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Erdoğan Visits Baghdad, Najaf, Arbil to Boost Ties with Iraq

Najaf and Arbil, being the second and third spots of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's visit to Iraq following the capital city of Baghdad, on Tuesday became venues for a landmark declaration of Turkey's new approach to Iraq, which has been modified greatly in recent years. In both the Shiite holy city of Najaf and Arbil, the capital of the semi-autonomous Kurdish region in northern Iraq, Erdoğan was greeted with great enthusiasm by residents. In Arbil, the flags of Iraq, Turkey and the regional government were waving on streets hours before the Prime Minister's arrival in the city.

In Najaf, Erdoğan visited the shrine of Imam Ali, cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet Muhammad, and afterward met with Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, the Iraqi-based highest-ranking cleric in the Middle East for Shiites. Erdoğan's Najaf visit and the meeting with Sistani come as Turkey is raising concerns over Shiite-Sunni unrest in Bahrain. "We expect Iraqi issues to be discussed, as well as what is happening in neighboring countries, especially in Bahrain," Khaled al-Jashaami, a member of Najaf's provincial council, told reporters ahead of the visit. Becoming the first ever Sunni leader to visit the shrine of Imam Ali, Erdoğan's trip has been seen as a significant step for rapprochement between Sunnis and Shiites at a time when concerns over sectarian clashes have grown in the region. Following last year's elections, Ankara held contacts with all ethnic and sectarian groups in Iraq in order to pave the way for a broad-based government, in a bid to maintain its legitimate stance and credibility in the eyes of the Iraqi people.

Iraqis fear that Shiite Iran will seek to fill the power vacuum created by the departure of U.S. troops, in competition with Sunni-led neighbors such as Turkey and Saudi Arabia. Ankara had in the past privately warned Iranian officials that there was a thin line between helping Iraq solidify its democratic institution and meddling in the country's domestic affairs. Nonetheless, Turkey, while pursuing its own interests in Iraq, has avoided antagonizing Iran, a valued trading partner.

Late on Monday in Baghdad, Erdoğan held closed-door meetings separately with a group of Turkmen members of the Iraqi Parliament, Islamic Supreme Council leader Ammar Al Hakim, former prime minister and Sunni-backed Iraqiya leader Iyad Allawi, and former Shiite prime minister and National Alliance chairman Ibrahim al-Jaafari, as well as current Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki.

In Kirkuk, hours before Erdoğan's arrival in the regional capital of Arbil, the Provincial Council elected Hassan Toran, a Turkmen Front official, as head of the council. The

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appointment has been widely considered as a landmark gesture from Iraqi Kurdish leader Massoud Barzani to Erdoğan. In June, Barzani, the president of Iraq's Kurdistan Regional Government, paid his first visit to Turkey as regional president. Barzani had last visited Turkey in April 2004, when he held the rotating presidency of the now-defunct Iraqi Governing Council. Erdoğan was hosted at a dinner by Barzani on Tuesday evening where he proposed trade be conducted on a Turkish lira basis, returning to Baghdad following the dinner.

Erdoğan's visit to Baghdad was his first since Maliki formed a government in December -- nine months after parliamentary elections. "Iraq is a brotherly nation," Erdoğan said on Monday after meeting with Maliki. "For years we have felt in our hearts the ordeals and pain, and we have been following the developments since then with admiration," he added. He also appealed for more help from Baghdad in combating the outlawed Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) whose members operate from safe havens in the north of Iraq. "From now on, we don't want the terrorist organization to stand as a source of evil between us," Erdoğan stated in reference to the PKK, which is listed as a terrorist organization by a majority of the international community. Erdoğan urged Iraq to work in "solidarity" with Turkey against the PKK, saying it "would strengthen our regional brotherhood," while addressing Iraqi lawmakers on Monday. /Today's Zaman/

Turkey Evacuates Wounded Libyans from Port of Misurata after Temporary Truce

Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu contacted the Libyan government and opposition for the declaration of a temporary ceasefire at the Libyan port of Misurata so a ferry with ambulances and medical equipment on board could enter the port and take on wounded Libyans.

The Ankara ferry, which in late March sailed from İzmir to Misurata, was waiting off the coast due to the situation in the city, which is described by some as nightmarish. The critical shortage of medical supplies at the Misurata Hospital, which could not function due to lack of first aid material and equipment, rang alarm bells in Ankara, and Davutoğlu on Friday night initiated telephone conversations with both Libyan Prime Minister Al-Baghdadi Al-Mahmoudi and opposition national council leader Mustafa Abdul-Jalil, diplomatic sources told reporters on Sunday.

Following the talks, a 12-hours long temporary ceasefire was declared around the port on Saturday and the Ankara ferry managed to get 230 wounded people and patients and 60 accompanying persons on board, the sources said, noting that when the ship entered the port, the clashes were still continuing in the city as the ceasefire was only limited to port areas. 12 F-16 military planes and four tanker aircraft were assigned to protect the Ankara ferry, along with a military frigate. The overall operation is being carried out under "a national umbrella," officials said, while noting that coordination has been maintained with NATO.

The ferry left the Misurata port at 10:20 PM Saturday and the 15-member health team aboard offered preliminary treatment to those 230 people. The ferry entered the Benghazi port in the late afternoon on Sunday. "Nobody who came to the port was rejected by the ferry, either from Muammar Gaddafi forces or from rebels. There are also

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citizens of Chad among those 290 people," sources underlined.

Ali Davutoğlu, the Turkish consul general in Benghazi, said the ship was picking up another 100 from Benghazi before sailing to the Turkish port of Çesme, where hospitals were preparing to welcome them. The cruise liner will carry scores of other people, including those accompanying the wounded and 70 British, Finnish, German, Greek, Turkish, Ukrainian and Uzbek citizens. Around a dozen doctors and nurses on board will tend to the patients until they reach Turkey, performing surgery if necessary, before transferring them to hospitals. /Today's Zaman, Hurriyet/

CPT Praises Turkey's Improved Record on Torture, But Problems Remain

A report on Turkey by anti-torture monitors has revealed that the country's "downward trend in both the incidence and the severity of ill-treatment by law-enforcement officials" is continuing, but some problems still exist. The Council of Europe's Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, or CPT, prepared its report basing on the inspections it carried out in 41 police stations and prisons from June 4 to 17, 2009, its fifth periodic visit to Turkey.

