

**2/14/24 Wednesday**

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Lindsey Graham's About-Face on Ukraine Shows GOP Patience With Kiev Regime Has Run Out

Graham, considered to be among the most "hawkish" lawmakers in Washington, may be counting on collapse in Ukraine to sink US President Joe Biden's reelection chances. Lindsey Graham (SC-R), long considered one of the US Senate's foremost advocates of a muscular US foreign policy, raised eyebrows this week when he repeatedly voted against lethal aid for Ukraine and Israel.

Observers were surprised by the South Carolina lawmaker's about-face on the issue given Graham was one of the lead negotiators on the compromise bill. Amidst concern over large numbers of migrants at the US' southern border, grassroots conservatives have repeatedly argued that [immigration reform](#) is a more pressing concern than continued funding for foreign allies.

Lengthy discussions ensued early this year, wherein Graham worked with a bipartisan group of Senators to address border security concerns as part of the evolving foreign aid package. But in recent days, election year politics have apparently [derailed](#) the compromise legislation, with Trump-aligned Republicans seeking to deny Biden a perceived legislative victory with the passage of long-sought immigration reform.

But beyond the fickle vagaries of US politics another dynamic is at play, as even foreign policy "hawks" like Graham have come to realize that Ukraine's US-backed proxy war against Russia has failed.

The effort's defeat on the battlefield has long been apparent, with last year's vaunted Ukrainian "counteroffensive" in the Donbas failing to make headway against Russian forces. Even US media outlets have [struggled](#) to positively portray the Ukrainian military's declining fortunes. But more recently, the US proxy conflict has suffered political failure as well.

"I talked to President [Donald] Trump today and he's dead set against this [foreign aid] package," Graham explained Sunday. "He thinks that we should make packages like this a loan, not a gift."

The capitulation of Graham, who less than a year ago insisted US President Joe Biden should redouble efforts to assist embattled Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky during a visit to Kiev, suggests a seismic shift is underway concerning US support for Ukraine, and perhaps US foreign policy as a whole.

Former President Trump rode to victory in 2016 in part on his "America First" platform promising a focus on domestic concerns rather than foreign wars. Trump harshly [criticized](#) the Republican-led Iraq War, even amidst sharp criticism from the GOP establishment and mainstream US media. Amidst weariness over the US' years-long military engagement in the Middle East, the message resounded with voters.

Now, as Democratic President Joe Biden presides over US-backed conflicts in Ukraine and Israel, anti-war sentiment has again coalesced behind Trump's MAGA movement. "Going against Trump [on Ukraine funding] right now is a death sentence," remarked one anonymous Republican lawmaker, emphasizing the political shift within the grassroots of the party against support for Kiev. The new conservative foreign policy paradigm has threatened to undermine NATO as well, with Trump insisting European countries should contribute more of their own funds towards the US-led military alliance.

But American neoconservatives are not the only ones facing political rejection recently. President Zelensky faces his own crisis, with prominent figures inside and outside of his government signaling increasing opposition to his failing war effort. Observers speculate a palace coup is [imminent](#) as the Ukrainian leader scrambles to remove opposition within his cabinet.

The Washington Post's [displeasure](#) over Senator Graham's political change of heart is not surprising, given the outlet's owner Jeff Bezos is one of the US Central Intelligence Agency's largest contractors. But with even Graham apparently recognizing that Russia's victory is only a matter of time, Langley may face few options beyond scolding lawmakers through its media mouthpieces.

Republicans, meanwhile, seem ready to run against President Biden amidst crises at both the US' southern border and in Kiev.

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US Senator Gives Rousing Speech Calling Israel 'War Criminals,' Votes to Fund Them Anyway

Sen. Chris Van Hollen (D-MD) apparently implicated himself during a speech from the floor of the Senate where he blasted those who "orchestrate" Israeli violence.

Democratic Senator Chris Van Hollen (D-MD) delivered a stirring speech Monday accusing Israel of "war crimes" before voting to send the country \$14 billion in military aid.

"The president must demand that the Netanyahu government immediately allow more food and water, and other lifesaving supplies into Gaza and make sure it reaches the children and other people who are starving," said the Maryland lawmaker on the floor of the Senate.

"Kids in Gaza are now dying from the deliberate withholding of food," he added. "In addition to the horror of that news, one other thing is true. That is a war crime. It is a textbook war crime. And that makes those who orchestrate it war criminals."

"He has just confessed to being a war criminal," author Robert Fantina wryly noted, responding to Van Hollen's rhetoric during [an appearance on Sputnik's The Critical Hour program](#) Wednesday.

"He's stated how what's happening is starvation," the journalist added. "Children are starving to death. This is just... horrible and it's a war crime, and he has chosen to finance it."

Van Hollen [defended](#) his apparently contradictory action by noting the legislation included funds for humanitarian aid in Gaza and other global conflict zones. The bill also set aside some \$60

billion for the US-backed Ukrainian proxy war against Russia, which Democrats have been eager to support even as the Kiev regime faces likely [military and political collapse](#). The withholding of food from Gazans isn't the only Israeli war crime being discussed in recent days, with National Security Minister Itamar Ben-Gvir reportedly calling for Palestinian women and children approaching Gaza's border to be shot on sight during a contentious meeting with the IDF chief of staff Sunday.

"We cannot have women and children getting close to the border... anyone who gets near must get a bullet [in their head]," said the controversial politician, according to a [story](#) in The Jerusalem Post.

Fantina acknowledged the noteworthiness of the story's appearance in "a mainstream Israeli publication."

"Ben-Gvir has been very clear from the start of its time in the Israeli cabinet that [the Palestinians all must either leave or die here](#)," he noted. "He doesn't care which it is, but they need to be gone and... Israel will absorb all of Palestine and there will be no Arabs there."

"The Israelis have done this before a few years ago, when Palestinians were protesting at the border, [part of] peaceful protests for the Right of Return, and they were shot," Fantina added, referring to the massive demonstrations documented in independent journalist Abby Martin's film [Gaza Fights for Freedom](#). "Many were killed, medics were targeted – all in violation of international law on war crimes."

"And now, Ben-Gvir is saying 'yes, we must continue this. We must continue with this genocide, with these crimes against humanity.' And the Jerusalem Post is reporting it as if it's just more mainstream news."

Fantina and host Garland Nixon also discussed proposed plans for "tent cities" to house Palestinian refugees as Israel continues their bombing campaign in the Southern Gaza city of Rafah. Under the proposal, the United States would fund the arrangement to provide Palestinians with temporary refuge as Israel destroys the last "safe zone" in the besieged enclave.

Although US President Joe Biden has superficially criticized Israeli actions via leaked statements to the press, Nixon claimed Biden is too beholden to funding from [powerful interest groups](#) to seriously challenge the Netanyahu regime.

"What [Israeli lobbying group] AIPAC has said is we are going to interfere in the 2024 election, we don't want the American people to choose their representatives," said Nixon. "We're going to use this money and we're going to decide."

Academic Noam Chomsky once [noted](#) that the primary source of foreign election interference in the United States is Israel.

"Israeli intervention in US elections vastly overwhelms anything the Russians may have done," said Chomsky during an interview on the program Democracy Now. "Even to the point where the prime minister of Israel, Netanyahu, goes directly to Congress, without even informing the president, and speaks to Congress, with overwhelming applause, to try to undermine the president's policies – what happened with Obama and Netanyahu in 2015."

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## Europe 'In For Very Rocky Times' After Failed Sanctions on Russia

Economist Richard Wolff warned the EU may find itself in a “terminal crisis.”

Beijing [reacted angrily Wednesday](#) to reports that the European Union plans to target three Chinese companies as part of the bloc’s 13th round of sanctions against Russia.

The move by the EU follows claims that Chinese and Indian businesses have helped Russia “circumvent” European sanctions by providing them with electronic components used in the manufacturing of drones and other military equipment. [The EU has imposed sanctions on Russia](#) since the intensification of the Donbass conflict in early 2022.

Beijing blasted the EU restrictions as “illegal” and criticized the “long-arm jurisdiction” against Chinese companies.

