

CRISIS IN MIDDLE EAST

Turkey FM in Saudi for Qatar talks

AFP, Makkah

Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu yesterday arrived in Saudi Arabia for talks with King Salman, continuing efforts to resolve the Gulf's biggest diplomatic crisis in years.

A Turkish diplomatic source told AFP that the minister had landed in Jeddah.

Riyadh, the UAE, Egypt and others severed diplomatic and economic ties with Qatar almost two weeks ago, accusing Doha of supporting groups, including some backed by Iran, "that aim to destabilise the region".

Qatar denies any such support for extremists.

Cavusoglu was to travel from Jeddah to the holy city of Mecca where Salman is based for the last days of Ramadan, after meeting his Kuwaiti counterpart on Thursday.

The emir of Kuwait, which did not cut ties with Qatar, has also been trying to mediate.

Turkey's chief diplomat was in Doha on Wednesday where he called for dialogue after meeting Qatar's emir and foreign minister ahead of his Saudi stop.

"Although the kingdom is a party in this crisis, we know that King Salman is a party in resolving it," Cavusoglu said earlier.

"We want to hear the views of Saudi Arabia regarding possible solutions and will share with them our views in a transparent way... We pay a great attention to our relations with them," he said.

The crisis has put Turkey in a delicate position as Ankara regards Qatar as its chief ally in the Gulf but is also keen to maintain its improving ties with regional power Saudi Arabia.

At the same time, Turkey is eager to maintain workable relations with Iran, Saudi Arabia's foe.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan on Tuesday described the decision by Gulf states to cut political and economic ties with Qatar as "inhumane and un-Islamic".



The remains of Grenfell Tower, a residential tower block in west London which was gutted by fire, are pictured against the London skyline yesterday. Inset, A woman touches missing person posters near The Grenfell Tower block. The death toll from the London tower block fire has risen to at least 30.

PHOTO: REUTERS



'Witch hunt' by 'bad people'

Angry Trump says no 'proof' on Russian 'collusion', says he is being investigated over Comey firing

AGENCIES

President Donald Trump, in a furious yesterday morning message, said he is being investigated for his role in firing former FBI Director James Comey deriding a "witch hunt" against him led by some "very bad" people.

"I am being investigated for firing the FBI Director by the man who told me to fire the FBI Director!" Trump said on Twitter, calling the probe into him a "Witch Hunt."

He was answering accounts that he is personally being investigated for obstruction of justice with a characteristic scorched-earth defense: claiming mistreatment of historic proportions and calling into question the probity of his accusers.

"You are witnessing the single greatest WITCH HUNT in American political history -- led by some very bad and conflicted people!" he said in an early morning tweet on Thursday.

He also took to Twitter yesterday to insist that despite months of investigating, no proof has emerged that he colluded with Russia to tilt the 2016

presidential election in his favor.

Trump's young presidency has been battered by allegations -- under investigation both by Congress and the FBI -- that Russia interfered to sway the 2016 election in his favor, in possible collusion with Trump's campaign team.

The FBI probe, now in the hands of special counsel Robert Mueller, shifted



its focus to allegations of obstruction in the days after Trump fired the agency's then-director James Comey on May 9.

The new allegations against Trump center on his own admission that he fired Comey because of the Russia investigation, and suggestions he asked several top intelligence officials for their help altering the inquiry's

direction.

The Washington Post reported Thursday evening that Mueller's team is also focusing on the finances and business dealings of Jared Kushner, Trump's senior adviser and son-in-law.

The widened Russia probe could have far-reaching repercussions for Trump's presidency, transforming his closest aides into witnesses and sucking yet more political oxygen out of the West Wing.

Meanwhile, the Trump administration announced on Thursday that it is cancelling an Obama-era policy to allow millions of illegal-immigrant parents of children born in the United States to stay in the country.

The 2014 policy, known as DAPA, for Deferred Action for Parents of Americans and Lawful Permanent Residents, aimed to help the families of so-called "dreamer" children stay together free from the threat of deportation.

It was never implemented after 26 states successfully sued in a Texas federal district court to block it. The US Supreme Court let the lower court ruling stand last year after a four-four vote.