The report, published Thursday, expresses particular concern about conditions in police facilities and remand prisons although "hardly any allegations of physical ill-treatment of prisoners by staff were received in most of the prison establishments visited by the CPT's delegation." Nevertheless, a number of credible allegations of recent physical ill-treatment were received, mainly concerning the excessive use of force during apprehension, the CPT said. "The delegation received a number of allegations of excessive use of force at the time of apprehension [such as kicks or blows after the person concerned had been brought under control], as well as of threats or verbal abuse during police questioning," the report stated. The document addressed the Diyarbakır area in Southeast Anatolia as being problematic, "where most of the above-mentioned allegations of ill-treatment were received."

In response to a specific recommendation made by the committee in this regard, Turkish authorities have issued a circular to all central and provincial police units emphasizing the need to avoid ill-treatment and the excessive use of force. Although it underlined that torture and maltreatment had lessened in Turkey, the document focused on the killing of Murat Çömez and Mecit Akkaya, two soldiers under arrest who suffocated to death in Hasdal Military Prison in a fire that broke out after a riot in 2008.

The delegation also noted "major shortcomings" in the conditions under which immigration detainees were held. "Major shortcomings were found by the delegation in several of the detention centers visited, in particular at Ağrı and Edirne," the CPT said, citing severe overcrowding, dilapidated conditions, limited access to natural light, poor hygiene and a lack of outdoor exercise. In response to the report, Turkish authorities have referred to plans to construct several regional detention centers for foreigners to replace many of the establishments currently in use, the CPT noted. The latest report by the CPT reveals improvement on the issue compared to the previous reports, the Turkish Foreign Ministry said in a written statement Thursday. The necessary work has been started to apply the recommendations of the CPT, it stated. /Hurriyet/

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Turkey to Seek another Term on UN Security Council

Turkey is considering seeking a new term on the UN Security Council in 2015-16, Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu stated Wednesday. Turkey's last tenure at the Security Council was in 2009-2010, and it is rare to seek a new term so soon. Speaking to reporters in London, Davutoglu stated that it was a "strong possibility" that Turkey would seek a two-year term on the world body. "We are considering it," he said.

Davutoglu also telephoned his New Zealand and Spanish counterparts to tell them about Ankara's planned candidacy for a non-permanent seat on the Security Council, officials said. Spain and New Zealand are in contention for one of the two seats available for the Western Europe and Others Group (WEOG), one of the UN's regional blocs. If no other candidate emerges in the group, Turkey, Spain and New Zealand will compete for one of the two seats. Ankara is now expected to announce its candidacy for a new term in the next few days. /Turkish Press Review/

Turkey, Syria, Jordan, Lebanon to Sign Banking Cooperation Deal

Turkey will sign a regional cooperation agreement in the field of banking with three of its southern neighbors with whom it envisions establishing a single market, an example of regional economic cooperation that many say is the Middle East version of the European Union, the head of the country's central bank said on Monday. Central Bank of Turkey Governor Durmus Yilmaz addressed bankers from Syria, Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey at a conference titled "Enhancing Shamgen Banking: Turkey, Syria, Lebanon and Jordan" in İstanbul last week. "As a result of this agreement, trade and investments between these countries will be supported and facilitated," he declared, adding that the planned agreement will also complement free trade and visa-exemption agreements signed earlier between the four countries.

The foreign ministers decided on June 10 of last year to set up a high-level cooperation council to boost existing legal mechanisms in free trade and visa exemption deals to improve trade cooperation between them. The council plans to develop a long-term strategic partnership and to create a zone of free movement of goods and persons among them. "Although this conference is a step toward improving relations between the banking sectors of Turkey, Syria, Lebanon and Jordan in the short term, it is expected to contribute to the formation of a single market with the inclusion of other countries in the region in an area circumscribed by the Persian Gulf, Red Sea and the Mediterranean," Yilmaz said during his speech at the conference.

Also speaking at the conference, Turkish Regulation and Supervision Agency (BDDK) President Tevfik Bilgin said relations between the countries in terms of banking investments are insufficient at the moment. "Investments made by Syrian, Lebanese and Jordanian bankers in Turkey and investments by Turkish banks in these three countries are very small," he stated. Central Bank of Jordan Governor Faris Sharaf said financial integration will "catalyze" the economic integration of the four countries. "We all know that we have to harmonize our standards [in banking] and update regulations to ensure no obstacles remain [to that end]," he said. /Today's Zaman/

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Turkey Seeks to Mediate Between Palestinian Factions

Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu has expressed optimism for prospects of an end to a rift between Palestinian factions, warning that the latest upheaval in the Middle East region should not lead to ignoring the Palestinian issue. Davutoğlu was speaking to reporters in Damascus late on Wednesday after having a meeting with Hamas political bureau chief Khaled Meshaal at the Turkish Embassy in the Syrian capital.

Recalling that during a telephone conversation with Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas on March 31 he had conveyed his support of the Palestinian leader's recent announcement in which he said he intends to visit the Gaza Strip in a bid to end a more than three-year split with the Hamas movement that governs the territory, Davutoğlu said Turkey approaches positively all kinds of initiatives aimed at maintaining national reconciliation in Palestine. He shared this view with Meshaal as well, Davutoğlu added.

"We are not in a position to persuade one side on behalf of the other side. The positive thing is that both sides want that national reconciliation secured as soon as possible," Davutoğlu was quoted as saying by the Anatolia news agency. "While Mr. Abbas gives priority to forming the government, Mr. Mashaal gives priority to accomplishing the reconciliation in its all elements. We have gotten the impression that a common ground can be established," Davutoğlu added. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict "is at the core of the wave of change in the Middle East and many other problems," he underlined. "A possible crisis in Palestine ... would cause greater instability in the region," he stated. "Israel's recent operations on the Gaza Strip have posed a great risk."

