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Iran 'will not instigate hostility'

Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif said Iran will not instigate any hostility but will defend itself in the face of military action.

In an interview aired on Monday, Zarif told the BBC's chief international correspondent, Lyse Doucet, that "Iran is not an easy target," dismissing threats by the United States, Israel, and Saudi Arabia against the Islamic Republic.

"First of all, we're not talking about the law of the jungle. We're talking about international law, and according to international law, those options are a violation of international law, and I advise them not only to respect the international law, but to be prudent enough not to get themselves in serious trouble," he stated.

"I certainly hope that prudence will prevail because Iran is not an easy target. We're not going to provoke anybody. We're not going to instigate any hostility. We've never started hostility, and we're not planning to do it," Zarif said.

He added, however, that "we will defend ourselves. I do not believe that people looking at our history, people looking at our capabilities will ever make the decision to engage in that misadventure."

Missiles for 'self-defense'

Zarif reaffirmed that Iran's missile program is a mere means of defending the nation against enemy threats.

"Missiles are our defensive means," he said, adding, "We're a sovereign state. [The projectiles are] for our defense and for being ready to defend ourselves."

Further supporting Iran's defensive work, Zarif recalled the foreign-backed war imposed on Iran by the former Iraqi regime in the 1980s.

"Our people do not forget the fact that they were being bombarded. Everybody was providing assistance to the aggressor and no one, absolutely no one, gave us even the rudimentary means of defense," he added.

Iran deal 'Washington's last resort'

Elsewhere, Zarif addressed the issue of Iran's 2015 nuclear deal with six world countries, including the US, saying Washington opted to sign the accord "because it didn't have any choice."

The US, he said, had already exhausted the means of applying pressure on the Islamic Republic, including sanctions.

"Those sanctions produced the exact opposite political outcome. They put economic pressure on Iran, but the Iranian people resisted. The Iranian people stood up against those pressures," said the top Iranian diplomat.

He described the deal, known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, as a "reasonable agreement," saying it "is not everything that they wanted, nor was it everything we wanted. But it's a reasonable middle ground, and I believe if the previous administration had other options, it would have exercised them."

Trump had adopted a harsh language towards Iran, threatening to "tear up" the nuclear deal, calling Iran "terrorist state number one," and imposing new sanctions against the Islamic Republic.

'US has never been friendly'

He also dismissed the idea that the new US administration's attitude towards Tehran was a major departure from its predecessors, saying Washington's hostile approach towards the Islamic Republic has remained unchanged since the revolution.

"So, it's not as if we're moving from very friendly relations into hostile relations. The United States policy towards Iran has never been friendly for the past 38 years. It has always been hostile, and our people have shown that hostility doesn't receive a positive response from the Iranian people."



Economic Desk

Iran and Iraq signed a memorandum of understanding on Monday to study a proposed pipeline project which will transfer crude oil from the northern Iraqi fields of Kirkuk via Iran, said a statement by Iraqi Oil Ministry.

The agreement, signed in Baghdad by the oil ministers of the two countries, also calls for a commis-

sion to solve a conflict on joint oil-fields and the possible transportation of Iraqi crude to Iran's Abadan refinery, it said, reported Reuters. Iraqi Oil Minister Jabar al-Lauibi said in the statement that he also agreed with visiting Iranian counterpart Bijan Namdar Zanganeh to cooperate on the policies of the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries.

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Iraq forces converge on Mosul airport



Iraqi forces backed by jets and helicopters battled their way to Mosul airport Monday as they prepared to take on the Daesh's stronghold in the city's west bank.

"The federal police have resumed its advance... Our cannons are targeting Daesh lines with heavy fire," Federal Police Chief Raed Shaker Jawdat said, AFP reported.

Federal police forces, as well as elite units from the interior ministry, army soldiers and Hashd al-Shaabi (Popular Mobilization) paramilitary fighters, launched a major assault on Sunday.

On the second day of the renewed offensive, they pushed northward toward Mosul airport, which lies on the southern approach to the city, on the east bank of the Tigris.

The assault marks a new phase in the broad operation launched on October 17 to retake Mosul, Iraq's second city and the terror group's last major stronghold in the country.