Man 'with knife' arrested outside UK parliament

AFP, London

London police yesterday arrested a man at the fence surrounding the British parliament on suspicion of carrying a knife, which comes nearly three months after an Islamist terror attack in the same area.

The man was detained at 11:10 am (1010 GMT) by the Palace of Westminster in central London, police said in a statement.

"The man -- aged in his 30s -- was arrested on suspicion of possession of a knife. There are no reports of any injuries," the brief statement said.



A bearded man, wearing black trousers and a grey sweatshirt, could be seen being held against the fence with his arms behind his back by a police officer.

A parliamentary spokesman said: "We are aware of an incident outside the Palace of Westminster, which is being dealt with by the Metropolitan Police."

On March 22, knifeman Khalid Masood drove into pedestrians on Westminster Bridge, killing four, and fatally stabbed a

policeman guarding the gates of parliament before being shot dead by armed officers.

On April 27, a man was arrested across the street from parliament. Police said knives were recovered from him.

Khalid Mohammed Omar Ali, 27, of north London, was charged with the intention of committing acts of terrorism engaged in conduct in preparation for giving effect to that intention.

He was also charged with two counts relating to explosive substances in Afghanistan in 2012.

Friday's arrest comes on the first anniversary of the murder of MP Jo Cox, who was shot and stabbed to death in her constituency by a man with links to neo-Nazi organisations.

More than 110,000 events were to take place around Britain between Friday and Sunday for "The Great Get Together" in honour of Cox, celebrating her belief that "we have far more in common than that which divides us".

Baghdadi 'The Ghost'

World jihad's low-profile boss

AFP, Baghdad

Discreet in his youth and invisible as the world's most wanted man, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi rose through the ranks quietly and patiently to become global jihad's undisputed supremo.

The Russian army yesterday said that Baghdadi may have been killed in a May 28 air strike near the jihadists' Syria stronghold of Raqa, although there was no immediate confirmation from his Islamic State group or the US-led coalition battling IS in Syria and Iraq.

The 46-year-old Iraqi-born leader of the IS, nicknamed "The Ghost", has not been seen in public since he proclaimed himself "caliph" in the Iraqi city of Mosul three years ago.

The world's most-wanted man has been rumoured wounded or killed a number of times in the past.

Baghdadi was said to have left Mosul earlier this year and has since been reportedly spotted in various areas near the Syrian-Iraqi border.

But his whereabouts were never confirmed.

"It is rather remarkable that the leader of the most image-conscious terrorist group is so low-key in terms of his own publicity," said Patrick Skinner, an analyst with the Soufan Group intelligence consultancy and a former CIA case officer.



That low profile -- a perfect antithesis to Osama bin Laden -- is partly what Baghdadi, who has a \$25-million US bounty on his head, has owed his rise as well as his survival to.

The man who in 2014 became the overlord of a jihadist state ruling over millions of inhabitants was born Ibrahim Awad al-Badri to a modest family in Samarra, north of Baghdad.

An introvert, he was mostly known locally for his skills as a footballer, a sport his group would later target as a product of the Western society jihadists claim to despise.

Baghdadi's high school results were too modest to undertake a law degree and his eyesight too bad to join the army so he moved to the capital to study Islam, settling in the neighbourhood of Tophchi.

After US-led forces invaded Iraq in 2003, he founded his own insurgent

outfit. It never carried out major attacks, however, and by the time he was arrested in February 2004 and detained at the Camp Bucca facility, he was still very much a second or third-tier jihadist.

The US prison in southern Iraq, which was later dubbed "the University of Jihad", was where he became radicalised and started showing signs of the leader he is now.

"People there realised that this nobody, this shy guy was an astute strategist," Amara, author of a recently-released documentary that unveiled exclusive documents on Baghdadi, said.

He was released at the end of 2004 for lack of evidence. Iraqi security services arrested him twice subsequently, in 2007 and 2012, but let him go because they did not know who he was.

In 2005, after his release from Bucca, he pledged allegiance to Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the brutal leader of one of IS's many previous incarnations. Zarqawi was killed in 2006 and Baghdadi took over from his successor, who was also eliminated, in 2010.