In regards to Egypt's ongoing efforts to achieve Palestinian reconciliation, Davutoğlu highlighted: "Egypt has made very valuable contributions on this issue. We have not been attempting to bring the role it [Egypt] played to Turkey. We believe that, with the latest change in the region, Egypt will make many more valuable contributions, in particular, on the Palestine issue. We believe that we will be engaged in efforts that are not alternatives but that are complementary to each other." /Today's Zaman/

Ankara Voices Support for Damascus Reforms

Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu arrived in Damascus on Wednesday morning, completing a less-than-48-hour whirlwind round of diplomacy intended to take the pulse of the volatile Middle East region and expressing support for Syrian government reforms.

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Embarking on another sensitive diplomatic journey, Davutoğlu departed from Ankara for Manama, Bahrain, on Tuesday morning. The minister was supposed to proceed to Damascus after talks in Bahrain. Yet, with a last-minute decision, after wrapping up his talks in Manama, he proceeded to Doha, Qatar, late on Tuesday. In Doha, Davutoğlu held a tête-à-tête meeting with Libyan opposition leader Mahmoud Jibril. Davutoğlu's willingness for intervening in a growing protest in front of the Turkish consulate in Benghazi also played role in this last-minute decision in addition to Turkey's willingness to help establish a cease-fire in Libya, diplomatic sources stated.

Upon his arrival in Damascus on Wednesday, Davutoğlu held a tête-à-tête meeting with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. The meeting and a subsequent one between the Turkish and Syrian delegations took three hours in total, according to diplomatic sources. Dr. Bouthaina Shaaban, an advisor for political and media affairs to the Syrian presidency, and Davutoğlu's Syrian counterpart, Walid al-Moallem, also participated in the second part of the talks.

Davutoğlu was warmly welcomed on Wednesday by Assad at the presidential Tishreen Palace. At the meeting, which was closed to press, Davutoğlu voiced Turkey's support to all of the reforms launched by the Syrian leadership, and said his country is ready to offer every possible assistance to speed up these reforms and contribute to the prosperity, security and stability of the Syrian people, according to the national official agency of the country, the Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA). For his part, Assad thanked Turkey for its commitment to Syria's security and stability and said Syria is open to benefit from the experience of other countries in drafting reform bills.

The tête-à-tête part of the talks between Davutoğlu and Assad lasted two hours, with the former describing the meeting as "wonderful." A wide range of issues -- from lifting of emergency rule in Syria to citizenship rights of Kurdish people in the country and from opposition groups to sectarian and ethnic divides - were discussed at the meeting. The Turkish side has the impression that both length and comprehensive content of the meeting is a sign that the Syrian leadership is sincerely willing to draw lessons from Turkey's experience of democratization. /Today's Zaman/

Erdoğan Urges Immediate Ceasefire in Libya

Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan on Thursday made clear his government's policies on Libya, urging an immediate cease-fire in the country and necessary conditions for transition to constitutional democracy and protection of the territorial integrity of Libya. Erdoğan appeared at a press conference at his AK Party headquarters in Ankara to unveil Turkey's policies on Libya. He explained that the Turkish government was working on a road map that would help preserve Libya's territorial integrity and its sovereignty, and also bring peaceful change in the country.

Accordingly, Turkey's road map includes three key elements. "An immediate ceasefire must be declared, Gaddafi forces must lift the siege on some towns and they must withdraw. Safe zones must be created that would enable uninterrupted flow of humanitarian aid to Libyan people. A process must start immediately for transition to democratic change and transformation taking into consideration legitimate rights and interests of the people of Libya so that a constitutional democracy could be established,"

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Erdoğan told the press conference. He said Turkey would continue to hold talks with Libya's officials to discuss this road map in detail.

"We have been giving a shape to our road map together with leading figures of the international community and we will share it with our partners including United Nations, African Union, Arab League and Organization of the Islamic Conference ahead of the meeting of [the] Libya contact group in Qatar," Erdoğan stated. During his speech, Erdoğan also called for an immediate halt to attacks on civilians and reiterated his call for political figures to start the process for transition to democracy in line with demands of Libyan people. "Turkey has showed awareness to what's going on in Libya since the very beginning," he said. "Turkey has never been deaf to any problems in its region and in the world. We have never followed a wait-and-see policy about Libya. We have never displayed an opportunity minded stance; we have just acted for rights and justice."

Erdoğan noted that a Turkish ferry brought 475 people including injured ones from Benghazi to Cesme in the western Turkish province of Izmir under difficult circumstances and wounded people were hospitalized immediately. He also firmly stated Turkey's support for the implementation of the UN Security Council resolutions 1970 and 1973 on Libya, and said that NATO's military operation should be carried out under the resolutions of the UN Security Council. /Anatolia.com, Inc./

Gül Makes Historic Visit to Indonesia

Speaking at a joint press conference with his Indonesian counterpart Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono following a tete-a-tete meeting and a meeting between respective delegations, Turkish President Abdullah Gül said he was very pleased to be in Indonesia. Accompanied by a large business delegation on his two-day visit, Gül emphasized that Turkey and Indonesia have taken their relations to a level of strategic partnership and have begun comprehensive cooperation. "The peoples of the two countries look at each other with love and our relations go back to the 16th century. Our close relations will get reflected in economic cooperation," Gül said.

"Turkey and Indonesia are two most developed countries of the Islamic world. Their common characteristics include having a large population and being ruled in democracy. There are opportunities for the two countries to cooperate more. We discussed with President Yudhoyono the ways to boost cooperation in defense industry, tourism, agriculture and education," Gül stated.

President Yudhoyono, in his part, noted that President Gul was the first Turkish President visiting Indonesia in 16 years and that this visit was historic. "Our economic and commercial relations with Turkey are developing. The two countries move towards developing strategic partnership," Yudhoyono stated. "Turkey and Indonesia are democracies both of whose majority consist of Muslims. Comprehensive cooperation between our two countries can contribute to the development of the Alliance of Civilizations project and relations between the Islamic world and the West," he said.

"During our talks on Tuesday, we discussed the recent developments in the Middle East, Northern Africa and Libya," Yudhoyono said. Touching on his country's relations with Libya, President Yudhoyono said that if a cease-fire was reached in Libya and an

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international effort was made to preserve peace, then Indonesia might participate in such an international step.

