

Saudi Arabia Creates Islamic Bloc

RIYADH, Saudi Arabia (AP) — Projecting its ambition for regional leadership, Saudi Arabia said Tuesday it has lined up most of the Arab world, NATO member Turkey and several African and Asian countries behind a vaguely defined “Islamic military alliance” against terrorists.

The move allows the kingdom, which follows a deeply conservative interpretation of Islam, to cast itself as a leader in the fight against extremism.

But absent from the alliance are the Shiite-led countries of Iran and Iraq, as well as Syria, whose government is backed by Tehran. And that omission raises questions about whether the 34-member bloc is primarily intended to present a unified front against extremists — or to also serve as a Sunni deterrent to Iran, Saudi Arabia’s main regional rival.

Riyadh supports rebels fighting to overthrow Syrian President Bashar Assad and has been leading an Arab coalition against Iran-supported Shiite Houthi rebels in Yemen since March. It is also part of the U.S.-led coalition fighting Islamic State militants in Syria and Iraq.

The announcement on state media said the Saudi-led alliance is being established because terrorism “should be fought by all means.”

Kerry Accepts Russian Stance On Assad

MOSCOW (AP) — U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry on Tuesday accepted Russia’s long-standing demand that President Bashar Assad’s future be determined by his own people, as Washington and Moscow edged toward putting aside years of disagreement over how to end Syria’s civil war.

“The United States and our partners are not seeking so-called regime change,” Kerry told reporters in the Russian capital after meeting President Vladimir Putin. A major international conference on Syria would take place later this week in New York, Kerry announced.

Kerry reiterated the U.S. position that Assad, accused by the West of massive human rights violations and chemical weapons attacks, won’t be able to steer Syria out of more than four years of conflict.

But after a day of discussions with Assad’s key international backer, Kerry said the focus now is “not on our differences about what can or cannot be done immediately about Assad.” Rather, it is on facilitating a peace process in which “Syrians will be making decisions for the future of Syria.”

Kerry’s declarations crystallized the evolution in U.S. policy on Assad over the last several months, as the Islamic State group’s growing influence in the Middle East has taken priority.

Nigeria Military Killed Hundreds Of Shiites

LAGOS, Nigeria (AP) — Police opened fire Tuesday on unarmed Shiite Muslim protesters in the northern city of Kaduna, leaving three dead, the spokesman for Shiites in Nigeria said, as activists accused soldiers of having killed hundreds of Shiites in “a massacre” in a nearby town in recent days.

But police spokesman Zubairu Abdullahi denied any killings and said Shiites tried to attack a police station.

“We only repel the sect who attempted to attack our station,” he said. “We only used tear gas to disperse them. Maybe in the process of dispersing them, they sustained injury, I don’t know.”

Spokesman Ibrahim Musa of the Shiite Islamic Movement in Nigeria said three people were killed and 10 wounded when police shot “peaceful protesters.” They were condemning the mass killings over the weekend and early Monday in the ancient Muslim university town of Zaria, and demanding the military release their leader, Ibraheem Zakzaky.

The bloodshed in Zaria was yet another blow to Africa’s most populous nation, already beset by a 6-year-old insurgency waged by Boko Haram, a violent Islamic group which is at odds with the Shiites and others who oppose its extremist views.

Storm Drops Up To 2 Feet On Colorado

LONGMONT, Colo. (AP) — A powerful late-autumn storm dumped up to 24 inches of snow in the Colorado mountains on Tuesday before barreling onto the plains, prompting airlines to cancel 425 flights at the Denver airport and leaving hundreds of miles of highways slippery with snow and ice.

The snow tapered off Tuesday afternoon as the storm moved northeast, leaving behind drifts up to four feet high.

“It’s going to be western Nebraska’s turn next,” National Weather Service meteorologist Todd Dankers said. “It’s going to end up eventually in Minnesota.”

It was the first big storm of the season for most of Colorado and Utah. Schools closed in some towns in at least four states.

Some flights at Denver International Airport were more than four hours late after at least seven inches of snow fell there, airport officials said.

Cease-Fire Ignored Amid Peace Talks

GENEVA (AP) — U.N.-brokered peace talks between Yemen’s internationally recognized government and Shiite rebels opened Tuesday in Switzerland with expectations for a deal low as fighters on both sides failed to honor a week-long cease-fire in some parts of the country.

The truce, scheduled to start at noon on Tuesday, was meant to give the warring factions a chance to find a solution to the conflict that has engulfed the Arab world’s poorest country. Security officials said rebel shelling and ground clashes continued in southwestern Taiz province and a Saudi-led coalition struck back with airstrikes several times throughout the day.

Yemen has been torn by fighting pitting the rebels, known as Houthis, and army units loyal to former President Ali Abdullah Saleh against forces of the internationally recognized government, which is backed by the Saudi-led coalition and supported by the United States, as well as southern separatists, religious extremists and other militants.