China has benefited in recent months as Western sanctions against Russian energy have hampered European competitiveness, forcing companies in Germany and other EU nations to raise prices as they rely on more expensive American liquified natural gas. Seen in this light, the EU’s attempts to punish Chinese businesses may be viewed as a desperate attempt to hobble the competition as Europe increasingly faces economic crisis and deindustrialization.

Economist Richard Wolff joined [Sputnik’s The Critical Hour program](#) on Wednesday to discuss the grim economic outlook for the continent.

“Europe, which has been kind of a dominant player in the whole world for a couple of thousand of years, is in what I believe to be – and I’m far from the only one – a crisis so profound it may be what we look back on and call the terminal crisis, the last one, because it literally cannot survive,” Wolff speculated.

“On the one hand, it is being outcompeted by the United States, which has dominated it for the last 75 years anyway,” he noted. “But now the new player in the world economy, [the People’s Republic of China and its allies](#), known generally as the BRICS, competing and challenging Europe, from the other side of the planet, if you like, means that Europe is caught between them.”

Wolff claimed the cultural, historical, and linguistic differences between EU countries have undermined the continent’s attempts to unify in recent decades. Now, Europe is a “junior partner” Wolff claimed, caught between the US-led G7 economic bloc and the China-led BRICS countries.

While Europe previously benefited from its relationship with Russia in the form of cheap natural gas, Russia has now turned towards China and the other nations of the BRICS bloc after being “betrayed by the rest of Europe.” If the solidifying of new alliances has economically harmed Europe, it has benefitted Russia, Wolff claimed, which has been able to sell its oil and gas to India and China.

“The Russian ruble is in fine shape. The Russian economy is growing faster than last year, [faster] than the United States is and is in no way falling apart,” the economist insisted. Meanwhile “no one is buying European or German products,” he claimed, contributing to “a really critically-wounded Europe.”

“We are in for very rocky times,” Wolff warned ominously.

In other economic news, the EU has recently threatened to [confiscate Russian funds](#) frozen as a result of Western sanctions, causing IMF officials to caution the bloc to ensure European countries have “sufficient legal support” before undertaking the desperate maneuver.

IMF First Deputy Managing Director Gita Gopinath admitted Western sanctions had failed to prevent Russia from selling energy on the world market, noting the country has been able “to export large quantities of oil despite the price cap, having earned a large amount in terms of export earnings.”

With the Kiev regime in crisis, even foreign policy hawk Lindsey Graham seems to have come around on the wisdom of Ukraine funding with the South Carolina senator voting against a compromise foreign aid package this week.

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“I talked to President [Donald] Trump today and he’s dead set against this package,” Graham said Sunday, demonstrating the collapse of GOP political support for funding Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky’s proxy war against Russia.

But with the Kiev regime consumed by both political instability and failure on the battlefield, Graham may understand that Ukraine faces imminent collapse, recognizing an opportunity to force US President Joe Biden to “own” the situation as he runs for reelection.

The Washington Post’s displeasure over Senator Graham’s political change of heart is not surprising, given the outlet’s owner Jeff Bezos is one of the US Central Intelligence Agency’s largest contractors. But with even Graham apparently recognizing that Russia’s complete victory is only a matter of time, Langley may face few options beyond scolding lawmakers through its media mouthpieces.

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“He has just confessed to being a war criminal,” author Robert Fantina wryly noted, responding to Van Hollen’s rhetoric during an appearance on Sputnik’s The Critical Hour program.

“He’s stated how what’s happening is starvation,” the journalist added. “Children are starving to death. This is just... horrible and it’s a war crime, and he has chosen to finance it,” Fantina emphasized.

The withholding of food from Gazans isn’t the only Israeli war crime being discussed in recent days, with National Security Minister Itamar Ben-Gvir reportedly calling for Palestinian women

and children approaching Gaza's border to be shot on sight during a contentious meeting with the IDF chief of staff Sunday.

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A Russian Soyuz 2.1a rocket carrying the Progress MS-26 cargo spacecraft, which will deliver more than 2.5 tonnes worth of cargo to the International Space Station (ISS), launched from the Baikonur Cosmodrome, according to a live broadcast by Russian state space corporation Roscosmos.

Nine minutes after the liftoff, the rocket will put the spacecraft into Earth orbit, and the Progress spacecraft will separate from the rocket's third stage and begin its independent flight to the ISS.

Russia's new space freighter will fly the traditional two-day route and is scheduled to dock the station on February 17 at 9:12 a.m. Moscow time (06:12 GMT). The spacecraft will spend a total of 180 days in space.

The spacecraft will deliver to the station more than 2.5 tonnes of cargo, including nearly 1.5 tonnes worth of hardware and equipment for the station's systems and scientific experiments, clothing, food, medical and sanitary supplies for the ISS crew, 580 kilograms of fuel, 420 kilograms of drinking water and 40 kilograms of nitrogen.

The space freighter also carries consumables for the new scientific experiment dubbed "Fullerene" to grow fullerite crystals in the Nauka module — the third crystalline form of carbon, which is a new class of semiconductors. Progress MS-26 will also carry equipment for the new scientific experiment Orbita-MG to create a monitoring system that will find cracks and other leaks in the station's hull.

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US Offers Up to \$10M In Reward in ALPHV/Blackcat Ransomware Crackdown - State Department

WASHINGTON, February 15 (Sputnik) – The US Department of State's Transnational Organized Crime Rewards Program announced on Thursday a reward of up to \$10 million for information leading to the identification or location of key leaders behind the ALPHV/Blackcat ransomware, according to a release.

"Today, the Department of State is announcing reward offers of up to \$10 million for information leading to the identification or location of anyone who holds a key leadership position in the Transnational Organized Crime (TOC) group behind the ALPHV/Blackcat Ransomware variant and up to \$5 million for information leading to the arrest or conviction of anyone participating in or conspiring or attempting to participate in a ransomware attack using the ALPHV/Blackcat variant," the release stated.

ALPHV/Blackcat ransomware has affected more than 1,000 victims around the world.

In December, the FBI disrupted the ransomware's operations by distributing a decryption tool it had developed, enabling dozens of victims to restore their computer systems and saving them from paying ransom demands totalling about \$99 million.

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Canada, Czechia Sign MoU on Military Education, Defense Research, Training – Blair

WASHINGTON, February 15 (Sputnik) - Canada and the Czech Republic have signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) on defense cooperation, covering training, research, technology and military education, Canadian Minister of National Defense Bill Blair said on Thursday.

"Canada and Czechia are reinforcing our defense relationship ... Today, @Jana\_Cernochova and I signed an MoU which outlines how we will strengthen cooperation in bilateral and multilateral training, military education, defense research and technology, and logistics research," Blair wrote on X.

Canada expects that the MoU would also allow both countries to work more closely on supporting Ukraine amid its ongoing conflict with Russia, Blair added.

On Thursday, NATO defense ministers are meeting at the alliance's headquarters in Brussels. The talks were preceded by a Ukraine Defense Contact Group meeting a day earlier.

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US Intercepts Shipment With Alleged Iranian Weapons Intended for Houthis - CENTCOM

WASHINGTON, February 15 (Sputnik) - The United States intercepted weapons allegedly sent by Iran to the Houthis during an operation in late January, the Central Command (CENTCOM) said Thursday.

"A U.S. Coast Guard cutter, forward deployed to the U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) area

of responsibility, seized advanced conventional weapons and other lethal aid originating in Iran and bound to Houthi-controlled areas of Yemen from a vessel in the Arabian Sea on Jan. 28," the command said in a statement on X.

The command added that the cutter had located the vessel and boarded it in the Arabian Sea. Upon boarding the ship, US forces discovered over 200 packages with medium-range ballistic missile components, explosives, unmanned underwater/surface vehicle components, anti-tank guided missile launcher assemblies among other military components, according to the statement.

"The direct or indirect supply, sale or transfer of such aid violates U.N. Security Council Resolution 2216 (as extended and renewed by resolutions 2675 and 2707)," CENTCOM said.

The Houthis, also known as the Ansar Allah movement, vowed in November to attack any ships associated with Israel until it halts its military actions in the Gaza Strip. This led US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin to announce the creation of a multinational operation in December to secure navigation in the Red Sea. US and UK forces have since launched a series of strikes against Houthi positions in a bid to degrade the rebels' ability to target commercial vessels.