Prior to the press conference Turkey and Indonesia signed agreements on visa exemption for diplomatic and service passports and on management of natural disasters. The foreign ministries of the two countries also signed a memorandum of understanding to facilitate bilateral cooperation. /Today's Zaman/

Door for Foreign Policy Dialogue Closing Between Turkey and EU

The ongoing impasse over Turkey's accession to the European Union is also closing the doors of dialogue between Ankara and Brussels over foreign policy issues of common interest, figures from both sides have warned. "A number of [EU] member countries have once again rejected launching foreign policy dialogue with Turkey," a European diplomat told the reporters. The comment was made ahead of an EU-Turkey Association Council meeting by a group of countries concerned about the deteriorating ties. Turkey will be represented at the meeting, set for April 19 in Brussels, by a team headed by Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu and chief EU negotiator Egemen Bağış.

If there is no last-minute intervention, the council will come together next week to discuss the state of Turkey's accession negotiations, with a policy paper to be announced by the EU Commission outlining the shortcomings on the Turkish side. The report is expected to focus heavily on concerns about declining press freedom and freedom of expression in Turkey, where recent arrests of high-profile journalists - and the seizure of a draft manuscript by one of them, Ahmet Şık - have made international news. The council will also discuss measures to coordinate Turkey's foreign policy with that of the European Union. Currently, Turkey's compatibility rate stands at 73 percent, but Brussels seeks a full harmonization in this area. At the moment, the country and the bloc are in discord over Iran's nuclear program and the Libyan revolt, among other international developments.

Though the European Union is expected to acknowledge Turkey's increasing global role, especially in its region, it remains reluctant to open a dialogue channel with Ankara. Turkish officials believe the main reason for this is the decision by some EU countries to abandon regular meetings on strategic issues where the bloc would brief the candidate country on topics of mutual interest. Such meetings were canceled in 2004. "There are so many issues going on around Turkey that are also in the interest of the European Union. But they seem unwilling to talk with us on these matters," a senior Turkish Foreign Ministry official told Hurriyet Daily News. "Take Iraq, or Egypt or even Libya... a policy ignoring the Turkish point of view is condemned to fail."

The suggestion of reinstating the pre-2004 practice of briefing candidate countries has been made but was rejected by France, Greece and Cyprus. The stalemate over EU accession likewise makes it impossible for Turkey to sign a security agreement with the European bloc. The EU's policy paper is also expected to strongly criticize Turkey's insistence at not negotiating the implementation of the Ankara Protocol, which obliges Turkey to open its ports and airports to Greek Cypriot vessels and planes. For many EU countries, a unilateral step by Ankara, even one with conditions or a limited scope or timeframe, would have a dramatic effect on the path of the negotiations.

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With Turkey-EU relations at one of their worst points in years and negotiations seemingly deadlocked, some European diplomats have expressed concerns that ties could worsen ahead of Turkey's June 12 general election. The Turkey Association Council is expected to discuss a set of measures to boost relations. "The intention is there but it's not very likely. There are only three chapters [of the accession negotiations] that can be opened, and two of them [social policy and public procurements] require constitutional amendments as benchmarks. Competition thus remains the only chapter for Turkey to open," another diplomat stated. "The only positive thing we have heard so far is [about] the establishment of an EU Ministry after the elections," the diplomat added. /Hurriyet/

Turkey Affirms Support for Georgia's Integrity as Abkhazia Leader Visits

With the president of the Moscow-backed breakaway Georgian region Abkhazia visiting Turkey between April 7 and 10, the Turkish Foreign Ministry extended support for Georgia's territorial integrity. "Turkey perfectly shares the sensitivity of Georgia concerning her territorial integrity. In that respect, Turkey respects and supports the territorial integrity of Georgia within her internationally recognized borders, a policy that remains a fundamental position," said a written statement released by the Turkish Foreign Ministry late Thursday.

The ministry, however, in the statement avoided using the title of the Abkhazian official Sergei Bagapsh and emphasized that it was not an "official" visit. "The visit of Mr. Sergei Bagapsh to Turkey will take place purely on medical grounds upon the invitation by the civil society associations founded by Turkish citizens under their sole responsibility. The visit has by no means an official character," said the ministry statement. "Turkey reconfirms its commitment to deepening the strategic relations between Turkey and Georgia to the benefit of our peoples and the region at large," it added. /Hurriyet/

Turkey Condemns Argentina's Genocide Ruling, Armenian Attacks

Turkey on Monday slammed an Argentinean judge's ruling that Turkey committed genocide against Armenians around the time of World War I and decried an increase in attacks by radical Armenian groups on Turkish targets abroad. Ruling on a 2001 lawsuit filed by an ethnic Armenian against Turkey, Judge Norberto Oyarbide wrote on Friday that "the Turkish state committed the crime of genocide against the Armenian people" between 1915 and 1923.

In a statement, the Foreign Ministry called the ruling an example of how legal systems are being abused by Armenian diaspora extremists. The statement said Turkey condemns and rejects the ruling, saying it ignored the universal principles of law and international treaties. The statement stressed that the ruling is contrary to the United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide and it also is based on accusations that lack seriousness. Such developments only hurt efforts to restore friendship between Turks and Armenians, explained the ministry. /Turkish Press Review/

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TUSIAD Selected News on Turkey

Washington

April 12-18, 2011

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Israel Urges Turkey to Avert New Aid Convoy to Gaza

Turkey said on Thursday it had received a request from Israel to help stop activists sailing to Gaza on the first anniversary of an Israeli raid on a Turkish ship, but it stated the flotilla plan was not Ankara's concern. The Free Gaza Movement, a pro-Palestinian activist umbrella group, has said that a flotilla expected in late May would comprise 15 ships with international passengers including Europeans and Americans.

Israel's ambassador to Turkey, Gaby Levy, asked the Turkish government this week to help stop the activists, saying sending humanitarian aid to Gaza outside legal channels was a "provocation," an Israeli diplomatic official told Reuters. Asked about the request, a Turkish foreign ministry official told Reuters: "We listened to the message given by the Israeli side and told them this is an initiative by civil society." The official did not elaborate.

The IHH, the Turkish Islamist charity that owned the Mavi Marmara ship which was raided by the Israeli commandos, has said it will join the "Freedom Flotilla II." It also plans to send its own convoy led by the Mavi Marmara after Turkey's general election on June 12. An IHH official told Reuters the group has not been approached by the Turkish government over its plans to send another flotilla and added, "In Turkey governments don't tell NGOs what to do and what not to do."

