

May 2011

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Erdoğan Unveils Plan for New Waterway Bypassing Bosphorus

Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has finally revealed details of his long awaited "crazy project" planned for Istanbul. A 50-kilometer long canal will connect the Black Sea to the Marmara, transforming the European side of the city into an island. The canal is intended to lighten sea traffic along the Bosphorus Strait, as well as to bring in at least five billion dollars in revenue every year. The highly anticipated 'Kanal Istanbul' project was revealed to the public during a meeting held Wednesday by the Prime Minister and the Istanbul Congress Center to announce targeted goals for both Istanbul and Turkey for the year 2023. While keeping the location and costs confidential in order not to arouse speculation, Erdoğan started off his address by discussing the difficulties experienced in Istanbul in the past.

Announcing that the tanker traffic along the Bosphorus will be moved to the canal, Erdoğan said, "There are many cities with a river running through them, however Istanbul will be the only one to have two seas passing through it." Elaborating on the details of the plan, the Prime Minister explained, "This project is an energy, transportation, public works, agricultural, educational, employment, urbanizing, family, property, culture, and tourism project. Most importantly however, it is an environmental project. It is a project geared towards protecting Istanbul's surroundings, nature, sea, water sources, greens, animals and plants."

"We will continue to keep the project's cost and precise location under wraps in order to prevent any negativity or injustice. Studies for the project will begin after the June 12th election and will take two years. During this time, changes may be made to the location and cost of the project. This project that we have begun now will transform Istanbul into a city in which two seas pass through. It will not be possible to even compare the Panama, Suez, or Corinth Canal to what will be one of the century's most significant projects." Russia reacted to the plan by urging Turkey to respect the Montreaux Convention, which has governed the use of the Bosphorus and Dardanelles Straits since 1936 and allows free passage for all civilian ships in peacetime. /Sabah/

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U.S. Ambassador Says U.S., Turkey Share Same Strategic Goals on Iran

The U.S. ambassador to Turkey has said the United States and Turkey share the same strategic goals with respect to what he calls "the most sensitive topic" between the two allies, Iran. Ambassador Francis Ricciardone told reporters ahead of a business meeting with American companies in İstanbul that the U.S. and Turkey have shared interests and the same strategic goals in the region but that "naturally, we sometimes have different views," when he was asked to comment on Turkey's role in its region and whether this role is compatible with the Turkish-U.S. strategic partnership. "This is very natural. Turkey is in this region. We are afar," the ambassador stated in remarks published on Monday.

Ricciardone said both countries are reluctant to see Iran developing nuclear weapons and added that both Turkey and the U.S. agreed Iran has the right to possess peaceful nuclear energy once it meets necessary international obligations. The ambassador noted Turkey and the U.S. are largely on the same page on ways to persuade Iran to comply with its international commitments and that the fundamental agreement between the two countries is that diplomacy, if not the only tool, is the best one to deal with the Iranian nuclear standoff.

The Ambassador hailed the partnership between Turkey and the U.S. on strategic, political and defense levels as exemplary and said the importance of Turkey's NATO membership for the US and the alliance has been evident during his three months as ambassador. He pointed to Turkey's influence in shaping discussions at NATO regarding its policy in Libya, adding that the two allies are in close consultations beyond the scope of NATO with respect to developments in the region and constantly continue to have high-level meetings.

Ricciardone said Turkey has made great progress since the 1970s and praised the strength of Turkish companies in competing globally. He noted there is now a great interest in Turkey among U.S. businessmen in investment and trade and said the challenge that needs to be overcome now is transforming this interest into actual trade and investment. He recalled the Framework for Strategic Economic and Commercial Cooperation that was launched by Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and U.S. President Barack Obama in December 2009 to hear the voices of Turkish and American business circles and hinted the sides might gather this June.

Meanwhile, the Turkish ambassador to Iran has said Turkey takes its ties with Iran into consideration before entering into any international agreement, including any NATO agreement on the establishment of a ballistic missile defense shield in Turkey. "In any political process, when we are weighing up options, we certainly take account of our relationship with Iran," Ambassador to Tehran Umit Yardim said in an interview with the Fars News Agency when asked to comment on the possible establishment of a missile defense shield in Turkey near the border with Iran. "It is completely a technical issue. During the Lisbon summit, Turkey transparently expressed its views on the issue. In this process, the most important matter is the Iran-Turkey relationship and Turkey expressed its concerns in this regard," Yardim stated. /Today's Zaman/

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Ankara Prepares for Possibility of Syrian Refugee Influx

Turkey has accelerated its preparations to deal with a large potential influx of Syrian refugees as it continues warning the Syrian administration to abstain from actions that could lead to the division of the country. "He says, 'I will do it.' But I am having a hard time understanding if he is being prevented from doing it or if he is hesitating," Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan stated late Sunday in a television interview, commenting on Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's failure to act immediately to make reforms.

"We do not want to see another Hama massacre," Erdoğan said, referring to a deadly crackdown in the Syrian town of Hama in 1982 against a revolt by a Sunni community protesting the regime. Erdoğan warned al-Assad it would be "very difficult for Syria to deal with the consequences if such a tragedy repeats itself." The Turkish prime minister also said Syria should avoid actions that could lead to the division of the country.

Turkey shares a long border with Syria and fears the chaos in its southern neighbor could spark a refugee crisis on the borders. Erdoğan explained, however, that Turkey would not close its doors to Syrians and was making sure it would be prepared if more refugees arrive. Separately, President Abdullah Gül said Turkey is "taking measures for the worst-case scenario in regards to recent developments in Syria."

Turkey's president reaffirmed the country's efforts to convince Syria to make reforms and carry out a "transition process in line with its people's legitimate demands." Ankara also voiced the need for a multiparty system for Syria as an outcome of upcoming elections.

"A few days ago, nearly 300 Syrian people crossed the border and took shelter in Turkey. They have been accommodated in several places," Gül stated. "We hope reforms will be made and a transition completed in Syria without any more bloodshed. We also hope a multiparty and democratic system will be established in Syria soon." Turkey has already set up a small camp in the southern Hatay province for the 263 Syrians who fled their country Friday. /Hurriyet/

Turkey Urges Israel not to "Repeat the Same Mistake" with Second Flotilla

Stressing that stopping private charity groups from sailing to Gaza is unacceptable to Turkey, Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu Monday cautioned Israel not to "repeat the same mistake" by launching any attack on a humanitarian aid mission in international waters. "We can advise, we can say something, but we cannot stop the flotilla," Davutoglu told reporters, speaking of a second flotilla due next month in Gaza, in the wake of the deadly Mavi Marmara incident last year.