He revived the fortunes of Iraq's struggling Al-Qaeda affiliate, the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), turning it into the independent IS group, expanding into Syria in 2013 and then launching its sweeping offensive in Iraq in 2014.

Baghdadi grew up in a family divided between a religious clan and another of officers loyal to Saddam Hussein's secular Baath party.

Years later, his masterstroke as a jihadist leader was arguably to incorporate the ex-Baathists his predecessors had either fought or ignored into his organisation. It gave his leadership the military legitimacy he personally lacked and formed a solid backbone for the future IS group, whose extremist religious propaganda was combined with formidable guerrilla efficiency.

Baghdadi is thought to have had three wives, Asma al-Kubaysi, Isra al-Qaysi -- from Iraq and Syria -- and another, more recent, from the Gulf.

He has also been accused of having repeatedly raped girls and women he kept as sex slaves, including a pre-teen Yazidi girl and the US aid worker Kayla Mueller who was subsequently killed.

VENEZUELA CRISIS

Protest death toll hits 72

AFP, Caracas

Two protesters, both aged 20, died Thursday during anti-government demonstrations in separate regions of Venezuela, bringing the total deaths in more than two months of protests to 72, officials said.

Prosecutors said they were investigating the death of Jose Perez, a student in the western town of Rubio who was "shot in the face" during a demonstration.

Separately, the public ministry said it was investigating the death of Luis Vera in the city of Maracaibo, who was "at a demonstration when he was shot".

Near-daily protests against President Nicolas Maduro began on April 1, with demonstrators demanding his removal and the holding of new elections.

Macron, a 39-year-old centrist unknown

FRENCH PARLIAMENT ELECTION

Turnout worries for Macron ahead of second round

AFP, Paris

French Prime Minister Edouard Philippe called for high turnout in tomorrow's parliamentary election which is expected to hand President Emmanuel Macron's new party an overwhelming majority.

REM has fielded a mix of centrists and moderate left- and rightwingers drawn from France's established parties, as well as complete newcomers including a star mathematician and a former bullfighter.

A new poll published on Thursday underlined the scale of the losses for France's main rightwing Republicans party and Socialists who have dominated French political life for decades.

REM and its allies were tipped for 440-470 seats, the Republicans and its allies for 70-90 seats and the Socialists 20-30 seats -- a loss for them of more than 200 seats after their five years in power under president Francois Hollande.

Many opposition leaders have stressed the danger of Macron facing little opposition or scrutiny from parliament under a constitution that confers huge powers on the president.

The ministry flip-flopped a week later, saying the documents did exist.

Macron, a 39-year-old centrist unknown

to most people three years ago, looks on course to complete his revolution of French politics by securing a massive majority.

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Trump to change US-Cuba policy

AFP, Miami

President Donald Trump yesterday was set to announce a clampdown on US business with Cuba and tighter rules on travel to the island, in a move to roll back his predecessor Barack Obama's historic outreach to Havana.

Trump headed to Miami's Little Havana, spiritual home of the Cuban-American exile community, to unveil the policy shift in an address at the Manuel Arturo Theater -- named after an anti-communist veteran of the ill-fated Bay of Pigs invasion.

US officials told reporters that he will prohibit financial transactions with Cuba's military-backed tourism conglomerate GAESA, a body which might otherwise have hoped for a windfall from a new surge in American visitors.

Run by Castro's son-in-law Luis Rodriguez Lopez-Callejas, GAESA is involved in joint ventures with several foreign firms that have driven a tourism boom on the island, including the Marriott hotel chain.

Under a new National Security Presidential Memorandum, Trump is also expected to announce stricter application of the rules under which Americans can travel to Cuba.

American citizens will still be able to take commercial flights to Cuba, but only for 12 specific reasons -- ranging from journalism to educational activities -- which will be more tightly enforced.

Cuban-Americans will still be able to travel to Cuba and send remittances. Trump's measures stop short of reversing Obama's opening, but they signal a tougher stance that could slow the number of Americans who have begun to head to Cuba for Havana city breaks or longer beach holidays.