Israel has also asked the United Nations to help stop the activists. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu told UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon that the mission of ships "was being organized by Islamic extremist elements" intent on bringing about "a flare-up."

Turkey, a secular Muslim nation, has been an important regional ally of Israel for more than a decade. But in an incident last May nine Turks were shot dead when Israeli marines stormed a flotilla organized by the IHH, which ignored orders to turn back as it tried to breach an Israeli blockade of the Gaza Strip. Turkey has since scaled back ties, demanding Israel apologize and pay damages for last year's raid, which caused an international outcry. Ankara has demanded an apology as a condition for mending ties regardless of a UN probe's findings into the incident.

Although diplomatic relations remain dismal, trade between Turkey and Israel has reportedly reached a new high. According to the Jerusalem Post, trade between Turkey

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and Israel last year reached \$3.5 billion, a historic high, and continued to rise for the first two months of 2011. The newspaper said Israel has no replacement planned for Ambassador to Turkey Gaby Levy, whose posting ends this summer, but added, "Commercial interests are trumping the political divide." /Sabah, Turkish Press Review/

Turkey, Pakistan Vow to Support Peace in Afghanistan

The Turkish and Pakistani presidents vowed Wednesday to support efforts for peace in Afghanistan amid statements by Afghan officials that Turkey is preparing to host a Taliban office to facilitate peace talks between Afghan insurgents and the government.

President Abdullah Gül held talks with his visiting Pakistani counterpart, Asif Ali Zardari, last week with Afghanistan high on the agenda since any solution to the Afghan conflict would likely require the support of Pakistan; in particular, elements of its security forces are believed to have links to insurgents in Afghanistan. "We are supporting every effort that would lead to peace in Afghanistan," Zardari declared at a joint news conference with Gül, who said Turkey has been cooperating with Afghan officials and authorities in every field.

Recalling the fifth three-way meeting between Afghanistan, Pakistan and Turkey, which was held in İstanbul in late December last year, Gül highlighted that not only presidents but also chiefs of staff, chiefs of intelligence agencies and sometimes relevant ministers from the three countries participate in these talks. He said Turkey will be part of every activity to bring peace to the war-torn country, adding that Turkey is conducting these activities in coordination not only with Afghanistan but Pakistan as well.

Gül made his remarks on the heels of an announcement by the Afghan High Peace Council -- a body established by Afghan President Hamid Karzai to promote reconciliation with insurgents and reintegrate Taliban foot soldiers to try to end a war that is now in its 10th year -- that talks continue with Turkish authorities to host a Taliban office in Turkey. The council also stated that Turkey has already expressed cooperation in this regard.

Pakistan's The Nation newspaper quoted Deputy Chair of the council, Maulawi Attaullah Ludin, who said Turkey is expected to host a Taliban office and provide an office for the High Peace Council in Turkey. "Head of the Peace Council Burhanuddin Rabbani has been in contact with the Afghan government on this and discussions are also going on in Turkey, and we hope the office will soon be opened," Ludin said. According to officials on the Peace Council, the report said, some other countries including Germany, Iran, Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates have expressed interest in hosting similar offices to facilitate peace talks with the Taliban. Arsala Rahmani, a member of the peace council, earlier this week said establishment of the office will take time to work out.

At the news conference, neither Zardari nor Gül confirmed plans to let the Taliban open such an office in Turkey. But Zardari, responding to a question on whether Pakistan would allow Taliban militants from Pakistan to travel to Turkey if the office is opened, stated, "We will be facilitators to any format to lead to peace." Gül also avoided direct comment on the issue, saying only that Turkey would contribute to "any kind of initiative that would contribute to peace." /Today's Zaman/

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Arab League Opens Ankara Office

Turkish-Arab relations have turned a new page with the opening of an Arab League office in Ankara, a move that heralds an effort to erase negative historical preconceptions and work together closely in the future. "Arab and Turkish people were far from each other, despite being neighbors and having a common history and the same aspirations," Ambassador Mohammed Al-Fatah Naciri, the Arab League's representative to Turkey, told reporters in an interview late last week.

Admitting that the mission to Ankara was "opened very late," Naciri said both sides are now seeking to "end problems and start a new page in relations... We have a lot of common interests that would fulfill our people's [expectations]," he stated, explaining that Turkey and the Arab League have co-launched an initiative challenging the way the history of the region has typically been taught on both sides. "Ministers of higher education and deans of universities are coming together from Turkey and the Arab world," Naciri said. "We are looking at our syllabuses, at the way history is written about Arabs in Turkey and about Turks and Ottoman in the Arab world. We are looking at how we can remedy this."

A commission to be set up to address this issue will also work to improve knowledge of each other's languages, Turkish and Arabic, to create diploma equivalences and to arrange for the educational systems in Turkey and Arab countries to work together and exchange professors and students, Naciri said.

Praising the role of Turkey's ruling Justice and Development Party, or AKP, in the rapprochement between Turks and the Arab world, the ambassador said the first steps in this progress were taken by the late President Turgut Özal in the early 1990s, but that the desired outcome could not be accomplished at that time.

Naciri also addressed ongoing concerns that Turkey's warming relations with the Arab world represent a shift in the traditional "Western orientation" of the European Union candidate country. "I disagree with this argument," the Arab League ambassador stated. "Turkey is emerging as a regional power, producing more merchandise to sell. Turkey will want to trade with other partners; it cannot be dependent on only the European Union and the United States. What is wrong about that?"

Underscoring the importance of establishing close economic relations between Turkey and the Arab world, Naciri said this would keep relations from being "threatened by minor problems." Turkey and the Arab League will hold a ministerial forum this year that will focus on cooperation in higher education, industry and foreign policy, Naciri noted. He added that social housing would also be on the agenda of the meeting, in which Turkey's Housing Development Administration, or TOKI, will take part. /Hurriyet/

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Erdoğan Pledges New Constitution in Election Manifesto

Turkish Prime Minister Tayyip Erdoğan promised to draft a new constitution and make Turkey one of the world's 10 largest economies by 2023 as he launched a party manifesto on Saturday ahead of elections in June. Opinion polls show Erdoğan's Justice and Development Party (AKP) comfortably securing a third consecutive term of single-party rule in the vote, on the back of a decade of economic success and political stability.