The Foreign Minister explained that the government urged the Humanitarian Relief Foundation (IHH) not to sail to Gaza last year but "in a democratic society, we cannot stop them." He added, "We urge Israel not to repeat the same mistake. It is Israel's responsibility not to implement [a blockade] against Gaza. A fact-finding mission of the UN declared that this... is illegal." Again arguing against any attack, he said, "In the flotilla last year, people were killed 72 miles from the coast, so this was in international waters. The Mediterranean does not belong to any nation." /Turkish Press Review/

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Erdoğan, Obama Agree Gaddafi Must Step Down

Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi must step down and depart Libya, Turkish and U.S. leaders agreed in a phone conversation on Monday that was part of the two leaders' consultations on developments in the Middle East, the White House has said. U.S. President Barack Obama had talks with Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, with the leaders agreeing that attacks against civilians must stop and that the Libyan leader must step down and depart from Libya permanently in order for there to be a lasting solution that reflects the will of the Libyan people, according to a readout of the conversation released by the White House.

Erdoğan previously avoided sharpening his tone against Gaddafi and did not directly call on the Libyan leader to step down in the hope that Turkey could secure a possible cease-fire between the Libyan groups engaged in hostilities. Turkey also refused to participate in the military phase of NATO's operation against forces loyal to Gaddafi but pledged to contribute to an arms embargo and to establishing a humanitarian corridor to help wounded Libyans. Obama expressed his appreciation for Turkey's ongoing humanitarian efforts in Libya and its participation in NATO's no-fly zone and arms embargo operations.

Turkey unveiled earlier in April a roadmap seeking a way out of the impasse for peace in Libya, but neither side in Libya has yet said they endorse the roadmap for peace. In a recent interview with the Anatolia news agency, U.S. Ambassador to Turkey Francis Ricciardone pointed to Turkey's influence in shaping discussions at NATO regarding its policy in Libya and stressed that the two allies are in close consultations beyond the scope of NATO with respect to developments in the region and constantly continue to have high-level meetings.

The two leaders also expressed their "deep concern" about the Syrian government's "unacceptable use of violence" against its own people. The White House statement said the leaders had agreed that the Syrian government "must end the use of violence now" and promptly enact meaningful reforms that respect the democratic aspirations of Syrian citizens. Obama's conversation with Erdoğan came on the heels of preparation by the U.S. administration to slap new travel limits and financial penalties on Syrian leaders as a ruthless crackdown on Syrian protesters intensified in the past weeks. Both countries released strongly worded statements over the weekend, demanding the end of violence in the country, a visible increase in the tone of the calls. /Today's Zaman/

Both AK Party and CHP Vow to Bolster Turkey's Ties with the EU, U.S.

Turkey's ruling party and main opposition both remain committed to the country's European Union accession bid, but are divided over their reasons for seeking membership in the bloc, according to their respective electoral platforms. Joining the European Union is a "strategic goal," the ruling Justice and Development Party (AK Party) said in the foreign policy section of its election manifesto released last week. The AK Party will continue to take necessary steps to secure membership in the 27-member bloc "despite some European countries' unfair and unfounded opposition," the party said, adding that the government will continue to implement EU-mandated reforms since they "benefit our citizens."

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After years of strained relations with its putative ideological brothers in Europe, the main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) promised greater cooperation with the EU's social democratic parties on the road to Turkish membership. "Turkey will pave the way for Turkish-EU relations, which have reached a bottleneck, through improved discourse with European social democrats," the party said in its manifesto for the June 12 general elections. Ultimately, the goal of EU accession is "social transformation," the CHP said, adding that social democrats should unite under the EU umbrella. Together with its social democratic partners, the CHP will convince Europeans that Turkey's membership is the best way to refute the "clash of civilizations," the party said.

The CHP added that it would work to ease tensions between Ankara and Washington, redefining ties in terms of "equality and mutual respect" for the benefit of both sides. Under former leader Deniz Baykal, the party had restricted dialogue with the U.S. For its part, the AK Party said it would continue to improve and strengthen constructive and comprehensive ties with the U.S., adding that boosting trade is one of its priorities.
/Turkish Press Review/

Turkey Advocates Bosnia and Serbia Inclusion in NATO, EU

Turkey wants to help turn the war-ravaged Balkans into a region of cooperation with a joint future in the European Union and NATO, President Abdullah Gül has said, as part of Turkey's increased involvement in the region. "It is our desire to have the whole region united under a wider umbrella of the European Union and NATO," Gül declared after talks with Serbia's President Boris Tadic and the three members of Bosnia's multiethnic presidency on Tuesday. "We believe that the Balkans is not at the end of Europe, but that it is the heart of Europe," Gül stated. "We want to ... strengthen cooperation and move jointly toward solving burning issues."

The talks at the Karadjordjevo residency in Serbia near the border with Croatia came a year after Turkey hosted a similar summit in İstanbul, aimed at bringing former Balkan foes Serbia and Bosnia closer together. Turkey's diplomatic initiative illustrates its bid to renew its influence in the Balkans stemming from centuries-long Ottoman rule and close ties with the region's Muslims.

"Turkey has its historic reasons and ... legitimate interests for its presence in the Balkans," Serbia's president Tadic said. "We want the entire region to be integrated into the European Union as soon as possible ... this is our main political goal." Tadic pledged to put the past behind and "create a better future" for the region that in the 1990's was engulfed in the bloodiest conflict in Europe since World War II. Tadic did not elaborate on Gül's proposed NATO ties. The issue is sensitive among the Serbs because of the Western military alliance's 1999 bombing of Serbia that ended Belgrade's rule over Kosovo, Serbia's former province.

The war in Bosnia ended in 1995 in a U.S.-brokered peace plan that divided the country into two entities, a Serb and a Muslim-Croat one. Bosnia's inability to create a centralized government has stalled its efforts toward EU membership, while Serbia has recently made some progress after its EU bid had been blocked over failure to arrest war crimes suspects sought by a UN court.

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Memories of the war past also have been rekindled with the choice of the Karadjordjevo hunting lodge where former Serbian and Croatian nationalist leaders - Serbia's Slobodan Milosevic and Croatia's Franjo Tudjman - reportedly negotiated carving up Bosnia in the early 1990s, fueling the path to war. Tadic argued that "some good decisions also were made here" during the era of the former Yugoslavia, when Karadjordjevo was often used by former communist leader Josip Broz Tito. Tadic said the choice of the venue only strengthens the message of reconciliation. "I will never repeat the mistakes of my predecessors, made even here in Karadjordjevo," Tadic said. "It is our intention ... to turn the places of our joint history, which remind us of bad past experience, into the places of good decisions." /Today's Zaman/

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Libya Contact Group Welcomes Turkey's Roadmap

Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu has said many participants of the Libya Contact Group hailed Turkey's roadmap for peace in Libya as "the most applicable and correct" plan, hinting an impending deal on the roadmap. Davutoğlu, after attending a meeting of the NATO-backed coalition against Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi in Rome, during which participants sought ways to get funds to Libya's ill-equipped rebel movement, told reporters that Turkey has recently intensified its efforts regarding its roadmap for peace, which Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan unveiled last month. The foreign minister said Turkey had shared the main points of the roadmap with parties in the contact group's meeting in Doha last month and that Turkey has been sharing the details of the plan with international community. He added that there is a "certain agreement" on this.