Iran has denied sending weapons to the Houthis. It has also rejected the West's allegations of Iran's involvement in Houthi attacks on merchant ships in the Red Sea, saying that the group is acting on its own.

The United States is deceiving the whole world by bombing empty areas and evacuated military camps in Yemen, a member of the movement's political office told Sputnik earlier this week.

The US and UK airstrikes have not affected the Houthis' military capabilities, the official stated.

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Biden Says US Has Had More Shootings in 2024 Than There Have Been Days in Year

WASHINGTON, February 15 (Sputnik) - The United States has already seen more shootings in 2024 than there have been days in the year, President Joe Biden said following the deadly shooting at the Kansas City Super Bowl parade.

"Today's events should move us, shock us, shame us into acting," Biden said in a statement on Wednesday. "We've now had more mass shootings in 2024 than there have been days in the year."

On Wednesday, shots were fired in Kansas City, Missouri, near the site of the Super Bowl parade, leaving at least one person dead and over 20 injured. Three people are in custody, with the motive still unknown.

Biden said that the Super Bowl is the most unifying event in the United States, and "for this joy to be turned to tragedy today in Kansas City cuts deep in the American soul."

Biden has called on the Congress to act to ban assault weapons, limit high-capacity magazines, and enhance background checks.

The president said the First Lady and he pray for those killed and injured in Kansas City, and for "our country to find the resolve to end this senseless epidemic of gun violence tearing us at

the seams."

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Special Counsel Behind Biden Report in Final Talks to Testify Before Congress – Reports

WASHINGTON, February 15 (Sputnik) - Special Counsel Robert Hur is in the final stage of talks to testify before Congress in March about his report on US President Joe Biden's mishandling of classified documents, Axios reported on Thursday, citing a Republican official.

While Hur's report concluded that Biden's mishandling of the documents while he was vice president did not merit criminal charges, it added fuel to the ongoing accusations that the 81-year-old president is suffering from cognitive decline, finding that he had a "poor memory" and "diminished faculties."

Hur, a former US attorney, has already reached out to former colleagues at the Justice Department for advice on preparing his testimony, including Sarah Isgur, the head of public affairs and a senior counselor to Trump's deputy attorney general during the Robert Mueller investigation, Axios reported.

Hur would likely be asked to testify in front of the House Judiciary Committee, with a focus on his remarks about Biden's mental fitness.

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Canada Procures \$202Mln Worth of Air Defense Systems for Troops in Latvia - Minister

WASHINGTON, February 15 (Sputnik) - Canadian Minister of National Defense Bill Blair announced on Thursday that Canada is acquiring air defense and anti-drone systems worth about C\$273 million (\$202 million) for its troops deployed with NATO in Latvia.

"Today, I'll be announcing that Canada's acquiring new capabilities on an urgent basis for Canadian troops which will be deployed with NATO in Latvia. First, I'm announcing that Canada has finalized the procurement of an air defense capability for Canadian Armed Forces members in Latvia and we are acquiring the RBS 70 NG air defense system through an investment of approximately [C]\$227 million with Saab," Blair said at a press briefing.

Blair said that the air defense system would help defend Canadian troops against aerial threats such as fixed-wing aircraft, helicopters, and drones.

Blair also announced that Canada had finalized the acquisition of new counter-drone equipment for its troops in Latvia for approximately C\$46 million.

The announcements follow the finalization of contracts for anti-tank weapons in December.

Blair said that he expected Canadian forces in Latvia would receive all three types of equipment later this year.

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UPDATE - Trump Holds 'Get Out The Vote' Rally in South Carolina

(Fixes name of US state in headline, adds background in para 6)

WASHINGTON, February 15 (Sputnik) - Former US President Donald Trump is holding a rally in South Carolina 10 days before the state is slated to hold its primary.

Trump's rally garnered thousands of supporters on Wednesday in the state whose former governor, Nikki Haley, remains Trump's final competitor for the Republican presidential nomination.

During the rally, Trump took aim at Haley the same way he lambasted her in New Hampshire, by claiming that she is "helping liberal democrats invade the Republican Party."

Currently, Trump leads the state by more than 30 points in the polls. If Trump wins the South Carolina primaries, it could solidify what polls have been suggesting for weeks: that Trump will secure the Republican nomination.

South Carolina is to hold primaries on February 24, where the second remaining Republican candidate, Haley, is going to contest Trump. As of now, multiple polls are showing that Trump is in the lead, receiving approximately 65% of the votes, with Haley getting around 30%.

The US presidential election will be held on November 5. Incumbent US President Joe Biden announced his bid for reelection in April 2023 from the Democratic Party.

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Trump's Rally in South Carolina Marked by Success, Former US Leader Mingles With Audience

CHARLESTON, February 14 (Sputnik), Lenka White - Former US President Donald Trump was happy with the crowd at his 'Get Out the Vote' rally in South Carolina on Wednesday, which even saw him go and greet the front rows of the audience.

Given the large number of people and complex security measures, Trump does not usually come down from the podium to meet the public. This time, however, he seemed to be in a good mood and happy about the atmosphere, indicating that he truly has the advantage in his next battle with Nikki Haley, his final competitor for the Republican presidential nomination.

During the rally, Trump took aim at Haley just as he had in New Hampshire by claiming that she was "helping liberal democrats invade the Republican party." He also accused his competitor of getting votes from the Democrats and said she would never be his vice-president.

Some of his supporters have traveled to see Trump in many US states. One of them, Maggie from Canada, who came to the United States about 30 years ago, has traveled to 36 of Trump's rallies.

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US Foreign Spending 'Bad Policy,' Lack of Accountability 'Dangerous' - Election Candidate

EL PASO, February 15 (Sputnik) - US spending overseas is bad policy and the lack of oversight on some of this spending is dangerous for the United States, US congressional candidate Kathleen Winn told Sputnik.

Winn, a Republican, is running for election to the US House to represent Arizona's 6th congressional district.

"It's bad financial policy ... we're not holding anybody accountable, and that lack of accountability is dangerous for the good citizens of this country [United States]," Winn said.

Winn said that she would be against approving any funding for Ukraine if she was a member of Congress.

On Tuesday, the Senate passed the \$95 billion foreign aid bill that includes \$60 billion for Ukraine aid, \$14 billion for Israel, among other funding for US national security priorities, but excludes border policy reforms. However, it's unclear whether the House will take up the bill any time soon.

A US congressional source told Sputnik there is growing Republican opposition to providing more funding to Ukraine but strong Republican support to continue assisting Israel. However, "neocons and warmongers" in the congressional Republican Party will be applying significant pressure on House Speaker Mike Johnson to do something on these measures, the source added.

The US has provided more than \$75 billion in assistance to Ukraine since the start of Russia's special military operation in February 2022. Aid shipments began in 2022 with artillery munitions and training and have escalated to include tanks, advanced air-defense systems, missiles and cluster munitions. The Kremlin has consistently warned against the West's continued arms deliveries to Ukraine, saying that they only prolong the conflict.

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Biden US Policies Have 'Failed,' No One is 'Thriving' - Congressional Candidate

EL PASO, February 15 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration's policies have failed as the general US public does not seem to be economically thriving, US congressional candidate Kathleen Winn told Sputnik.

Winn, a Republican, is running for election to the US House to represent Arizona's 6th congressional district.

"The policies of this current administration are failed. No one is thriving," Winn said. "I think that American families need relief before we give relief around the world."

On Tuesday, the Senate passed the \$95 billion foreign aid bill that includes \$60 billion for Ukraine aid, \$14 billion for Israel, among other funding for US national security priorities, but excludes border policy reforms. However, it's unclear whether the House will take up the bill any time soon.

Last month, US Secretary of Treasury Janet Yellen said that the \$34 trillion US national debt is a "scary number" but manageable, because the United States has a "huge" economy.

However, International Monetary Fund Managing Director Kristalina Georgieva recently said the United States can show more discipline with respect to public spending as the strength of the US dollar and post-pandemic excesses in government expenditures are feeding into global inflation.

Public spending is among the major talking points in the presidential election due in November, with polls suggesting that voters increasingly believed higher federal spending was directly contributing to inflation.