Unveiling what he called the AKP's manifesto for 2023, Erdoğan offered few concrete proposals but said he would slash unemployment, build homes for the poor and push on with economic reforms that have transformed the country from an economic basket-case to a stable, fast growing economy. Erdoğan has said he wants a strong mandate that will allow him to introduce a new constitution to replace the one drafted after the 1980 coup. On Saturday he repeated that pledge. "We'll start working on a new constitution right away, to support democracy and freedoms," Erdoğan declared during a speech at his AKP headquarters in Ankara without giving details.

Formed as a coalition uniting religious conservatives with liberal and nationalist groups, Erdoğan's AKP has been Turkey's dominant political force since it crushed establishment parties tainted by graft in 2002. Investors regard the AKP as the most market-friendly party, due to economic policies that have brought inflation to record lows, opened the doors to foreign investment and helped Turkey become one of the fastest growing economies in the world.

In his speech, Erdoğan claimed his AKP had "restored the honor" of the Turkish lira and defeated "the monster called inflation that lived in the people's pockets." He predicted Turkey will be "among the 10 largest economies in 2023." If reelected for a third term in June, Erdoğan would not be able to run in the next elections set for 2015 under party law. His mention of 2023 -- the 100th anniversary of the foundation of modern Turkey by Kemal Atatürk -- will fan suspicions that Erdoğan, a former Istanbul mayor, harbors long-term political ambitions and is planning to elevate himself to a presidency with stronger powers. Secularist rivals accuse AKP of having an Islamist agenda. The AKP, which evolved from banned Islamist movements, denies this and says it is a Muslim version of Europe's Christian Democratic parties. /Sabah/

Azerbaijan, Iran, Turkey Move to Expand Regional Cooperation

Azerbaijan, Iran and Turkey have released a joint declaration which outlines cooperation in various fields while Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu stated that the three countries will expand regional cooperation. The declaration was issued in the Iranian city of Orumiyeh on Saturday following the first trilateral meeting of the foreign ministers of Azerbaijan, Iran and Turkey. Saturday, April 16, 2011, turned out to be a very important day both in regards to Turkey's relations with Iran and in regards to developments in Caucasia, Davutoğlu stated, speaking to reporters following the meeting as he recalled that Turkey and Iran also opened a new border crossing between Kapıköy in eastern Anatolia's Van and Iran's West Azerbaijan provinces.

In Orumiyeh, the three countries officially launched the process of trilateral meetings, Davutoğlu said. "This is an extremely important development in regards to many

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aspects. These three countries have a very deeply rooted historical past," Davutoğlu was quoted as saying by the Anatolia news agency. "We have the intention to intensify cultural relations and increase mutual comings and goings. Additionally, we will carry out joint economic projects. We will expand fields of regional cooperation on the borders of the three countries," he added.

The three countries -- from the Caspian to the Indian Ocean and from the Black Sea to the Mediterranean -- will work to unify their potential, he explained. Iran, Turkey and Azerbaijan are at the same time Caucasian countries, he said, highlighting that the trilateral cooperation among them is important also within the context of Caucasia. "We highlighted the understanding of joint work as a principle for enabling building peace, security and stability in the Caucasus," Davutoğlu explained. The trilateral meetings will be held every six months and the next meeting is planned to be held in Nakhchivan, Azerbaijan, in October. /Today's Zaman/

Turkish Airlines Launches Direct Flights to Erbil

Turkish Airlines (THY) this week launched flights to Erbil, the capital of Iraqi Kurdistan and its second destination in Iraq after Baghdad. Finance Minister Mehmet Simsek, Energy and Natural Resources Undersecretary Metin Kilci, THY Chairman Hamdi Topcu and a group of Turkish businesspeople were on the inaugural THY plane to Erbil.

Speaking in Erbil, Simsek hailed the new service. "I bring you greetings from our prime minister," he said in Kurdish. "We have been brothers for a thousand years. We are here to promote peace, stability and growth." Speaking at Erbil International Airport, a facility built by Turkish company Cengiz Construction and opened two weeks ago by Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, he also reiterated Ankara's support for the Iraqi Kurdish region.

"In recent years, we have been developing our relations with neighboring countries based on a policy of zero problems and through strong cooperation as well as more investments," he explained. "Turkish Airlines flights to Erbil are a physical manifestation of the existing ties between the hearts of the Turks and Iraqis. I hope these flights will make great contributions to trade, investment and cooperation between our peoples." With the new service, THY will fly from Istanbul to Erbil on Tuesday and Saturday and from Erbil to Istanbul on Wednesday and Sunday. /Turkish Press Review/

Police Detain Istanbul's al-Qaeda Chief

Al-Qaeda's leader in Istanbul was among a group of around 40 people detained by police Tuesday in a series of raids targeting Islamists in Turkey's largest city, media reports stated. The security forces made the arrests in raids on some 50 locations in Istanbul, private news channel NTV reported, adding that the suspects included the leader of al-Qaeda in the city, although he was not named. There were raids in other cities as well that saw followers of Turkish Hizbullah detained, according to the Anatolia news agency. The group, which has no known links to its Lebanese namesake, is listed by Ankara as a terrorist organization that seeks to replace Turkey's secular system with a hard-line Islamic regime.

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TUSIAD Selected News on Turkey

Washington

The Turkish police regularly target suspected al-Qaeda supporters since two sets of twin suicide bombings hit Istanbul five days apart in November 2003. A Turkish cell of al-Qaeda was held responsible for the attacks, in which explosive-laden trucks first targeted two synagogues, and then the British consulate and a British bank, killing a total of 63 people, including the British consul. Seven men were jailed for life in 2007 over the bombings, among them a Syrian national who masterminded and financed the attacks. /Hurriyet/

April 19-25, 2011

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Turkey Calls on Syria to Show Restraint, Continue with Reforms

In a statement released on Saturday, the Turkish Foreign Ministry expressed deep concern and sorrow over the killings of dozens of people in Syria on Friday, demanding that Syrian authorities act with patience and good sense to prevent incidents from spiraling into a cycle of violence. Security forces and gunmen loyal to Syrian President Bashar al-Assad killed at least 112 people on Friday and Saturday, when they fired on protesters demanding political freedom and an end to corruption as well as during mass funerals for victims a day later. Turkey stressed in its statement that stability, security, and prosperity, for what it called Turkey's "friend and neighbor" Syria and its people, are important for Turkey.

Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan earlier stated that he has spoken many times with Assad and urged him to quickly introduce reforms that meet people's expectations. Erdoğan said he was assured that the Syrian leadership would implement reforms as soon as possible. Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu went to Damascus earlier this month for talks with the Syrian president, where Turkey pledged to stand by Syria in the reform process. The new statement recalled Assad's previous statements pledging to address the legitimate demands of the people and the implementation of reforms and welcomed the work and steps taken in this regard thus far. The statement also noted Turkey had promised that it is ready to support Syria in the reform process.

Assad lifted emergency law this week, in place since his Baath Party seized power 48 years ago, in a bid to appease protesters and ease international criticism of the use of deadly force against civilians. Besides the government crackdown, Assad has been trying to defuse protests by offering a series of concessions including granting citizenship to thousands among Syria's long-ostracized Kurdish minority, firing local officials, releasing detainees and forming a new government. Aided by his family and a pervasive security apparatus, Assad, 45, has absolute power, having ignored demands to transform the autocratic system he inherited when he succeeded his late father, President Hafez al-Assad, in 2000.

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The Friday and Saturday attacks were the bloodiest and the demonstrations largest since protests erupted in the southern city of Deraa, on the strategic Hauran Plain near the border with Jordan, over five weeks ago. "Turkey calls on Syria to show restraint in this fragile time, to avoid using disproportionate and excessive force, to correctly select response methods against mass demonstrations, to maintain [work on reforms] with determination, to complete [it] in the shortest time possible and to implement [them] without further delay, to act in the spirit and language of the reforms unveiled, to restore societal peace, to avoid actions that could escalate incidents, and to act with patience and common sense to avert incidents from transforming into a cycle of violence," the statement stressed.

The heavy security crackdown on Friday and Saturday came after Assad warned a week ago that any further unrest would be considered "sabotage" after he made the gesture of lifting the long-hated emergency law, which gave security forces extensive powers for surveillance and arrests. The weekend protests stretched from the port city of Latakia to Homs, Hama, Damascus and its suburbs, and southern towns. The death toll has risen to around 350, with scores of people also missing since demonstrations broke out on March 18, rights campaigners have said. /Today's Zaman/

Supreme Board of Elections Lifts Ban on Some Kurdish Candidates

Turkey's electoral board on Thursday reversed a ban on seven of 12 independent candidates in June's parliamentary election which had sparked violent protest in the mainly Kurdish southeast. The Supreme Board of Elections said some of the Kurdish candidates it had barred due to criminal convictions in a ruling on Monday had supplied the necessary court documents to have their candidacies reinstated.

Of the seven, six were backed by the Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party (BDP), which had threatened to withdraw from the June 12 election if its candidates could not stand. The board upheld its ban on three candidates, one of whom was backed by the BDP, and stated it would carry out further assessment of the two additional candidates.

Among those now cleared to stand are BDP co-leader Gultan Kisanak, who is currently a member of parliament, and Leyla Zana, a former Nobel Peace Prize nominee who has been convicted several times under Turkey's anti-terrorism laws. Some of those barred had convictions for links to outlawed Kurdish rebels in the southeast, scene of a separatist conflict between the state and militants from the banned Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK).

"It's public pressure that made the Supreme Board of Elections change its decision. Turkey has gone through a democracy test and passed," said Ertugrul Kurkcu, a BDP-backed candidate now free to stand. "It was a unique experience to see people [from] all over the political spectrum support our case to stand in [the] election." Parliament Speaker Mehmet Ali Sahin, a member of the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) which is predicted to comfortably win a third term, had called on the election board to reconsider its decision.

The BDP was planning to enter all of its 61 candidates in the election as independents to bypass regulations that limit the ability of small parties to enter parliament. Fury at the

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ban sparked three days of violent protest in the southeast. One protester was shot dead and police fired water cannons and tear gas on protesters hurling petrol bombs and stones in the city of Diyarbakir. BDP leader Selahattin Demirtas said the man was killed by police. /Sabah/

Obama's Annual Statement Satisfies Neither Turkey nor Armenian Diaspora

U.S. President Barack Obama's annual statement on April 24, the day on which the deaths of Anatolian Armenians killed during World War I are commemorated, has disappointed both Ankara and the Armenian diaspora, as he called the killings nearly a century ago a "horrific" slaughter but once again stopped short of branding it "genocide."

In a written statement released on Saturday, Obama said the 1915 killings represent "one of the worst atrocities of the 20th century." But for the third straight year, he failed to use the word genocide to describe the events. As a candidate for president, Obama repeatedly vowed to recognize "the genocide" once in office, vowing "principled commitment to commemorating and ending genocide." But since 2009, Obama has declined to use the word in the face of furious resistance from Turkey, a key NATO ally. "I have consistently stated my own view of what occurred in 1915, and my view of that history has not changed," the president declared in a White House statement on April 23. "A full, frank, and just acknowledgment of the facts is in all our interests."

Taking into consideration the critical reactions from both Ankara and the Armenian-American diaspora, Obama appeared to put himself between a rock and a hard place with the wording of his statement. Turkey's reaction came at noon on Sunday in a written statement by the Foreign Ministry, while Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu separately criticized Obama in remarks delivered on Sunday in Çanakkale. "President Obama's statement issued on April 23, 2011, takes a one-sided approach reflecting Armenian views regarding the dispute between Turks and Armenians on the painful part of their common history. This statement distorts the historical facts. Therefore, we find it very problematic and deeply regret it," the Foreign Ministry said in its statement.

"Issued by domestic political considerations, such statements serve no purpose but making it difficult for Turks and Armenians to reach a just memory. One-sided statements that interpret controversial historical events by a selective sense of justice prevent understanding of the truth. We expect the United States not to render difficulty but to facilitate the normalization process between Turkey and Armenia, and the studies on the historical dimension. Holding a partisan view on historical pains, such statements do not serve peace or the common future of peoples," the ministry stated.