Thursday's meeting of the so-called Libya Contact Group brought together foreign ministers from countries including France, Britain, the United States, Italy and Qatar as well as representatives of the Arab League, the African Union and the United Nations. Davutoğlu said Turkey had earlier discussed the details of the roadmap both with Gaddafi government authorities and the rebel government, adding that a roadmap the Libya's Transitional National Council has announced at the meeting is very similar to Turkey's roadmap. "For this reason, we will continue our efforts on this roadmap," Davutoğlu stressed. He noted the group has decided to hold its next meetings in the United Arab Emirates and then in Turkey, as NATO's only Muslim member.

Additionally, U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton on Thursday held a bilateral meeting with Davutoğlu in Rome ahead of the meeting of the Libya Contact Group. During the meeting, Clinton reportedly said the U.S. administration has been supporting Turkey's roadmap for Libya and that Washington is willing to be in close cooperation with Ankara on the Libya issue. Davutoğlu explained that he had a comprehensive meeting with

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Clinton in which they discussed the operation in Libya and Turkey's roadmap, other developments in the region, particularly unrest in Syria, international terrorism and the post-bin Laden situation, and the reconciliation deal among Palestinian factions.

Davutoğlu also defended Turkey's foreign policy and position on Libya, dismissing claims that Turkey shifted its policy when Erdoğan openly called on the Libyan leader to immediately step down earlier last week. He stated that Turkey's position has been clear from the outset and that the country has called for a constitutional democracy in the North African state. The foreign minister also had talks with Libya's Transitional National Council representatives, UAE Foreign Minister Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed al-Nahayan and Australian Foreign Minister Kevin Rudd. /Today's Zaman/

Davutoğlu Says World Political Order Must be More Multilateral

The world political order must be more multilateral and participatory, and must represent all humanity, Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu declared Sunday. "We don't want to have political hierarchy in the world, where certain countries, certain nations, have more to say on the future of political order in the coming decades and centuries," Davutoğlu said. "We want to have more participation, more multilateralism, and more representation at a global political level."

The foreign minister made his remarks in a speech at the opening ceremony of the Intellectuals Forum, part of the 4th United Nations Conference on Least Developed Countries. Davutoğlu highlighted that there is too much discriminatory terminology in the global political and economic arena and this reflected differentiation made among the world's countries. "There are permanent members in the UN Security Council, and permanent [means] they will decide what will be happening in the world [in the future], it means they have the right of veto," the minister stated, calling this system unjust and in need of change. /Turkish Press Review/

Turkey, Iran Boost Energy, Trade Ties Despite Growing U.S. Pressure

Turkey and Iran have signed three agreements over the past three weeks to boost their relationship in almost all fields amid growing pressure from the United States on Ankara to stem ties with its neighbor. In the latest deal, energy ministers from both sides announced Tuesday the completion of what they called a "road map" detailing their investment projects in the energy field. "It brings us great joy that the road map will be approved and signed by both sides today," Iranian Electricity Minister Macit Namcu told reporters late Tuesday at a joint press conference with Energy Minister Taner Yıldız.

The other two agreements were signed by the foreign and state ministries of both countries. The foreign ministries have agreed to open three more border gates and to create a trilateral mechanism that includes Azerbaijan to increase regional cooperation, while State Minister Hayati Yazıcı inked a protocol on cooperation in the field of "public administration" that will facilitate an exchange of public personnel. The United Nations Security Council has imposed sanctions against Iran, as have the United States and the European Union. Turkey has stated it would only obey the UN's sanctions because it does not believe in the usefulness of such measures.

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The Turkey-Iran road map envisions forming a technical committee that will look into potential investments in both countries and guide private companies. This committee will create the opportunity to set up renewable energy plants and other energy-related facilities in Tehran, Yıldız said. The road map foresees increasing the 500-megawatt energy-exchange capacity between the two countries to more than 1,000 megawatts, according to Namcu. In addition, the plan will allow for investments in setting up heat stations and energy power plants. "We especially wanted to focus on renewable energy sources," the Iranian minister said.

Turkey's deepened and diversified economic and energy relations with Iran have sparked further U.S. reaction against Ankara. A senior U.S. official recently voiced concerns about Turkey's boosted ties with Iran, saying they could encourage the regime in Tehran to continue its controversial nuclear program. "One of the issues that concerns us is as Turkey is looking to improve its economy, one of the ways to achieve that is to increase its global exports, and exports to Iran, which carries a substantial risk," the official told the *Hürriyet Daily News*. Turkey and Iran have declared a common objective of increasing trade volume to \$30 billion.

The same official also expressed unease about the newly established Turkey-Iran-Azerbaijan trilateral mechanism, which places regional cooperation at the center of its plans. "We have a concern about the expansion of commercial and trade relations between Turkey and Iran. We recognize that they [Turkey and Azerbaijan] are neighbors to Iran and there will be some commerce. That being said, as trade grows, so does the opportunity for Iran to abuse [it]," the official stated. Turkey and Iran have failed in recent years to finalize a comprehensive energy draft agreement due to Washington's pressure on Ankara. Ignoring the U.S. criticisms, Turkish government members have emphasized that Turkey is committed to developing relations with its neighbor. /*Hürriyet*/

U.S. Envoy Rejects Turkish Government Criticisms over PKK Fight

Rejecting claims by top Turkish officials about inadequate U.S. assistance in their fight against terrorism, the U.S. ambassador to Ankara said Monday that no country supports Turkey more. "Absolutely this [claim] is nonsense. This is disinformation, a myth, a lie. If there is any country that does more than we do to help Turkey in its fight against terror, I'd like to know [about it]," U.S. Ambassador Francis J. Ricciardone stated in an interview with the *Anatolia* news agency. "We [work together on] law enforcement. We support your troops. We work with your diplomats. How anyone can think we are not doing anything?"

Ricciardone's statement came days after Deputy Prime Minister Cemil Çiçek and Defense Minister Vecdi Gönül hinted that Washington did not back Turkey in its fight against the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party, or PKK, at the same level as Ankara helped the United States in its global fight against al-Qaeda. Both officials charged that there was a double standard imposed on the global anti-terror fight, in remarks made after the killing of al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden by U.S. commandos.

"I cannot go into the details, but our most important cooperation is within the intelligence field," Ricciardone said, describing his country's expertise in this field as "valuable, expensive and special." The United States has preferred to use this intelligence capability

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for the service of Turkish forces instead of deploying it for the use of U.S. troops in Afghanistan, the ambassador added.

"You cannot measure the value of such technical abilities in terms of dollars but saving in Turkish people's lives," Ricciardone underlined. "Of course it has an expense. It costs over a million dollars a day, and up to \$400 million a year for the past few years." His statement was believed to be the first announcement by an American official of the cost of Washington's intelligence assistance to Turkey. "This is not 'nothing,' but we do it because we're allies against terror. We do it because the United States has declared the PKK a terrorist organization," Ricciardone added.