#### IMMIGRATION

Aside from US spending issues, Winn also highlighted major concerns about the crisis on the US-Mexico border

Winn represents a district in southern Arizona on the border with Mexico, which is starting to become the next hot spot for illegal immigration after Texas deterred a surge in its region.

"First and foremost, we need to secure the border, and then have a very comprehensive deportation plan," Winn said. "These people don't need to wait 10 years in our country, they can go back to their country. And I believe that many of these people that are saying they're seeking asylum, don't have valid claims."

Winn also suspects there may be terror cells inside the United States as a result of a record level of illegal immigration on the southern border.

According to the Department of Homeland Security's Homeland Threat Assessment, last year, US border agents encountered a growing number of migrants on the FBI's terrorist watchlist trying to illegally cross the US-Mexico border.

US Customs and Border Protection (CBP) documented more than 302,000 migrant encounters in December, marking the highest single-month figure ever recorded. The Biden administration has also experienced three consecutive years of record numbers of illegal migration on the southern border.

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US Shouldn't Be Responsible for Paying First Responders' Pensions in Ukraine - Candidate

EL PASO, February 15 (Sputnik) - US congressional candidate Kathleen Winn told Sputnik that the United States should not be responsible for paying the pensions of first responders in

Ukraine.

Winn, a Republican, is running for election to the US House to represent Arizona's 6th congressional district.

"[Ukraine] They've been given way too much money and the money that they've been given has gone for things that we don't even cover in our own country," Winn said. "We're paying for pensions ... of their police officers at this point. Why is that the US's responsibility. But on top of that, this is a proxy war."

Winn further said the United States should not give Ukraine "another nickel."

On Tuesday, the Senate passed the \$95 billion foreign aid bill that includes \$60 billion for Ukraine aid, \$14 billion for Israel, among other funding for US national security priorities, but excludes border policy reforms. However, it's unclear whether the House will take up the bill any time soon.

Winn said she supports US assistance for Israel because it is an important ally of the United States, but "Ukraine isn't."

US aid for Ukraine also goes to non-military expenses, including for subsidizing businesses in the country, purchasing seeds and fertilizer for Ukrainian farmers, and paying the salaries of some 57,000 of Ukraine's first responders, according to media reports.

The US has provided more than \$75 billion in assistance to Ukraine since the start of Russia's special military operation in February 2022. Aid shipments began in 2022 with artillery munitions and training and have escalated to include tanks, advanced air-defense systems, missiles and cluster munitions. The Kremlin has consistently warned against the West's continued arms deliveries to Ukraine, saying that they only prolong the conflict.

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Trump's rally garnered thousands of supporters on Wednesday in the state whose former governor, Nikki Haley, remains Trump's final competitor for the Republican presidential nomination.

During the rally, Trump took aim at Nikki Haley the same way he lambasted her in New Hampshire, by claiming that she is 'helping liberal democrats invade the Republican party.'

Currently, Trump leads the state by more than 30 points in the polls. If Trump wins the South Carolina primaries, it could solidify what polls have been suggesting for weeks: that Trump will secure the Republican nomination.

South Carolina is to hold primaries on February 24, where the second remaining Republican candidate, Nikki Haley, is going to contest Trump. As of now, multiple polls are showing that Trump is in the lead, receiving approximately 65% of the votes, with Nikki Haley getting around 30%.

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Musk Confirms SpaceX Moved State of Incorporation From Delaware to Texas

WASHINGTON, February 15 (Sputnik) - SpaceX founder Elon Musk said in a statement that he moved the company's state of incorporation from Delaware to Texas.

"SpaceX has moved its state of incorporation from Delaware to Texas!," Musk said via his social media platform X on Wednesday. Musk suggested that any company still incorporated in Delaware should move to another state as soon as possible.

The state of Delaware for the longest time became well known for being the state where many companies file their articles of incorporation because of its corporate-friendly laws.

However, Musk moved the company from Delaware after a federal judge in the state recently ruled that his \$56 billion Tesla pay package was invalid.

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Lockheed Martin Signs New Energy Security Cooperation Letter With Romania - Release

WASHINGTON, February 15 (Sputnik) - Lockheed Martin has signed a letter of cooperation on energy security with the government of Romania, the giant US defense contractor announced in a press release.

"On February 8, the Lockheed Martin Energy team hosted the Romanian Minister of Energy, Sebastian Burduja, for discussions on how the GridStar Flow battery can help Romania with its net zero goals, and to sign a letter of energy collaboration," the release stated on Wednesday.

"Romania's energy strategy looks to enhance energy supply, modernize infrastructure, and strengthen energy efficiency," Lockheed Martin said.

"Lockheed Martin's GridStar Flow aligns with our goals and objectives for improving Romania's energy security," Romanian Minister of Energy Sebastian Burduja said in the release.

GridStar Flow is a new redox flow battery designed to advance clean energy affordability and sustainability, Lockheed Martin said.

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Biden Ready to Cut F-35 Buys, Alaska, Guam Missile Defenses in Budget Talks - Reports

WASHINGTON, February 15 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden is looking to reduce the number of expensive new F-35 Joint Strike Fighters the US armed forces want to buy in the coming fiscal

year by 18% to stay within the financial limits imposed on the military budget by Congress, wire service reports said.

The Department of Defense had included a request for 83 new F-35s in the coming defense budget, but that would now be reduced to only 70 of the aircraft, saving \$1.6 billion, Reuters News Agency reported on Wednesday.

Biden would cap the total military budget at \$895 billion, Reuters reported, citing sources speaking on condition of anonymity. The final agreed figure will be made public on March 11 following negotiations between Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin and the White House Office of Management and Budget (OMB), the report said, citing the anonymous sources.

Plans to boost missile defenses at the US base on the Pacific island of Guam may also be slashed, along with planned modernization upgrades to the Ground-Based Interceptors (GBIs) in Alaska and proposed new SM3-1B interceptor missiles to be deployed on US Navy AEGIS destroyers and cruisers, the report said.

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Trump Supporters Gather in South Carolina to Attend 'Get Out Vote' Rally -Correspondent

CHARLESTON, February 15 (Sputnik), Lenka White - Several thousand Trump fans gathered in Charleston, South Carolina, for a 'Get Out Vote' rally to support the former president in his 2024 presidential bid.

The line to get inside Charleston's Congress Center was long, but the crowd remained cheerful and shouted slogans in Trump's support.

Many of the attendees had Trump signs on their hats, t-shirts, jackets, or just pins pinned to their clothing.

One of the attendees, Suzan, told Sputnik that she had been sleeping in front of the Congress Center to be one of the first ones to get in and get a front-row seat.

The supporters, mostly, had a unifying reason for coming here - they believed that without Trump, the United States would be finished.

"If we don't get President Trump back in office, America is gone," David told Sputnik outside of the conference center where Trump is expected to give his speech.

Another Trump supporter, Gidie, told Sputnik that she was not a fan of Nikki Haley, as the former UN Ambassador was not "presidential" material.

In addition, Gidie voiced her opinion about current President Joe Biden, noting that Biden "doesn't even know who he is."

South Carolina is to hold primaries on February 24, where the second remaining Republican candidate, Nikki Haley, is going to contest Trump. As of now, multiple polls are showing that Trump is in the lead, receiving approximately 65% of the votes, with Nikki Haley getting around 30%.

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**with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.**

US Must Be 'Fiscally Responsible,' Cautious About Spending - Congressional Candidate

EL PASO, February 15 (Sputnik) - The United States must be fiscally responsible and cautious about overstretching its spending, US congressional candidate Kathleen Winn told Sputnik.

Winn, a Republican, is running for election to the US House to represent Arizona's 6th congressional district.

"We can't continue to borrow money that we don't have to pay these ridiculous bills that are coming through the House and the Senate right now," Winn said. "So we need to be fiscally responsible."

The United States needs to cut spending, Winn added.

Public spending is among the major talking points in the presidential election due in November, with polls suggesting that voters increasingly believed higher federal spending was directly contributing to inflation.

Last month, US Secretary of Treasury Janet Yellen said that the \$34 trillion US national debt is a "scary number" but manageable, because the United States has a "huge" economy.