The recapture of Mosul would deal a death blow to the "caliphate" which Daesh chief Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi proclaimed in the city in June 2014 but has been shrinking steadily for two years as anti-Daesh forces advanced.

But it took the Iraq's most seasoned forces, the elite Counter-Terrorism Service (CTS), two months to retake east Mosul, where Daesh put up stiffer than expected resistance.

Commanders and experts believe the city's west bank could

prove even harder to retake, with the narrow streets of the Old City forcing Iraqi forces to undertake perilous dismounted raids.

Strategic hill

Yet after a lull in the four-month-old operation, optimism was high on the frontlines.

"I don't expect a very difficult fight: Their end has arrived," Hakem Gasseem Mohammed, an officer with the Interior Ministry's Rapid Response force said.

The first day of the rekindled offensive saw forces advance in sparsely populated areas just south of the city itself and retake at least 15 villages.

The main focus of Monday's operations was to secure an area south of the airport called Busif.

CTS forces, who have urban warfare experience and did most of the fighting in east Mosul, were seen heading across the desert to the western side of Mosul.

They are expected to breach the densely-populated western part of Mosul once other forces have moved all the way up to the city limits.

The terrorists defending Mosul's west bank have no choice but to protect their bastion. Bridges across the Tigris in the city have been destroyed and Iraqi forces have cut off escape routes.

The forces were receiving support from a US-led coalition that has delivered more than 10,000 munitions on Daesh targets since the start of the Mosul operation.

Pence vows Trump committed to nervous EU

US Vice President Mike Pence sought to reassure Europe Monday of Donald Trump's commitment to transatlantic ties as he met EU chiefs in the face of anti-Trump protests.

Pence was in Brussels at the end of a European trip aimed at comforting allies fearful US President Trump might abandon them.

"Today it is my privilege on behalf of President Trump to express the strong commitment of the United States to continued cooperation and partnership with the European Union," Pence said after talks with EU president Donald Tusk. AFP wrote.

Pence said US commitment to transatlantic ties remained "steadfast and enduring" after decades of working together on security and economic issues.

Tusk thanked Pence for the meeting, saying that "we all truly needed it" and that Europe counted on "unequivocal" US support.

"Too much has happened over the past month in your country and in the EU... for us to pretend that everything is as it used to be," the former Polish premier added.

Trump's criticism of NATO as "obsolete", his praise for Britain's decision to leave the EU and prediction that others would follow have all unnerved US allies.

Pence also met European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker and EU foreign policy chief Federica Mogherini.

Pence's Belgian hosts had earlier called on him to oppose any break-up of the EU.

"No question of allowing the European Union's break-up. That message was given," Belgian Prime Minister Charles Michel told Belga news agency after a dinner with Pence on Sunday. "I feel that it was heard," he said.

The Brussels trip follows a visit to the Munich Security Conference, where Pence pledged the Trump administration's "unwavering" commitment to the transatlantic alliance.

"President Trump and our people are truly devoted to our transatlantic union," he said.

But European allies continue to seek reassurance from Washington even though Pence, US Defense Secretary James Mattis and US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson stuck close to established policy during their first foray into Europe.

Pence said Washington would push Russia to honor the Minsk cease-fire accords in Ukraine, while Tillerson said the US would only cooperate with Moscow if it benefits the American people.

Four Russian soldiers killed in Syria

Four Russian soldiers have died and two were wounded last week when their car was hit by a radio-controlled bomb in Syria, a Defense Ministry statement quoted by Russian agencies said Monday.

The ministry said the explosion ripped through a column of Syrian Army and Russian military vehicles carrying advisors from an airbase in Tiyas and the city of Homs, Reuters reported.

"Four Russian servicemen died when their car exploded on a radio-controlled IED on February 16, 2017, in Syria," the statement said. "Two more were injured. Russian military medics are trying to save their lives."

"The convoy of Syrian army cars, in which the vehicle with Russian military advisers was travelling, was en route from the Tiyas airfield area toward the city of Homs," it said.

"After they traveled four kilometers, a radio-controlled explosive was activated under the car with Russian servicemen."

The four deaths raise the number of Russian military men



officially reported killed in Syria to 26 since it started its campaign in Syria in support of President Bashar al-Assad on September 30, 2015.

Another soldier committed suicide.