Turkey and Armenia signed two protocols in October 2009 but the parliaments of the two countries have yet to ratify the documents. Turkey has kept its border with neighboring Armenia closed since 1993 in a show of solidarity with Azerbaijan, as Armenia advanced to occupy the region of Nagorno-Karabakh and around 20 percent of Azerbaijani territory. Azerbaijan fiercely opposed the protocols, saying opening the borders was "against Azerbaijan's national interests."

In Washington, D.C., an influential Armenian diaspora organization harshly criticized Obama for his statement in which he refrained from using the term genocide to describe

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the killings of Anatolian Armenians. In a written statement released as early as Saturday, the Armenian National Committee of America (ANCA) said, "Obama again betrayed his pledge to properly condemn and commemorate this crime against humanity."

"Despite his repeated, detailed and unambiguous pledges to recognize the Armenian Genocide, the President offered only euphemisms and evasive terminology to describe the murder of over 1.5 million men, women, and children -- effectively keeping in place the gag rule imposed by the Turkish government on the open and honest discussion of this crime. In refusing, under foreign pressure from Turkey, to honor his pledge, he again fell far short of his own view, as voiced during his campaign, that America deserves a President who uses the term 'genocide' to convey the full factual, moral, legal and contemporary political meaning of this crime against all humanity," ANCA chairman Ken Hachikian said in the statement. /Today's Zaman/

Budget Suggests Turkish Membership off EU's Radar Screen until 2020

Turkish membership in the European Union is off the bloc's radar screen for the next decade, its decision not to include Turkey in the EU's budget for 2014-2020 appears to show. "Including Turkey in the 2014-2020 budget would have meant Turkey would be an EU member within this period. This is the last message French President Nicolas Sarkozy and German Chancellor Angela Merkel would like to give," explained Demir Murat Seyrek, a managing partner of the Brussels-based Global Communications and an expert on the European Union. Candidate countries receive special funding during their first five years of EU membership. An allocation has been foreseen for Croatia, another candidate country that started membership talks the same year as Turkey and is expected to conclude its negotiations later this year.

Member states' opposition to Turkey's joining the bloc caused the European Commission, tasked with preparing the budget, to rebuff the Turkish government's demands to have Turkey included in the EU's 2014-2020 financial considerations. Since negotiations started in 2005, opposition to Turkey's membership has grown stronger and the pace of reform in Ankara has slowed. The ruling Justice and Development Party, or AKP, has been pushing for a target date to finalize negotiations, saying it will have a motivating effect on slackening enthusiasm among a Turkish public less and less convinced that Turkey will ever enter the bloc.

Discussions have already started among member states on the general outlines of the budget, with the United Kingdom joining forces with France and Germany to demand a real-term freeze in the EU budget until the end of the decade. The three countries' proposal that the union's budget should rise by no more than the rate of inflation over the period 2014-2020 has received support from Poland, Sweden, Finland and Austria. "If this proposal is adopted, this will close the way to add an additional issue to the budget, making it difficult to include Turkey during the course of the next eight years," Seyrek said. The negotiations on the EU budget come amid high stress on European national budgets due to the global financial crisis.

According to Seyrek, it would be futile for the AKP government to push to include Turkey in the next seven-year budget, as France and many countries will be strongly against it. He added that being absent in the budget does not mean it is impossible for Turkey to be

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a member within the next decade. "Saying yes to Turkey's membership is, after all, a political decision. The fact that it is absent in the budget will not prevent Turkey from becoming a member," Seyrek noted. "Candidate countries receive approximately 9 billion euros each year for the first five years. Turkey can live without that money." Others, though, see Turkey's exclusion from the budget as a strong negative signal, dampening its hopes of EU accession. /Hurriyet/

Turkey Chooses U.S. Helicopters for \$3.5 Billion Deal

Turkey on Thursday selected the U.S. firm Sikorsky as the partner company that will lead the production of its next generation of utility helicopters. The decision was made at a meeting of the Defense Industry Executive Committee, Turkey's highest decision-making body on defense procurement. The committee's members include Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Defense Minister Vecdi Gönül, Chief of General Staff Gen. Isık Kosaner and procurement chief Murad Bayar.

Gönül told reporters after the meeting that cost of the project, which covers the acquisition of 109 helicopters, was \$3.5 billion. He added that the number of helicopters could reach 600 in the future. Several Turkish companies, most notably Turkish Aerospace Industries, or TAI, will take part in the joint production of the platforms. "Some important components of the helicopters, such as the body, engine, avionic systems and task software, will be produced in Turkey as TAI will be the main contractor," Gönül stated. Following the committee's decision, the Undersecretariat for Defense Industries and Sikorsky will launch contract negotiations for the building of a first batch of utility helicopters.

Sikorsky was competing with AgustaWestland, an Italian-British firm, for the contract. Sikorsky offered its T-70, the Turkish version of its S-70 Black Hawk International, which presently is being used by the militaries of dozens of countries, including Turkey. AgustaWestland, on the other hand, was competing with its TUHP 149, the Turkish version of its newly developed A-149.

Most of the helicopters in the first batch will go to the military, with the Gendarmerie Forces receiving the lion's share, and the Army, Navy, Air Force and Special Forces Command getting some of the aerial vehicles. The remaining choppers will go to the Security Directorate, or police forces, and to the Firefighting Department. /Hurriyet/

Ankara Pushes for Free Trade Deal with India

A free trade agreement between Turkey and India should be signed as soon as possible to make the most of the "tremendous trade potential" between the two emerging economies, Foreign Trade Minister Zafer Caglayan said on Tuesday. "We should sign a free trade pact as soon as possible," he told the Turkey-India Business Forum in New Delhi. "The problems encountered as a result of visa requirements present obstacles to trade." Turkey currently has free trade agreements with 14 nations as well as with members of the European Free Trade Association (EFTA), a free trade organization of four non-European Union member states.

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Caglayan lamented the paltry size of trade between Turkey and India last year compared to the size of both economies and their respective trade volumes. "We're particularly working on the Indian market," he added. "When you analyze India's imports and Turkey's exports, we see a 45 percent match. This is excellent; only a handful of countries have such a similarity. In fact, we're selling the very goods you're buying, but we haven't taken advantage of this because we don't know each other as well as we should." /Turkish Press Review/

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