International Monetary Fund Managing Director Kristalina Georgieva recently said the United States can show more discipline with respect to public spending as the strength of the US dollar and post-pandemic excesses in government expenditures are feeding into global inflation.

US public spending as of the third quarter of 2023 stood at \$10 trillion, or 36% of gross domestic product, according to the US government's Bureau of Economic Analysis.

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Number of Victims in Kansas City Super Bowl Parade Shooting Rises to 22 - Police

WASHINGTON, February 15 (Sputnik) - The number of victims in the Kansas City Super Bowl parade shooting increased to 22 but the motive of the shooting remains unknown, Kansas City Missouri Police Chief Stacey Graves said in a press conference.

"Our gunshot wound total went up to 22...Right now, we're still working on a total of number of victims. This is still an active investigation," Graves said on Wednesday evening. "We have three people that we have detained."

Graves added that the motive of the shooting is unknown at present.

According to a fire department official, eight of the victims have immediate life-threatening injuries, seven have life-threatening injuries, and six others have minor injuries.

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## Emergency Lending Facility to Close Year After US Banking Crisis - Texas Bankers' Group

WASHINGTON, February 15 (Sputnik) - The Federal Reserve will stop issuing from next month loans from an emergency lending facility created during a US banking crisis last year, an industry association familiar with the matter said.

"The Federal Reserve Board's Bank Term Fund Program (BTFP) - the emergency lending facility set up last year during the March banking crisis - will stop making new loans on March 11," the Independent Bankers Association of Texas (IBAT) said in a statement. "Until then, banks and other depository institutions will still be able to borrow from the facility, albeit at a slightly higher interest rate."

The 2023 US banking crisis culminated with a series of failures and bankruptcies among midsize banks, with the federal government ultimately intervening in several ways. Among them was the establishment of the BTFP by the Fed to offer loans of up to one year to eligible depository institutions pledging qualifying assets as collateral.

IBAT said in the statement that banks with BTFP loans will be able to refinance their borrowing until March 10, providing them liquidity for another year.

Separately, US banks are being encouraged by the Fed to sign up for the central bank's discount window and familiarize themselves with the facility, the statement said.

Federal regulators had reiterated last summer that the discount window should be part of an array of funding sources that banks, including private lenders such as the Federal Home Loan Banks, rely upon, the statement added.

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## US Special Counsel Files Response to Trump's Supreme Court Immunity Challenge

WASHINGTON, February 15 (Sputnik) - US Special Counsel Jack Smith filed a response in the US Supreme Court to former president Donald Trump's motion for a stay in a case involving his claim to presidential immunity from criminal prosecution for his alleged role in the January 6 US Capitol riot.

On Monday, Trump filed a motion with the US Supreme Court, requesting the justices halt a lower court ruling that denied his immunity claims.

"A President's alleged criminal scheme to overturn an election and thwart the peaceful transfer of power to his successor should be the last place to recognize a novel form of absolute immunity from federal criminal law," Smith's response, filed Wednesday, said.

Trump is seeking to prevent a district court from proceeding to a trial in the case, which is set to begin on March 4. However, Trump cannot demonstrate a fair prospect of success in the Supreme Court, Smith said.

Smith requested that, if the Supreme Court believes Trump's claims merit review, they take on the case and set it for expedited briefing and argument.

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US Sends 6 Military Satellites to Low-Earth Orbit, 2 With Hypersonics Tracking - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, February 15 (Sputnik) - The United States launched six military satellites into low-Earth orbit, two of which will be able to track hypersonic and ballistic missiles, the US Missile Defense Agency (MDA) said.

"Today's planned launch will include two satellites for MDA's Hypersonic and Ballistic Tracking Space Sensor (HBTSS) and the final four SDA Tranche 0 (T0) Tracking Layer satellites of its Proliferated Warfighter Space Architecture (PWSA)," the MDA said in a press release on Wednesday.

A SpaceX Falcon 9 rocket successfully launched from Cape Canaveral Space Force Station in Florida to deliver the payload into Earth's low-orbit.

The rocket is currently enroute to deliver its payload as of Wednesday afternoon.

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US House Passes Bill to Prohibit, Discourage Normalization of Ties to Syrian Government

WASHINGTON, February 15 (Sputnik) - The US House of Representatives passed legislation to prohibit the United States from taking actions to normalize relations with the Syrian government, so long as the country is led by President Bashar al-Assad.

House lawmakers passed the bill, dubbed the Assad Regime Anti-Normalization Act, on Wednesday in a vote of 389-32.

The bill establishes as US policy that it will not recognize or normalize relations with any government led by al-Assad, due to alleged crimes against the Syrian people. The bill also establishes a policy of actively opposing recognition or normalization of relations by other governments.

The legislation bans federal officials and funds from being used to imply "in any manner" US recognition of an Assad-led government in Syria.

Moreover, the bill requires the US Secretary of State, in consultation with other administration officials, to submit a report to lawmakers on actions taken by foreign countries to normalize or upgrade ties to the Syrian government.

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UPDATE - Alleged US National Security Threat Involves Russian Desire to Put Nuke in Space - Reports

(Updates with more details in paras 6, 7)

WASHINGTON, February 15 (Sputnik) - A purported national security threat to the United States involves an alleged desire by Russia to put an anti-satellite nuclear weapon into space, ABC News reported.

Earlier on Wednesday, US House Intelligence Committee Chairman Mike Turner announced that he made information about the alleged security threat available to all lawmakers. Turner also called on US President Joe Biden to declassify all information related to the threat.

The alleged threat involves Russia wanting to put an anti-satellite nuclear weapon into space, the report said, citing two sources familiar with talks in the US Congress.

The information is very concerning and sensitive, one of the sources reportedly said.

US House Intelligence Committee ranking member James Himes said on Wednesday that there is no reason for people in the US to panic about the alleged threat. However, the Biden administration and the US Congress must address the issue in the medium- to long-term, Himes said.

The capability does not pose an urgent threat to Ukraine, the US or its European allies, The New York Times reported on Wednesday, citing officials briefed on the matter. The capability is not yet in orbit, the report said.

The information could not be declassified without severing its source, the report said. Turner's statement angered White House officials, who were concerned about losing the intelligence source, the report said.

Turner's announcement on the alleged threat comes amid efforts in the US Congress to pass supplemental funding legislation with billions of dollars in aid for Ukraine and Israel, as well as efforts to extend and reform Section 702 surveillance authorities under the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act.

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Biden Bars Palestinians From Deportation For Next 18 Months - White House

WASHINGTON, February 15 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden has signed a memorandum granting Palestinians who are currently in the United States a temporary safe haven in light of the deteriorating conditions in the Gaza Strip, National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan said.

"In light of the ongoing conflict and humanitarian needs on the ground, President Biden signed a memorandum directing the deferral of removal of certain Palestinians who are present in the United States, giving them a temporary safe haven. Specifically, President Biden is granting deferred enforced departure for 18 months to Palestinians that are currently in the United States," Sullivan said in a statement on Wednesday.

Sullivan explained that the grant of deferred departure would provide protection for most Palestinians in the United States except for those convicted of felonies or considered a threat to public safety.

"Anyone who vountarily returns to the Palestinian territories would lose any such protections,"

Sullivan added.

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One Dead, Up to 15 Injured in Shooting at Super Bowl Parade in Kansas City - Police

WASHINGTON, February 15 (Sputnik) – One person is confirmed dead and up to 15 more were injured in a shooting at a Super Bowl parade in Kansas City in the US state of Missouri, Police Chief Stacey Graves told reporters.

“Right now, we have up to 10 to 15 injured. We do not have an exact number of people who were victims of a gunshot wound. It could be upwards from 10 to 15 with one deceased,” Graves said on Wednesday.

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US National Archives Says Closed After 2 People Poured Powder on US Constitution’s Case

WASHINGTON, February 15 (Sputnik) - The US National Archives said in a statement that it closed its rotunda and galleries after two people poured red powder on themselves and the case holding the US Constitution.

“The National Archives Rotunda and galleries in Washington, DC, closed to the public today after two individuals dumped red powder on the encasement protecting the US Constitution at approximately 2:30 pm [ET],” the statement said on Wednesday.