Commenting on the killing of bin Laden, the ambassador expressed his hope that fewer people would follow al-Qaeda, which he described as possessing a deadly ideology. "The cruelest thing bin Laden has done was to confuse people by making them think the cruelty, hate and violence [of al-Qaeda] are a part of Islam," he said. "I have lived in Iran, Turkey and Asia, and met a lot of different people. None of these Muslims were pro-violence or cruel." Bin Laden's biggest crime was to portray himself as a representative of Islam, Ricciardone stated, adding: "Now that he is gone, I hope the wounds he left will heal in his absence. We are hoping for the bankruptcy of his ideology." /Hurriyet/

Cypriot Leaders Agree on Terms of International Agreements

Turkish Cypriot President Dervis Eroğlu and Greek Cypriot leader Dimitris Christofias have agreed on the terms of international agreements in negotiations aimed at reunifying the island. The leaders met on Thursday in Nicosia to discuss international agreements as well as internal security, fisheries and search and rescue issues in the sea. Eroğlu said the leaders have also established a committee of experts to further explore these issues along with the special envoys already in place in a statement he made after the talks.

Eroğlu and Christofias have been regularly meeting for almost a year to hammer out an enduring peace settlement on the long-divided island but have achieved few tangible results. The Turkish Cypriot President noted that domestic security was also discussed, adding that it had already been accepted that the federal police would be composed of equal numbers of Turkish and Greek Cypriot police. However, there is not yet full agreement on the total number of police to be deployed.

Special representatives for the two sides will meet on Tuesday and the leaders will meet again on May 12, Eroğlu stated. A third trilateral meeting between the leaders and including UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon is scheduled to take place in New York after June 20. /Today's Zaman/

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Washington

May 10-16, 2011

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U.S. Lawmakers Ask Turkish PM to Prevent New Flotilla 'Provocation'

A group of members of the U.S. Congress has submitted a letter to Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan urging him to "help work out a mechanism with Israel to allow legitimate humanitarian assistance to go to Gaza without provoking a needless confrontation," The Weekly Standard reported on Thursday. The 36 congressional members expressed serious concern over reports that the "so-called Free Gaza Movement" and the Humanitarian Aid Foundation (İHH) are planning to send another flotilla to Gaza in the coming weeks to provoke a confrontation with Israel. "As members of the United States House of Representatives we ask you to help discourage these efforts and work with the Israeli government in a productive way as it continues to allow legitimate aid, but not weapons, to enter Gaza," the letter stated.

The members of Congress alleged that the government of Israel has demonstrated a commitment to ensuring the basic needs of those living in the Gaza Strip are being met and that over the last year the capacity of existing land crossings had been increased, citing as an example the capacity of the Kerem Shalom crossing increasing by 210 percent. The letter recalled that more than 3,600 supply trucks had entered Gaza in the month of March alone, delivering tens of thousands of tons of goods, including food, clothing, medicine and fuel. It noted that over the past year agricultural exports from the Gaza Strip have gradually increased and economic growth in Gaza reached 15 percent in 2010. "These are all clear signs that Israeli policies are making a positive impact on the lives of the Palestinian people," the representatives underlined.

According to the letter, Israel, like any country in the world, must take whatever steps necessary to protect its citizens and that starts with preventing additional weapons from entering Gaza. It said if flotilla organizers carry out their confrontational plans, the Israelis will have little choice but to board the vessels and search for weapons. "We fear violence could erupt just as it did last year." The members of Congress called for Erdoğan's active participation in finding a resolution that prevents violence and hoped that his government can help work out a mechanism with Israel to allow "legitimate" humanitarian assistance to go to Gaza without provoking a confrontation.

"We are confident that Israel, as it has in the past, will continue to allow such aid to flow subject to appropriate security screening. By finding a constructive solution as an alternative to another flotilla, you have a unique opportunity to potentially save lives and be a force for stability at a particularly volatile time," the letter concluded. Both Democrats and Republicans have signed the letter, including the ranking member of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, Howard Berman, many of Berman's colleagues on the

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same committee and influential Democratic congressman Henry Waxman. /Today's Zaman, Hurriyet/

Erdoğan Warns of Sectarian Clashes in Syria

Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has expressed concern that Syria might split along sectarian lines as tensions continue to grow in Turkey's southern neighbor. "We have concerns that sectarian clashes might erupt in Syria that could split the country. We do not want to see such a thing," Erdoğan told reporters during a visit to the governor's office in the Black Sea province of Rize on Saturday.

Erdoğan said the last time he talked to Syrian President Bashar al-Assad was nearly 10 days earlier, adding however that the Turkish ambassador in Damascus was in continuous contact with the Syrian government. "Syria is like a domestic issue for us because we have an 850-kilometer border as well as strong ties of kinship. I hope that Syria will overcome these dire times quickly," Erdoğan said, repeating previous statements he has made on the issue.

Earlier the prime minister said it was premature to say whether al-Assad should quit. Erdoğan, in an interview aired on the U.S. television channel Bloomberg late Thursday, described al-Assad as a "good friend" and said Ankara had begun applying pressure for reform even before a wave of uprisings began in Arab countries. Turkey, whose ties with Syria have flourished in recent years, has said that it opposes foreign intervention in its southern neighbor and that the unrest-stricken country should solve its own problems. Last month, Turkish envoys held talks with al-Assad in Damascus as part of Ankara's efforts to cajole him into reform. /Hurriyet/

Tension Mounts in Turkey's Southeast following PKK Killings

The killing of 12 members of the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) by Turkish security forces in Şırnak's Uludere district, near the border with northern Iraq, over a period of two days has raised tension in the Southeast of the country, with protests breaking out and the pro-Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party (BDP) announcing a three-day period of mourning for the deaths.

The General Staff announced on Saturday that 12 PKK members were killed in the previous two days while trying to infiltrate military bases along the border. The BDP and the PKK announced a three-day period of mourning after the killings, which began on Sunday. Many store owners in Şırnak and its districts of Silopi, İdil, Uludere and Beytüşşebap kept their shops closed on Sunday and Monday. The Uludere and Cizre municipalities cancelled festivals to be held in the districts.

On Sunday, a group of demonstrators gathered in front of Şırnak State Hospital, where the bodies of four PKK members were brought, chanting slogans. A group of BDP members, including BDP Şırnak deputy Hasip Kaplan, traveled to the village of Yemisli, where the bodies of three PKK members were still being kept by security forces. The bodies of the other five are reportedly still in the village of Ortaköy. Kaplan told the Milliyet daily on Monday that there is anger in the region over the killings and that they

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want the state to at least hand over the bodies of the dead PKK members. "Our people condemn the continuation of military operations while a ceasefire is in place. We are face-to-face with a situation that has grave consequences," he said.