NY, LA Schools Receive Same Email Threat; LA Cancels Classes

BY CHRISTINE ARMARIO
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Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — The nation’s two biggest school systems — New York City and Los Angeles — received threats Tuesday of a large-scale jihadi attack with guns and bombs. LA reacted by shutting down the entire district, while New York dismissed the warning as an amateurish hoax and held classes.

It’s extremely rare for a major U.S. city to close all its schools because of a threat and it reflected the lingering unease in Southern California following the terrorist attack that killed 14 people at a holiday luncheon two weeks ago in San Bernardino.

In LA, the threat came in the form of an email to a school board member. Authorities in New York reported receiving the same “generic” email and decided there was no danger to schoolchildren. Mayor Bill de Blasio concluded the threat contained “nothing credible.”

“It was so outlandish,” he said.

New York Police Commissioner William Bratton agreed. Bratton, who was police chief in Los Angeles until 2009, quipped that it looked like the sender of the threat had watched a lot of the Showtime terrorism drama “Homeland.”

The shutdown closed more than 900 public schools and 187 charter schools attended by 640,000 students across Los Angeles.

LA officials defended the move, with that city’s police chief dismissing the criticism as “irresponsible.”

“It is very easy in hindsight to criticize a decision based on results the decider could never have known,” Chief Charlie Beck said at a news conference.

Southern California, he added, “has been through a lot in the recent weeks. Should we risk putting our children through the same?”

Jordan Tama, an assistant professor at American University specializing in U.S. counterterrorism policy, said it’s not unreasonable for authorities in different places to make different decisions based on the same information.

“There certainly is no uniform approach,” he said. “Los Angeles might make their decision based on different factors than New York and that would be the case throughout the country.”

Against the backdrop of the San Bernardino attack, it’s “just human nature” for LA authorities to be more cautious, Tama said.

The threatening 360-word email sent to the New York City school superintendent warned that schools would be attacked with pressure cooker bombs, nerve agents and machine guns. It claimed the writer and “138 comrades” would carry out the attack.

Students “at every school in the New York City school district will be massacred, mercilessly. And there is nothing you can do to stop



LUIS SINCO/LOS ANGELES TIMES/TNS

A police officer and a bomb-sniffing dog check vehicles parked around the Los Angeles Unified School District headquarters in downtown Los Angeles after a phoned threat to the safety of schoolchildren forced the closure of all LAUSD schools on Tuesday.

it,” the message said.

A law enforcement official with access to the document provided the email to The Associated Press. The official was not authorized to disclose details of an ongoing investigation and provided it only on condition of anonymity.

The anonymous writer claimed to be a student at a district high school who had been bullied. The person also claimed to be a jihadist but made errors that suggested the writer was really a prankster, including spelling the word “Allah” with a lowercase “a” and making no reference to the Quran.

The threats came in simultaneously to New York and LA school officials at about 1:20 a.m. EST Tuesday, or about 10:20 p.m. Monday in Los Angeles.

In LA, the school board member who received the threat immediately contacted school district police, Det. Rudy Perez said.

Across the country, the New York schools superintendent who received the threat was asleep and did not notice the email until

5:08 a.m. By 6:30 a.m., the message was sent to the NYPD.

An hour later, New York students began arriving at school with no knowledge of the threat. By about 9:30 a.m., investigators ruled the threat a hoax.

The decision to close Los Angeles schools was announced around the same time, at 6:25 a.m. PST.

Los Angeles Superintendent Ramon Cortines said every campus would be searched before schools reopened.

Bratton called the closure in Los Angeles a “significant overreaction.”

“We cannot allow ourselves to raise levels of fear,” he said.

White House spokesman Josh Earnest said he would not second-guess the decisions made in Los Angeles or New York.

The sudden closure disrupted the routines of many Los Angeles families.

Lupita Vela, who has a daughter in the third grade and a son who is a high school senior, called the threat “absolutely terrifying” in light of the San Bernardino attack.

“I know the kids are anxious,” she said.

The LA schools commonly

get threats, but Cortines called this one rare and said the San Bernardino attack influenced his decision to close the entire district.

The threat “was not to one school, two schools or three schools,” he said at a news conference. “It was many schools, not specifically identified. ... That’s the reason I took the action that I did.”

The person who sent the threat used an “anonymizer,” which uses a proxy server to mask the origin of Internet traffic, and the email was routed through a German IP address, according to a law enforcement official briefed on the investigation. The official, who was not authorized to discuss an ongoing investigation, spoke on condition of anonymity.

Vela said she worries about talking to her kids about the threat and terrorism in general. She’s concerned about her daughter feeling secure in class.

“I don’t want this to be in the back of her head,” she said. “Who knows what it does psychologically to kids? Is this going to cause her some kind of trauma so that she’s not going to feel safe at school?”

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