Footage of the incident shows the two men covering themselves and the encasement in a red powder, as well as delivering remarks about the environment.

The two people were immediately detained by security personnel, the statement said. The National Archives Building is set to reopen on Thursday, the statement added.

The National Archives takes vandalism very seriously and will insist that the perpetrators face prosecution to the fullest extent of the law, Archivist of the United States Colleen Shogan said in the statement.

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At Least 1 Dead, 9 Injured in Shooting After Chiefs Super Bowl Parade - Reports

WASHINGTON, February 15 (Sputnik) - One dead and nine wounded in a shooting in Kansas City, Missouri, on Wednesday after the Chiefs' Super Bowl victory parade, ABC News citing Kansas City Fire Department.

According to the report, three individuals are critically injured, five are in serious condition, and one has sustained injuries that are not considered life-threatening.

Earlier on Wednesday, shots were fired in Kansas City, Missouri, near the site of the Super Bowl parade, and there were multiple victims.

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Arrest of Russia's An-124 Cargo 'Piracy', Moscow Seeks Unconditional Return – Stepanov

WASHINGTON, February 15 (Sputnik) – Canada's detention of Russia's Volga-Dnepr An-124 cargo plane in Toronto is illegal and amounts to "hijacking, theft and piracy", Russian Ambassador in Ottawa Oleg Stepanov told Sputnik.

In mid-August, the cargo carrier sent a legal notice to several Canadian officials, including Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, about the existence of a dispute over the aircraft. The company gave Ottawa six months to peacefully settle the matter in line with Article 9 of the agreement between Canada and the Soviet Union for the promotion and reciprocal protection of investments from November 20, 1989.

As the Canadian Government acknowledged the reception of a legal notice and settlement proposal from Volga-Dnepr on August 18, the period for a peaceful solution to the dispute is effectively coming to an end in the coming days and the cargo company may initiate arbitration proceedings against Canada as it had warned.

"No matter what the Government of Canada may call it, there should be no mistake: the illegal arrest of Russian An-124 in Toronto is hijacking, theft, and piracy. The commercial owner of the aircraft has been contesting Ottawa's decision in court. And Russia as the flag state will continue to seek and obtain justice and unconditional recovery of our plane," Stepanov said.

Global Affairs Canada did not respond to Sputnik's request for an update on the status of the An-124 dispute.

The An-124 operated by Volga-Dnepr arrived in Canada on February 27, 2022, from China with a shipment of COVID-19 rapid tests under a contract with the Canadian government. The plane was due to depart the next day. However, on February 27, 2022, Canada closed its airspace for Russian aircraft and refused the request for permission to depart. Since then, the aircraft has been detained in Toronto airport.

In June, the Canadian Premier announced that his government would launch a confiscation procedure of the plane.

Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said in response that Canada's decision to confiscate the Russian aircraft would have serious consequences for Ottawa-Moscow relations. Later in June, the Russian foreign ministry summoned Brian Ebel, the minister-counselor at the Embassy of Canada in Moscow, to deliver a demarche in connection with the possible confiscation of the plane.

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US, Europe Must Deal With Costs for NATO 'Nuclear Umbrella' Themselves-Putin

WASHINGTON, February 15 (Sputnik) - The United States and Europe should deal with defense spending or the costs for NATO's nuclear umbrella themselves as former US President Donald Trump proposed, Russian President Vladimir Putin stated on Wednesday.

"He wanted to force the Europeans to increase defense spending, or, as he had said, then let them pay us [the US] for protecting them, for having the nuclear umbrella over their heads, and so on. Well, I don't know, let them figure it out themselves, that's their problem," Putin told journalist Pavel Zarubin.

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US House Will Delay Consideration of FISA Reform, Reauthorization Bill - Speaker's Office

WASHINGTON, February 15 (Sputnik) - The US House of Representatives will delay further consideration of legislation to extend and reform Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act (FISA) Section 702 authorities, US House Speaker Mike Johnson's office said in a statement.

"In order to allow Congress more time to reach consensus on how best to reform FISA and Section 702 while maintaining the integrity of our critical national security programs, the House will consider the reform and reauthorization bill at a later date," Johnson's Deputy Communications Chief, Raj Shah, said on Wednesday via social media platform X.

The US House was set to consider legislation to reform and extend FISA Section 702 authorities, which allow the US government to spy on noncitizens abroad. The reform initiative comes in the wake of an investigation into the surveillance authority, which found hundreds of thousands of abuses of the power.

The US House Judiciary and Intelligence Committees both passed FISA bills, which were combined into a proposal unveiled earlier this week. The bill did not include a proposed warrant requirement for Section 702 authorities, although lawmakers were set to consider amendments to the legislation, House Majority Leader Steve Scalise said in a statement.

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In 2022 Zelenskyy Gifted Biden Painting 'Orange Patterns' Worth \$2,400 – State Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 14 (Sputnik) – In November 2022, US President Joe Biden received a painting titled "Orange Patterns" worth \$2,400 from Volodymyr Zelenskyy as a gift, according to

a report with a list of gifts to US public employees published by the State Department on Wednesday.

Also, in November of the same year, Zelenskyy gifted US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan another painting titled "The Light Will Win," a traditional Ukrainian shirt, and a set of medals for a total of \$1,429, according to the report, which was published in the Federal Register.

In May 2022, US First Lady Jill Biden received from Olena Zelenskyy a set of table linens with four napkins, a gold brooch, and earrings for an estimated value of \$570, the report showed.

Then-Ukrainian Defense Minister Oleksii Reznikov gifted US Vice Admiral Frank Whitworth a medallion, a plaque, and a scepter for an estimated value of \$500, according to the document.

US Ambassador to Uzbekistan Daniel Rosenblum received the most expensive gift in 2022 from the government of the Central Asian country - a silk carpet worth \$15,000, the report revealed.

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#### SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, February 15 (Sputnik) -

##### MIDDLE EAST CONFLICT

\* Israel has not received any new proposals from the Palestinian movement Hamas in Cairo on the issue of the release of remaining hostages, the office of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said on Wednesday.

\* The strikes on the city of Rafah in the Gaza Strip is a matter of special concern for Russia, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said.

\* The prime ministers of Spain and Ireland requested that the European Commission review urgently whether Israel is complying with human rights obligations in Gaza.

\* FBI Director Christopher Wray made a surprise stop in Israel to join intelligence briefings on the growing number of threats to security, Fox News reported.

##### NATO

\* Europe should ensure safe and reliable operation of NATO's nuclear deterrence system, Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg said on Wednesday.

\* NATO does not see any immediate military threats to the alliance member states from Russia, but there are "constant threats of hybrid attacks," Stoltenberg said.

##### US SANCTIONS AGAINST IRAN

\* The United States sanctioned three individuals and four entities for alleged involvement in an Iranian procurement network tied to the country's central bank, the Treasury Department said on Wednesday.

### CONFLICT IN UKRAINE

\* US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin said during a meeting of the Ukraine Defense Contact Group on Wednesday that the partnering states are building coalitions to ensure Ukraine's long-term security.

\* Ukrainian Defense Minister Rustem Umerov announced the launch of an air and missile defense coalition to support Ukraine, which currently includes 15 member states.

\* A drone coalition with Sweden, the United Kingdom, Denmark, Germany, Lithuania, Estonia, Latvia and the Netherlands has also been established, Umerov said.

\* UK Foreign Secretary David Cameron said the danger of further escalation of the Ukrainian conflict is "illusory."

\* Ukraine has lost up to 360 soldiers in the Donetsk direction over the past 24 hours, the Russian Defense Ministry said.

\* Russia remains open to a diplomatic settlement of the conflict in Ukraine, but given the fact that Western countries do not want to take into account the interests of Moscow and the existing realities, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said.

### US LAWMAKERS IDENTIFY ALLEGED SECURITY THREAT

\* US House Intelligence Committee Chairman Mike Turner said on Wednesday that the panel had made information available to lawmakers concerning a "serious national security threat" and requested President Joe Biden to declassify all information related to the threat.

\* The purported national security threat involves an alleged intent by Russia to put an anti-satellite nuclear weapon into space, ABC News reported.

\* US House Speaker Mike Johnson said there is no cause for alarm regarding the alleged national security threat.