BDP members also called on people in the Southeast to not send their children to school in protest of the deaths. There were also protests in Hakkari, where many store owners kept their stores shut in protest of the deaths of the 12 PKK members. Protestors attacked police with stones during illegal demonstrations in Batman and Siirt. In response, the police stepped up security measures in these provinces.

Tension was also high in İstanbul on Monday when a group of BDP supporters attacked riot police in front of the BDP's İstanbul branch building. The group of close to 1,000 people gathered in Taksim Square and marched towards the BDP building. They threw stones and fireworks at the police upon arriving to the building. Clashes erupted between the protestors and the police, which used pepper spray to disperse the crowd. A number of the demonstrators were detained. /Today's Zaman/

Turkey Urges UN to Back Palestinian Reconciliation

Turkey has urged the United Nations to back the recent Palestinian reconciliation deal between rivals Hamas and Fatah. Meeting with UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu asked the UN chief to support the process to keep the deal alive, diplomatic sources told the Hürriyet Daily News. Davutoğlu met Ban on Monday on the sidelines of the 4th UN Conference on the Least Developed Countries. Turkish President Gül also discussed the agreement Fatah and Hamas reached, underlining his concerns that Israel's negative attitude on the deal could harm the commitment to Palestinian reunification.

Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas and Hamas leader Khaled Meshaal buried the hatchet at a Cairo reconciliation ceremony late last month, which ended a nearly four-year feud but has angered Israel. However, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu aims to convince the international community that the deal between Abbas's secular Fatah faction and the Islamist Hamas, which the Jewish state brands a terrorist organization, will be disastrous for Middle East peace.

Davutoğlu and the UN chief also discussed possibilities to keep the momentum going on Cyprus reunification talks between Turkish Cypriot and Greek Cypriot leaders. Ban conveyed that another trilateral meeting under the auspices of his office is scheduled for June. Additionally, Ban said he appreciated Turkey's efforts for solution on the Libya crises, and asked Ankara to be involved in ongoing process to reach ceasefire in the conflict-hit country, diplomatic sources said. /Hurriyet/

Ankara to Accelerate EU Accession Talks after Elections

The Turkish prime minister and the head of the European Commission have agreed to ramp up long-stalled EU accession talks following Turkey's June 12 general election. European Commission President Jose Manuel Barroso told Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan that they want to "immediately boost" negotiations for Turkey's membership in the EU after the election, the Hürriyet Daily News has learned. The two political figures

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held a bilateral meeting Monday on the sidelines of the 4th UN Least Developed Countries Conference, or LDC-IV, in Istanbul.

In the meeting, Barroso told Erdoğan that the European Union was following the prime minister's remarks in his election rallies. "We appreciate that you give importance to Turkey's relations with the EU," Barroso told Erdoğan. The European official also asked the prime minister about the preparation of Turkey's new constitution and said the commission is waiting to hear about the steps in the process. Erdoğan responded positively to Barroso's proposal to accelerate the EU membership process and said he wanted to visit Brussels after the June polls, a trip he had postponed due to his election campaign. The Cyprus problem and the Nabucco pipeline project were also discussed at the meeting Monday.

The slowdown in Turkey's EU membership negotiations was also on the agenda of Turkish President Abdullah Gül during his meeting with Barroso on Monday. Diplomatic sources said Gül criticized the vacillation of some EU countries over Turkey's accession. "There are private opinions" among some members of the 27-nation bloc that negatively affect Turkey's relations with the European Union, Gül stated.

Turkey and the EU began accession talks in 2005 but Ankara has only been able to open 13 negotiation chapters out of 35. Turkey has opened no new policy chapter since last June in the longest period of diplomatic drought since the accession talks started. The Turkish government has accused EU countries of slowing the talks while the EU continues to press Turkey to keep its promises to open its ports and airports to Greek Cypriot vessels. Talks on eight chapters are suspended since Turkey is seen as not fulfilling its obligations toward Cyprus. /Hurriyet/

Turkey Signs International Convention on Violence Against Women

Turkey became the first country to sign a new European convention to prevent and combat violence against women Wednesday, including crimes based on custom, religion, tradition or "honor." Turkey made a special effort to finalize the text during its rotating term presidency of the Council of Europe, placing time pressure on member countries so the convention could be opened for signatures during the council's ministerial meeting in Istanbul, when it handed the term presidency to Ukraine.

Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu signed the convention Wednesday, followed by representatives of 12 other countries. Most of the legal requirements of the convention are already met within Turkish legislation, Davutoglu stated, adding that Turkey is also committed to overcoming any problems that may arise during the implementation process. As member states of the council ratify the treaty, they become obliged to take legislative or other measures to ensure that acts such as domestic violence, violence in public places, sexual harassment, forced marriage, "honor" crimes, rape and genital mutilation are criminalized. Thus far 13 countries - Austria, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Iceland, Luxembourg, Montenegro, Portugal, Slovakia, Spain and Sweden, in addition to Turkey - have signed the convention. /Turkish Press Review/

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Gül Urges Hamas to Recognize Israel's Right to Exist

Turkey's President Abdullah Gül has urged the Palestinian Islamist group Hamas to recognize Israel's right to exist, the Wall Street Journal reported on Saturday. In an interview a day after U.S. President Barack Obama delivered a speech on the Middle East, Gül also hailed Obama's reference to creating a Palestinian state based on Israel's pre-1967 borders as "a very important step." Turkey has regarded Hamas as a key factor in the Middle East peace process since it won Palestinian elections in 2006.

Gül said President Obama "has a point" when he said in his speech that Israel could not be expected to negotiate with a body that does not recognize Israel's right to exist. Asked if he was willing to press Hamas on that issue, Gül said, "I already advised them." In a meeting with Hamas leader Khaled Meshaal in Ankara in 2006, Gül said he told Meshaal, "you have to be rational" about recognizing Israel's right to exist. Gül said he believed Hamas was ready to recognize Israel in its pre-1967 borders but wants that to happen simultaneously with Israel's recognition of a Palestinian state.

Ankara's ties with former close ally Israel broke down over its military operation in the Gaza strip in 2008 and hostility was fueled by an Israeli commando raid on an aid flotilla which killed nine Turkish activists in May last year. Turkey has demanded that Israel end its blockade of the Gaza strip and its aggressive stance on the Palestinian issue has created tensions between Ankara and Washington.

The paper said Obama's speech was being interpreted by Turkish officials as a significant if nuanced change. Gül also welcomed Obama's pledge of debt relief and aid for Egypt and Tunisia as they struggle in the wake of popular revolutions. But he said a much larger scale "Marshall Plan" for the Middle East was needed. Such a fund should be run by the World Bank and draw on contributions from countries in the region, as well as from traditional donors in the West, Gül stated. /Sabah/

Turkey Warms Up Ties with Libyan Rebels

Top Turkish officials met Monday with the head of the Libya's National Transitional Council, or NTC, in what was seen as a signal of possible recognition of the rebels by Ankara. NTC Chairman Mustafa Abdul-Jalil met with Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, President Abdullah Gül and Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu to discuss the transitional process in the turmoil-hit country and the humanitarian aid needed by Libyans.

