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European Union EU cutting Syria aid

For Europe, Syria is no longer the center of attention – with the war in Ukraine, priorities have shifted. This was also reflected in the willingness to donate.

For the European Union as an institution, the EU foreign policy chief Borrell promised only 560 million euros for 2024; this year and last year it was one billion euros more. He combined this with clear criticism of Syria's re-admission to the Arab League in early May - this was aimed directly at the ministers of Arab states who had come to Brussels for the seventh "Conference on the Future of Syria and the Region". One also follows how Turkey establishes direct contacts with the Syrian regime. "This is not the path that the European Union would have chosen," Borrell said.

The EU will not change its policy in the foreseeable future and will continue to impose targeted sanctions against Bashar al-Assad's regime. Addressing Turkey, he said: "The EU will not support organized returns to Syria unless there are rock-solid guarantees that these returns will be voluntary, safe and dignified, and under international supervision."

Overall, the more than seventy countries and international organizations made commitments of more than 5.6 billion euros in grants, 4.6 billion for the current year and only one billion for 2024. In the previous year it was 6.4 billion, of which were two-thirds raised by the EU Commission and the EU Member States.

The United Nations Food Program (WFP) had already set the tone before the start of the conference. The organization has announced that it will no longer provide food aid to 5.5 million Syrians, but only three million. The organization



Josep Borrell/ Photo: Reuters

cited "an unprecedented funding crisis" as the reason. A similar move in 2015 was instrumental in attracting hundreds of thousands of Syrians to Germany.

Not only the UN aid in the host countries is criticized, but also that in Syria itself. Experts and diplomats are skeptical because the Assad regime is abusing the UN aid for its own purposes, it is now one of the most important sources of income. Critics say it is prolonging the life of an inhumane regime in the name of humanity.

Resignation of „Qatargate“ judge in Brussels

Michel Claise, the Belgian judge who led the corruption investigation in the European Parliament, announced that he was resigning from the ongoing „Qatargate“ corruption investigation over allegations of a conflict of interest.

“As a precautionary measure and to allow the judiciary to continue its work calmly and to maintain the necessary separation between private and family life and professional duties, the investigating judge Michel Claise has informed us that he has decided to resign,” said a spokesman for the Belgian Public prosecutor.

Claise’s resignation comes after a bias motion brought by Maxim Töller, lawyer for MEP Marc Tarabella, one of the prime suspects in the case. Tarabella, who has consistently maintained his innocence, was recently cleared of wearing an electronic bracelet and released from house arrest under certain conditions.

Töller claimed Claise was biased because of his links to MEP Maria Arena. Although Arena was not questioned or charged by prosecutors, an arrest warrant mentions her as part of a group of MPs who allegedly obeyed Panzeri’s orders. Arenas and Claise’s sons are co-owners of the same company and have known each other for many years, according to public company docu-



Michael Claise/ Photo: Belga

ments and social media posts.

Maria Arena was a close associate of prime suspect Pier Antonio Panzeri, a former MEP who has since pleaded guilty. Arena described their connection as a “professional friendship.”

Eric Van Duyse, spokesman for the Belgian public prosecutor’s office, confirmed that the investigating judge Aurélie Dejaiffe, who was already dealing with “Qatargate”, would take over the

investigation.

Claise’s resignation could delay or even jeopardize the case if a conflict of interest is identified.

Sweden

Authorities allowing Quran burning

The Swedish police have said they have approved a protest meeting in front of a mosque in Stockholm to burn a copy of the Quran.

Despite the security risks, “the police approve the meeting,” the written version of the decision reads. The protest could also fuel tensions between Sweden and Turkey, which has so far blocked the Scandinavian country from joining NATO.

The demonstration took place in front of Stockholm’s Great Mosque last week. The organizer of the gathering, Salwan Momika, announced in his permit application that he intended to “tear up and burn the Quran”.

According to the Swedish SVT, the police had not specifically given permission to set fire to the holy book of Islam. The permit only mentions a “demonstration about the Quran”. The police also pointed out that there is currently a fire ban in the affected district. “The Office for the Protection of the Constitution has priority over temporary fire bans. The police will intervene if there is a danger,” said a spokesman for the SVT.

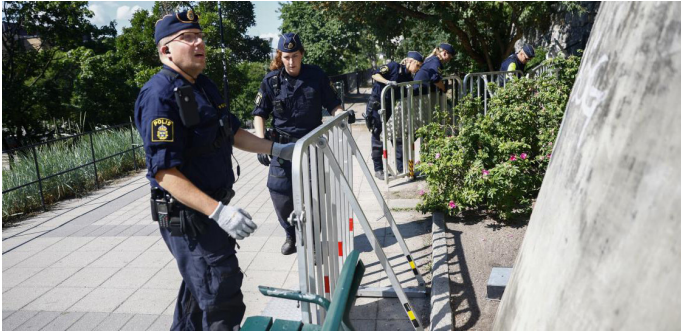
Two weeks ago, a Swedish appeals court retrospectively rejected police bans on demonstrations planned in February to burn the Quran as unlawful. The police had justified the bans with risks to public safety.

In January, a Danish anti-Islamic politician burned a copy of the Quran near the Turkish embassy in Stockholm. This had caused great outrage in Muslim-dominated countries like Turkey. Turkey then suspended negotiations on Sweden’s application to join NATO.

The action comes at a sensitive time in terms of foreign policy. According to „Dagens Nyheter“, the Swedish police were said to have come under political pressure first from the social democratic government and then from the centre-right government to stop Paludan and other demonstrators. The background is said to be Sweden’s application to join NATO and the extremely sensitive relationship with Turkey, which is blocking accession.

President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has repeated-

ly stated that he cannot accept a country that allows the burning of the Quran as a member of the defense alliance. Ankara justifies its previous blockade of Sweden with the fact that the country is a haven for “terrorists”. This primarily refers to



Schwedische Polizei schützt die Große Moschee in Stockholm/ Photo: Stefan Jerrevång

members of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK). Hungary has not yet agreed to Sweden joining NATO. At the forthcoming NATO summit on July 11th and 12th in the Lithuanian capital Vilnius, Sweden is hoping for progress towards its NATO membership.

In a conversation with German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, however, the Turkish President gave no hope that Turkey would say “yes” in the near future. Erdogan’s statement that there are still “unacceptable” circumstances in Sweden, such as the approval of demonstrations at which “terror propaganda” is spread, can probably not yet be traced back to the burning of the Quran.

United Kingdom

Court rejecting deportations to Rwanda

A British appeals court ruled last week that London cannot fly asylum seekers to Rwanda to have their applications in West Africa decided. Premier Rishi Sunak reacted angrily. His own government should “be able to decide who comes to our country, not criminal gangs”.

Now the British prime minister has failed legally for the second time. His conservative government’s plans violate international law, according to two of the three judges.

There is a very real risk that asylum seekers will be sent back to their countries of origin and subjected to torture and persecution there. In doing so, the British government violated Article 3 of the European Convention on Human Rights – the prohibition of torture.

However, the three judges did not fundamentally question the government’s right to transfer people seeking protection to safe third countries. It even argues, on the basis of the Geneva Refugee Convention, that “in principle nothing prevents the UK from deporting asylum seekers to safe third countries”. This is exactly what Britain had been doing for many years, sending thousands of migrants back to the continent every year thanks to EU membership and the Dublin system. From a European point of view, this raises two options that need to be discussed without emotion. Is it at all possible to outsource asylum procedures to another country if the transferring country has no control over the treatment of those seeking protection there? This is exactly what the British failed to do.



Photo: AFP