### US PROSECUTION OF JULIAN ASSANGE

\* The prosecution of WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange poses a threat to media freedom around the world, the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) and the European Federation of Journalists (EFJ) said on Wednesday.

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### Trump Has Own View on How US Should Develop Relations With Allies - Putin

MOSCOW, February 14 (Sputnik) - Former President Donald Trump has his own view on how the United States should approach its relations with its allies, Russian President Vladimir Putin said on Wednesday in an interview.

"Trump has always been called a non-systemic politician. He has his own view about how the United States should develop relations with its allies," Putin told Rossiya 1, when asked to comment on Trump's relations with European leaders.

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#### Arab Countries Limit US Ability to Launch Strikes From Their Soil - Reports

WASHINGTON, February 14 (Sputnik) – Some Arab partners of the United States in the Middle East, including the United Arab Emirates, are increasingly limiting the Pentagon's ability to launch strikes against Iran-backed militant groups from their soil, Politico reported on Wednesday, citing people familiar with the matter.

Several Arab countries are restricting the United States from conducting military operations from their territories, including strikes against targets in Iraq, Syria, and the Red Sea, the report said.

One of the Western officials cited in the report believes that the UAE authorities "don't want to appear like they're against Iran and they don't want to appear too close to the West and Israel for public opinion reasons."

Since the start of the Israel-Hamas war in October, US and coalition forces in the Middle East have come under more than 200 attacks, mostly in Iraq and Syria, by groups that belong to the so-called Axis of Resistance.

In response to a deadly attack on a US military outpost in Jordan in late January, the United States on February 2 struck more than 85 targets in Iraq and Syria allegedly linked to Iran's Revolutionary Guard and affiliated militias. Both Baghdad and Damascus have strongly condemned the attacks on their soil.

Tehran denies involvement in attacks on US forces, saying that resistance groups in the Middle East do not receive any instructions from Iran.

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#### US Senators Send Letter to Biden Supporting US Efforts at Reaching Ceasefire in Gaza

WASHINGTON, February 14 (Sputnik) - Twenty-seven US senators on Wednesday sent a letter to President Joe Biden in support of the ongoing US efforts to establish a temporary ceasefire in Gaza and release the remaining hostages held by Hamas there.

"Now ,130 days since the October 7 massacre, two million Gazan civilians remain displaced in extreme danger while hostages held by Hamas remain in life-threatening captivity. We therefore write to express our urgent support for your administration's ongoing diplomatic efforts to secure the release of hostages in tandem with a restored mutual ceasefire in Gaza," the letter said.

The senators acknowledged the difficulty of the situation and the tough terms for negotiating amid a potential for an even greater humanitarian catastrophe, but emphasized that successful talks remain in the best interest of the United States.

"We recognize that it is in Israel's vital national interest that Hamas ... be removed from Gaza. We continue to support that objective. We also recognize that without a break in the fighting,

humanitarian conditions for civilians in Gaza will become even more catastrophic and thousands more innocents - including children - will die," the letter said.

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Shots Fired in Kansas City Near Super Bowl Parade, Multiple Victims - Police

WASHINGTON, February 14 (Sputnik) - Shots were fired in Kansas City, Missouri, near the site of the Super Bowl parade and there are multiple victims, the Kansas City Missouri Police Department said on Wednesday.

"Shots were fired west of Union Station near the garage and multiple people were struck. We took two armed people into custody for more investigation," police said in a statement.

Thousands of people were in downtown Kansas City to celebrate the Kansas City Chiefs' Super Bowl win on Sunday.

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US House Speaker Johnson Says No Need for Public Alarm Over Alleged Security Threat

WASHINGTON, February 14 (Sputnik) - US House Speaker Mike Johnson said on Wednesday that there is no cause for alarm regarding an alleged "national security threat" announced by US House Intelligence Committee Chairman Mike Turner.

"I saw the chairman's statement on the issue and I want to assure the American people there's no need for public alarm," Johnson said.

Johnson also said the US government is making efforts to address the situation.

Earlier on Wednesday, Turner said that the US House Intelligence Committee made information available to all lawmakers concerning a serious national security threat. Turner also requested that President Joe Biden declassify all information related to the threat.

US media reported, citing Pentagon sources, that the alleged national security threat concerned a Russian military space capability

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Alleged US National Security Threat Involves Russian Desire to Put Nuke in Space - Reports

WASHINGTON, February 14 (Sputnik) - A purported national security threat to the United States involves an alleged desire by Russia to put an anti-satellite nuclear weapon into space, ABC News reported on Wednesday.

Earlier on Wednesday, US House Intelligence Committee Chairman Mike Turner announced

that he made information about the alleged security threat available to all lawmakers. Turner also called on US President Joe Biden to declassify all information related to the threat.

The alleged threat involves Russia wanting to put an anti-satellite nuclear weapon into space, the report said, citing two sources familiar with talks in the US Congress.

The information is very concerning and sensitive, one of the sources reportedly said.

US House Intelligence Committee ranking member James Himes said on Wednesday that there is no reason for people in the US to panic about the alleged threat. However, the Biden administration and the US Congress must address the issue in the medium- to long-term, Himes said.

Turner's announcement on the alleged threat comes amid efforts in the US Congress to pass supplemental funding legislation with billions of dollars in aid for Ukraine and Israel, as well as efforts to extend and reform Section 702 surveillance authorities under the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act.

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Pro-Palestine Protesters Interrupt Canadian Parliament Session

WASHINGTON, February 14 (Sputnik) – A group of protesters interrupted Wednesday's question period at the Canadian House of Commons (HoC) by chanting pro-Palestine slogans. "Free, Free Palestine," the group of demonstrators yelled from the parliament's second floor tribunes.

Protesters interrupted the session as Conservative leader Pierre Poilievre questioned Prime Minister Justin Trudeau on the government's mishandling of the development of the COVID-era ArriveCan app.

The interruption prompted HoC Speaker Greg Fergus to shut off the lawmakers' microphones and eventually suspend the parliament's session for two minutes in order to allow for "things to calm down."

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FBI Director Makes Surprise Stop in Israel as Tensions Escalate in Middle East - Reports

WASHINGTON, February 13 (Sputnik) - FBI Director Christopher Wray made a surprise stop in Israel to join intelligence briefings there, Fox News reported on Wednesday.

The United States has seen a rogues' gallery of foreign terrorist organizations who express support and praise for the Hamas attacks against Israel and threaten to attack US interests at home and abroad, Wray was quoted in the report as saying.

The United States is working with all partners to confront the elevated threat picture, which includes the threats posed by Iran and Hezbollah, both in terms of the Hamas attacks on

October 7 but also more broadly, the report said.

The FBI director explained it was important to travel to Israel to meet with intelligence and law enforcement officials in order to reiterate the United States' unwavering support for Israel's mission, the report said.

Wray emphasized that the United States is still working with partners in Israel and around the world to investigate the events of October 7 as well as to keep people around the world safe from terrorism, the report added.

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US Intel Panel Raises 'Mysterious' Security Risk Amid Surveillance Reform Work - Senator

WASHINGTON, February 14 (Sputnik) - US Senator Mike Lee said on Wednesday that he is interested in learning more details about a purported national security threat raised by House Intelligence Committee Chairman Mike Turner, amid efforts in the US Congress to reform government surveillance authorities.

Earlier on Wednesday, Turner announced that he made information about a serious national security threat available to all lawmakers. Turner also said that he requested US President Joe Biden declassify all information related to the purported threat.

"Very interested to learn about this threat," Lee said via social media platform X, in response to Turner's statement about the threat. "Also very interested to know why the spy guys are raising mysterious alarms right before we're about to reform illegal domestic surveillance under FISA [the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act]."

The US House of Representatives is set to consider legislation to reform and extend FISA Section 702 surveillance authorities, which allow the US government to spy on noncitizens located abroad.

Lawmakers have been pursuing reforms to the authority, after an investigation revealed hundreds of thousands of abuses of the surveillance power. The US House Judiciary and Intelligence Committees both passed FISA bills, which were combined into a proposal unveiled this week, dubbed the Reforming Intelligence and Securing America Act.