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Washington

"We see the NTC as the legitimate and respected representative of the Libyan people. We will continue our talks with all relevant parties," Davutoğlu told reporters at a joint press conference with Abdul-Jalil. "What is important for us is to accomplish the transition process peacefully and to meet the demands of the people," he added. Hakan Fidan, the undersecretary of the National Intelligence Organization, or MIT, was also present at the meeting between Davutoğlu and Abdul-Jalil.

The NTC chairman's reception by Gül and Erdoğan on his first visit to Turkey appeared to be a clear show of Ankara's support for the council. The visit came on the same day the European Union opened a representative office in the rebel stronghold of Benghazi. Turkey already has a representative in the Libyan city. Outlining the pillars of Turkey's policy on Libya, Davutoğlu said preserving the country's territorial integrity and political unity was a priority. "For this, we have used all possible diplomatic ways, openly and secretly. We will continue to do so," he stated. Criticizing Col. Moammar Gadhafi's administration for attacking its own people, Davutoğlu said Turkey would continue to work for a peaceful transition in Libya through its road map.

Abdul-Jalil's visit marks the highest-level contact to date between Turkey and the Libyan rebels following Ankara's initial reluctance to back military action in the conflict-torn North African country. Turkey has proposed a "road map" to end the Libyan turmoil, urging an immediate cease-fire, the lifting of sieges of rebel-held towns by regime forces and the initiation of a "transformation process" that would lead to free elections. "We support the road map created by our Turkish brothers and sisters. We support this plan that symbolizes and solidifies the needs of the Libyan people, including removing Gadhafi from the country," Abdul-Jalil declared.

Praising the historical ties between the two countries and the important role Turkish figures Mustafa Kemal Atatürk and Enver Pasha played for Libya, Abdul-Jalil said, "We have understood Turkey's stance from the beginning. They do not want bloodshed to continue. Libya awaits Turkey's support." Turkey severed ties with the Gadhafi administration in early May after it closed its embassy in Tripoli and Erdoğan urged the Libyan leader to "immediately" cede power and leave the country.

Another key issue discussed in Ankara was the Turkish government's possible humanitarian aid to the Libyan people. "We have discussed the humanitarian situation in Libya as well. In particular, the situation of the refugees in Tunisia, the [lack of] hospitals and other infrastructure," Davutoğlu said. "Turkey will do its best to provide assistance to Libya. In this framework we'll continue to work together [with the NTC]." /Hurriyet/

Turkish FM Criticizes U.S. Approach to Israel

U.S. President Barack Obama's far-ranging speech on the Middle East has drawn a mixed reaction from Turkey, which expressed some agreement with the U.S. strategy on Syria but strong criticism of its approach to Israel. The United States should support the Palestinian reconciliation process and pave the way for recognition of a Palestinian state if it wants peace in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu said following Obama's speech.

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"There is a reference to the 1967 borders [in Obama's speech]. This is an important window of opportunity. They should not refrain from giving support to Palestinian reconciliation due to Israel's unnecessary reservations," Davutoğlu stated in an interview Friday with the CNNTürk news channel. "What they should do is support Palestinian reconciliation and pave the way for recognition of a Palestinian state, so a legitimate Palestinian government can sit down at the negotiation table for peace with Israel," the Turkish foreign minister argued.

In his speech conveying Washington's policy in the Middle East and North Africa amid upheaval in the Arab world, Obama said peace talks between Israel and the Palestinians are made more difficult by the participation of Hamas in the Palestinian government. The U.S. president also cast a shadow on the possibility of a Palestinian initiative to be recognized as a state by the UN General Assembly. "Symbolic actions to isolate Israel at the United Nations in September won't create an independent state," Obama said.

Davutoğlu called indirectly on the United States to take a "more principled attitude" on the issue, noting that there was a commitment to establishing a Palestinian state at the time when Israel was formed in 1948. "A Palestinian state should be found without delay," he declared. The Turkish foreign minister also responded to recent remarks by U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs Philip Gordon, who urged Ankara to convince a Turkish human-rights organization not to dispatch another aid convoy to Gaza in June.

"What is unnecessary in this case is not the aid flotilla, but Israel's blockade [on Gaza]." he said. Rather than trying to restrain an aid convoy, Washington should urge Israel to lift its blockade on the Gaza Strip, Davutoğlu added, emphasizing that if Palestinian reconciliation could lead to forming a government, the blockade would be removed and the problem could be solved. "We will make necessary warnings [to the humanitarian aid flotilla] and try to find alternative ways [to send] the aid. But they [the United States] should not ask a democratic country to prevent a civil-society organization [from this action]," he stated. /Hurriyet/

Turkey Advises U.S. to Give Assad More Time for Reforms

Despite growing international pressure on the Syrian leadership, Turkey believes Bashar al-Assad's regime should be given more time to make reforms, giving a clear message to the United States that any untimely intervention would be unwelcome. "We want a smooth transformation and an orderly transition," a senior Turkish Foreign Ministry official told the Hürriyet Daily News on Tuesday, after a meeting between Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and U.S. Ambassador to Turkey Francis Ricciardone. The meeting came a day after a senior American military official held talks in Ankara and in İzmir with top Turkish generals.

Syria was the key issue discussed during the meeting between Ricciardone and Erdoğan, according to Turkish diplomatic sources, who said the envoy conveyed messages to Erdoğan from U.S. President Barack Obama. "The number-one issue was Syria, but all the regional developments were discussed," a Turkish diplomat told reporters on Tuesday. The diplomat refused to give more information on the content of the Erdoğan-Ricciardone meeting, which took place at a heliport in Ankara, but said Erdoğan also

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dispatched messages to Obama. "Turkey's, and in particular the prime minister's, initiatives in the region are always very important for us. That's why we are following them very closely. That's why I came here [to meet]," Ricciardone told reporters after his meeting with Erdoğan.

The Ankara-Washington dialogue has coincided with growing concerns over regional stability in the wake of the growing uprising in Syria and the recent tension on Israel's borders with Syria and Lebanon, where operations during protests to mark the anniversary of Israel's founding claimed the lives of nearly a dozen people. Damascus became the focal point of criticism by the international community amid the ongoing "Arab Spring" when it opted to suppress mass protests through excessive use of force that has left more than 1,000 people dead. Turkey has been advising Syrian leader Bashar al-Assad's government to immediately implement reforms to calm the situation, but has become frustrated at its recalcitrance.

The Ricciardone-Erdoğan meeting came just a day after U.S. Gen. James Cartwright, the vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, visited Turkey. Cartwright held talks with Turkish Chief of General Staff Gen. Isik Kosaner and visited the NATO Command in İzmir. According to a diplomatic source, the primary focus of the talks was the fight against the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party, or PKK, but the military officials discussed various matters of common interest, including the NATO operation in Libya and general developments in the Middle East.

Both Cartwright and Ricciardone are also likely to have discussed with their Turkish counterparts Turkey's active participation in the NATO military operation against Libya. Though Turkey is part of the NATO operation, it has rejected striking Libyan targets. Apart from the Libya operation, Turkish and American officials are believed to have discussed NATO's missile defense project, which envisions the deployment of a radar system on Turkish soil. Though Turkey has not ruled out such a deployment, it is continuing to negotiate its technicalities. The matter will be reviewed during a summit of NATO defense ministers in early June. /Hurriyet/

Six Top Members Resign from MHP over Video Scandal

Six top members of Turkey's far-right Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) resigned on Saturday, plunging its preparations for a parliamentary election next month into chaos. It was the second wave of resignations from the party ahead of the June 12 election, in which the MHP's prospects of exceeding the 10 percent threshold needed to retain their place in parliament were unclear. Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's ruling AK Party is expected to secure a third consecutive victory in the election, with opinion polls putting its level of support at around 45 percent.

The MHP resignations were triggered by the broadcast on a website of secretly filmed videos which showed senior members of the party on romantic trysts and making politically compromising statements. The website, named "Different Idealists", had threatened to broadcast further compromising video recordings if party leader Devlet Bahçeli did not resign by a deadline of May 18. He has not yet resigned. It was not clear who was behind the website. The Anatolian news agency said Deputy Chairmen Dr. Osman Çakır, Ümit Şafak, Deniz Bölükbaşı and Mehmet Ekici, along with General

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Secretary Cihan Paçacı and his deputy Mehmet Taytak resigned their party membership and candidacies to become members of parliament. /Sabah/

Turkey Announces Bid for UN Security Council Seat in 2015-2016

Ankara on Wednesday officially announced its bid for a new term at the UN Security Council (UNSC), declaring its candidacy for a non-permanent seat in the influential body for 2015-2016.

"Turkey is determined to increase its contributions to international peace, security, stability and prosperity, as well as to further its efforts towards strengthening fundamental principles and values such as human rights, democracy and rule of law. Thus, Turkey is announcing its candidacy for non-permanent membership in the [UNSC] for the years 2015-2016," a statement from the Foreign Ministry said on Wednesday morning. "The main reason for announcing our candidacy once again, not long after our non-permanent membership in the UNSC in 2009 - 2010, emanates from our belief that Turkey will provide significant added value to global peace and security in an era of critical and rapid change in international affairs," the ministry said.

Turkey occupied one of the non-permanent seats allocated to the Western European and Others Group (WEOG) in the 15-member UN Security Council for the 2009-2010 term. It had previously held non-permanent seats in 1951-1952 and 1954-1955. It was the first time Ankara had a seat on the 15-member body since 1961, when it had shared a non-permanent seat with Poland.

Ankara's foreign policy vision, which the Foreign Ministry said will also define its priorities for a possible new term at the Security Council, calls for an international policy that "upholds respect for human rights with a view to balance security and freedoms," focuses on "preventive diplomacy and mediation" in the resolution of conflicts, seeks to advance intercultural dialogue and supports reform within the UN. Turkey will be competing against Spain and New Zealand for the seat. /Today's Zaman/

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Turkey Hopes Rafah Opening Spurs Israel to Lift Gaza Blockade

Turkey has welcomed Egypt's decision to permanently open the Rafah border crossing with Gaza, saying it hoped the Egyptian move will lead Israel to reconsider its blockade of the coastal strip. After a four-year blockade, Egypt on Saturday permanently opened

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the Gaza Strip's main gateway to the outside world, bringing long-awaited relief to the territory's Palestinian population and a significant achievement for the area's ruling party, Hamas.

"We believe that the re-opening of the Rafah gate will help ease the difficult conditions and sufferings that [the] people of Gaza were subjected to. We wish this step leads Israel to reconsider the inhumane blockade it has imposed on the people of Gaza," a statement from the Foreign Ministry, released late on Sunday, said. It also praised Egypt, which brokered a reconciliation deal between Hamas and its rival Palestinian group Fatah earlier this month, for lifting the blockade of Gaza. "We congratulate the Egyptian government for this significant contribution to the improvement of the daily living conditions of the people of Gaza, which came in addition to its efforts to achieve national reconciliation in Palestine," the statement said. /Today's Zaman/

Turkey Issues Strong Warning to Assad as Syrian Opposition Meets in Antalya

With Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's resistance to implementing reforms, Ankara has strengthened its tone of warning to the Syrian government. Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has relayed to Assad the message that his only chance will be to "take a swift and radical step towards reforms." Step by step Ankara continues to increase its distance from Assad's administration. Based on Assad's failure to take any steps towards reforms since the start of the uprising, a definitive line has been drawn regarding the Syria issue, now considered to be a 'national security issue' by Turkey.

During a telephone conversation made on Friday Erdoğan gave a strong message to Assad, saying, "I place at least as much importance on the Syrian public's situation as a Syrian would. It's now time that radical steps that surprise everyone be taken." Erdoğan went on to state that Turkey will not remain silent regarding the attacks directed at the Syrian public and requested a timeline for reforms. Assad in return reiterated his intentions for undertaking reforms.

According to diplomatic sources, had Assad taken steps towards implementing reforms in the initial days of the uprising, which has now continued for ten weeks, then the situation could have been manageable. However, today the situation has become significantly more difficult. Should Assad not announce radical reforms within the next week or two, religious conflict in Syria is expected to escalate. In addition to the religious conflict in the country, ethnic conflict in Syria is one of Ankara's gravest concerns. Despite the fact that the possibility the uprisings will not spread to Aleppo appears promising, Ankara is determined to not allow a second Halabja massacre to transpire in the region.

Should the uprising continue, Aleppo is expected to feel the effects, and should an attack be directed at the Kurds in Syria, Turkey will offer protection for Kurds. In this case, Turkey will open the door for Kurds, which consist of seven percent of Syria's population, as well as to those of Armenian or Circassian heritage. Preparations are also being made for Sunni refugee groups. Between 500,000 and one million people are expected to seek shelter in Turkey to escape the Assad regime. Sources state that at this stage the borders are secured, however should the pressure continue then within 15 days there may be extraordinary movement in the region.

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Meanwhile, Turkey is playing host to a number of meetings by the opposition in Syria. After a minor meeting was held at the start of the month, now many of Syria's political opposition figures are holding a large scale meeting from May 31st to June 3rd in the Mediterranean city of Antalya. /Sabah/

Business Booming Between Turkey, Israel Despite Tensions

The diplomatic tension between Turkey and Israel since a deadly attack last year on a Gaza-bound aid ship has not hampered mutual trade, which continues to rise on the sale of military and other goods. While Turkey purchases high-tech defense-industry equipment from Israel, the military goods going the other way mostly include boots and uniforms. "Turkey dresses the Israeli army, mainly exporting army boots," said an executive from Turkey's Yakupoglu, speaking yesterday on condition of anonymity. The company manufactures materials in Ankara and exports them to Israel. Despite the political problems between the two countries, there has been no interruption in the firm's business thus far, the executive stated.

The export of military boots constitutes just a tiny portion of the longstanding trade relations between the two parties, and both Turkish and Israeli businessmen are enjoying a golden age of trade as official figures indicate that commercial bonds are stronger than ever. Trade between Israel and Turkey rose 25 percent in 2009-2010, and 40 percent in the first quarter of 2011 year-on-year. Bilateral trade by the end of last year peaked at \$3.44 billion, up from \$2.58 billion in 2009. "Turkey and Israel's business relations are getting stronger despite the political conflicts," Uriel Lynn, head of the Tel Aviv & Central Israeli Chamber of Commerce, said Monday. /Turkish Press Review/

Top Military Officer Arrested on Coup Charges

A top Turkish general was jailed on Monday pending trial over an alleged 2003 plot to unseat Prime Minister Tayyip Erdoğan's government, a move that could fuel tensions two weeks before a parliamentary election. General Bilgin Balanlı, commander of Turkey's military academies, is the highest-ranking serving officer among nearly 200 serving and retired officers charged with involvement in the alleged conspiracy, dubbed "Operation Sledgehammer" (Balyoz). The case has exacerbated strains between Turkey's secularist military and a ruling party with Islamist roots as campaigning heats up for the June 12 election.

The Istanbul court ordered General Balanlı be sent to jail pending trial on the recommendation of a prosecutor who questioned him for three hours on Monday, broadcasters reported. Most of the defendants in the case are held in a jail near Istanbul. The court released five other serving generals, two colonels and an admiral summoned for questioning on Friday after the seizure of documents at a retired colonel's house. Erdoğan, whose ruling AK Party is expected to win a third successive term in office, declined to comment on the detention.

Turkish media reports have suggested that the decision to question the generals was behind the surprise last-minute cancellation of major military exercises in the Aegean region last week. An armed forces official said the drills were cancelled for military reasons, while political leaders have declined comment. The military has overthrown

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three elected governments since 1960 and forced an Islamist-led coalition to quit in 1997. /Sabah/

Bomb Rocks Istanbul; PM Hints at Terrorism

A bomb that exploded Thursday in Istanbul's upscale Etiler neighborhood, wounding eight people including one police officer passing by, seems to have been the work of a terrorist organization, according to the prime minister. "Once we have the final conclusions, authorities including Istanbul's governor will make the necessary explanations. It would be wrong to declare anything at this point. When we look at it, we can easily realize the explosion is related to a terrorist organization," Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan told journalists Thursday.

Two people were seriously injured in the explosion, with one having reportedly lost her leg. The blast was caused by a medium-strength bomb that was mounted on an electric bicycle near a bus stop in the Etiler neighborhood, Istanbul Police Chief Hüseyin Çapkın explained. Çapkın confirmed in a statement that explosives placed on an electric bicycle had caused the blast at around 9 am. He also said the bomb was an explosive of medium strength.

Meanwhile, Istanbul's Gov. Hüseyin Mutlu claimed that "Citizens were the target," according to a report. Saying that the scene of the explosion was still under investigation, Mutlu noted there had been no immediate claim of responsibility for the blast. He condemned the attack, saying it showed the brutal face of terrorism one more time.

The eight people wounded in the explosion were sent to hospitals in the surrounding area. Meanwhile, the blast also damaged a public bus and a private vehicle passing by, as well as several buildings. Traffic in Etiler was reopened after the police and security forces completed their investigation in the area. /Hurriyet/

Saudi Air Force to Take Part in Anatolian Eagle Exercise

The Royal Saudi Air Force will participate in this year's Anatolian Eagle military training exercise, which will begin next month in the central Anatolian province of Konya, a newspaper in Saudi Arabia has reported. This year the participation of the Royal Saudi Air Force, which joined last year's Anatolian Eagle exercise as an observer, will be a first. Jordan, Pakistan, Spain, the United Arab Emirates, the United States and Turkey will also participate in the exercise which will run June 13-24.

Saudi Air Force Commander Lt. Gen. Mohammed bin Abdullah al-Ayish and Deputy Defense Minister Prince Khaled Bin Sultan are expected to travel to Turkey for the Anatolian Eagle exercise. The report published in Saudi Arabia by the Al Jazirah newspaper highlighted that the exercise carries the utmost importance, while citing earlier remarks by Prince Khaled. "These kinds of exercises to be carried out with Arab, Muslim and friendly countries will bring in a significant contribution to the air forces in regards to gaining combative capabilities," the Saudi prince was quoted as saying in remarks delivered earlier.

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TUSIAD Selected News on Turkey

Washington

In the fall of 2009, the Turkish military changed the Anatolian Eagle exercise, which is a joint international military exercise and which was to have included Israel, into a national military exercise, in a move widely seen as a way to exclude Israel. A delay in the delivery of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) to Turkey from Israel was linked to the tension sparked by this cancellation, which is contrary to popular speculation that the delay was due to Turkey's disapproval of Israel's devastating offensive against the Gaza Strip in the winter of 2008/2009. /Today's Zaman/

Baghdad Ties Continued Economic Cooperation to Changes in Turkish Water Policy

Turkey's restriction of water flows along rivers through to Iraq is "unacceptable" and the two countries must sign an agreement to regulate it, Iraq's government spokesman stated on Tuesday. "We will use all of our diplomatic ties with Turkey to guarantee Iraq's water share," Ali al-Dabbagh told a news conference in Baghdad's heavily-fortified Green Zone. "Minimizing Iraq's water share is unacceptable and, until now, we have not signed an agreement on economic collaboration with Turkey. Parliament will not approve a strategic cooperation council with Turkey until Turkey agrees to sign an agreement with Iraq about water."

Dabbagh did not say how much water was currently flowing through to Iraq, or what would constitute an acceptable level. Baghdad and Ankara have had frequent disagreements in recent years over water flows along the Euphrates and Tigris from Turkey downriver to Iraq, though they have made temporary agreements to regulate it. Iraq and neighboring Syria have often complained that Turkey monopolizes the waters of the Euphrates and Tigris through a series of dams built on both rivers as part of a massive project to irrigate its southeastern corner. Turkey argues that the dams allow for better management, ensuring a constant flow of water downstream unaffected by seasonal changes.

A report for the Swiss and Swedish governments released in February warned that water shortages in the Middle East were so alarming that opposing camps in the region would have little choice but to cooperate. In a March report, UNICEF cited the possibility that the Tigris and the Euphrates could be completely dry in 2040 due to climate change, the intensive use of water and reduced water flow. /Hurriyet/

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