FISA Section 702 is "vital" to US national security, US House Majority Leader Steve Scalise said in a statement on the bill. The new legislation does not include a proposed warrant requirement for Section 702 authorities; however, the House of Representatives will consider amendments to the bill to address "significant issues" raised by lawmakers, Scalise said.

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Austin After Ukraine Defense Contact Group Meeting Says US Understands Dangers of Retreat

WASHINGTON, February 14 (Sputnik) - The United States understands the dangers of retreat on Ukraine, US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin said on Wednesday, following the 19th meeting of the Ukraine Defense Contact Group.

"The outcome of Ukraine's struggle will help determine the trajectory of security in the 21st century. We understand the stakes—and we understand the dangers of retreat," Austin said in a statement.

Austin stated that support for Kiev is "crucial to American and global security."

"Today, the entire Contact Group focused on Ukraine's urgent needs on the battlefield—and to helping prepare the Ukrainian future force that can deter and defeat Russian aggression over the long haul," Austin said.

The US and allies are intensifying their support for Ukraine through the leadership of initiatives known as "capability coalitions," he added.

The Kremlin has consistently warned against continued arms deliveries to Kiev, saying it would lead to further escalation of the conflict. President Vladimir Putin has said that Russia cannot be defeated on the battlefield. If the West stopped supplying weapons to Ukraine, the war would be over within a few weeks, he said.

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Unspecific US National Security Threat About Russian Military Space Capability - Reports

WASHINGTON, February 14 (Sputnik) - The unspecified national security threat the US House intelligence Committee warned about is in regards to a Russian military space capability, Fox News reported on Wednesday, citing a Pentagon official.

CNN reported, citing sources, that the national security threat involves a "destabilizing military capability" from Russia.

However, US House Speaker Mike Johnson said there is no need for the US public to panic.

Moreover, NBC reported, citing sources, that US Senate Intelligence Committee Chairman Mark Warner and its ranking member Marco Rubio were briefed weeks ago about the threat.

The report said that the threat is also not directly tied to the Senate foreign aid bill stalled in the House of Representatives.

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US Sanctions Iran Procurement Network Tied to Country's Central Bank - Treasury

WASHINGTON, February 14 (Sputnik) - The United States sanctioned three individuals and four entities for alleged involvement in an Iranian procurement network tied to the country's central bank, the US Treasury Department said on Wednesday.

"Today, the Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) sanctioned a

procurement network responsible for facilitating the illegal export of goods and technology from over two dozen US companies to end-users in Iran, including the Central Bank of Iran (CBI), which is designated for its role in providing financial support to the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Qods Force (IRGC-QF) and Hezbollah," the Treasury Department said in a statement.

The network allegedly procured US technology for use by CBI, including information security items, the statement said.

CBI has played a "critical role" in providing financial support to the IRGC-QF and Hezbollah, the statement also said.

The United States will continue to use all available means to disrupt Iran's attempts to procure sensitive US technology, the statement added.

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UNSC Should Act Now on Gaza, There is Need For Humanitarian Resolution - Envoy

WASHINGTON, February 14 (Sputnik) - The UN Security Council needs to act now and approve Algeria's humanitarian resolution on Gaza, the UN Palestinian Ambassador Riyadh Mansour said on Wednesday.

"We would love to see the Security Council acting as quickly as possible within its mandate as its power. We believe we have massive support for this text [Algerian draft resolution]," Mansour told the press outside the UN Security Council chamber.

It is high time for another humanitarian resolution, he added.

The Mission of Algeria to the UN is working on another humanitarian resolution in Gaza.

The UN continues to be concerned about Israel's military plans to continue its ground operation in Rafah. At the same time, the UN is hoping to get back funding for its UNRWA - an agency focused on helping Palestinians in Gaza - after major donors have withdrawn their support following terroristic allegations of its members.

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White House Says Biden Spoke to Austin After Latest Hospitalization

WASHINGTON, February 14 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden spoke with Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin following the second hospitalization of the Pentagon chief this year, White House spokesperson Karine Jean-Pierre said on Wednesday.

"I can confirm that yesterday the President spoke to Secretary Austin," Karine Jean-Pierre said in a press briefing. "Obviously he continues to wish him a speedy recovery and is looking forward to the Secretary coming back to the Pentagon."

Austin was hospitalized over the weekend for the second time in 2024.

Doctors at Walter Reed National Military Medical Center said on Sunday that Austin had been

admitted to the critical care unit for supportive care and close monitoring in connection with a bladder issue. He was released from the hospital on Tuesday and is currently performing his duties remotely from home.

Austin was initially hospitalized on January 1 over complications following a December surgical procedure to treat prostate cancer. The US Defense Department failed to communicate Austin's hospitalization to the White House for several days, prompting a Pentagon Inspector General probe and bipartisan calls for him to leave his leadership position.

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Tory Lawmakers Ask Canada Watchdog to Probe \$190M in Contracts to ArriveCan Developers

WASHINGTON, February 14 (Sputnik) - The Conservative Party will ask Canada's Auditor General Karen Hogan to investigate all contracts allocated to one of the ArriveCan developers amid report that the company received C\$258 million (US\$190 million) worth in contracts, Tory lawmakers said on Wednesday.

Earlier in the day, Canadian media reported that GC Strategies - a two-person IT firm subcontracted for C\$11 million to work on the COVID-19-era ArriveCan application - has been awarded a total of 140 contracts worth nearly C\$258 million (US\$190.4 million) by the federal government since 2015.

"Today, Conservatives are going to be calling for the Auditor General to open an investigation into every contract, every penny that has been paid to GC Strategies because its beyond reason that a two-person company ... could be doing \$250 million in business," Conservative lawmakers Michael Barrett and Pierre Paul-Hus told reporters.

On Monday, Hogan presented her report on the development of the ArriveCan application, whose purpose was to collect travelers' health-related data and assist with quarantines.

The watchdog noted that the Canadian government failed to ensure proper financial record-keeping and demonstrated "glaring disregard" for basic principles during the development of the app.

Although the federal government placed the total cost of the application's development at C\$55 million (US\$40.5 million), Hogan said she was unable to corroborate the data as the Canada Border Services Agency did not have complete and accurate financial records of its development. Based on available information, Hogan estimated the minimal cost to be C\$59.5 million (US\$43.9), though it could have been significantly higher.

Moreover, Hogan said that GC Strategies was awarded the contract without a fair competition process and had the opportunity to craft the requirements for subsequent contracts, which gave it an advantage when it submitted its bid.

In addition, GC Strategies was found to have only acted as a middleman as both of the company's employees do not do IT work, but rather outsource the work while taking between 15-30% cuts for their services.

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US House Panel Calls on Biden to Declassify Info on 'Serious National Security Threat'

WASHINGTON, February 14 (Sputnik) - US House Intelligence Committee Chairman Mike Turner on Wednesday called on President Joe Biden to declassify information about a serious US national security threat so that Biden administration officials, US lawmakers and US allies can discuss the actions necessary to respond to this threat.

"Today, the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence has made available to all Members of Congress information concerning a serious national security threat. I am requesting that President Biden declassify all information relating to this threat so that Congress, the Administration, and our allies can openly discuss the actions necessary to respond to this threat," Turner said in a statement.

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US Crude Stockpiles Up 3rd Week in Row, Growing Almost 18Mln Barrels in All - Energy Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 14 (Sputnik) - Stockpiles of US crude oil rose last week for a third week in a row, growing some 18 million barrels, data from the Energy Information Administration (EIA) showed on Wednesday.

Crude balances rose by 12.018 million barrels during the week February 9, after an addition of 5.521 million and 1.234 million in two prior weeks, the EIA, which serves as the data wing of the US Energy Department, said in its Weekly Petroleum Status Report.

"When you zoom out, US [crude] inventories are on track to end winter below last year's levels but a few more weeks like this would change that," markets analyst Adam Button said in a reaction posted on the ForexLive forum.

Talk of oversupplies in petroleum has put a cap on this month's rally in oil, with benchmark US crude futures trading down 0.5% at \$77.50 per barrel by noon on Wednesday after the release of the EIA inventory data.

Notwithstanding the build in crude stockpiles, the EIA reported lower inventories for both gasoline and distillates.

Gasoline balances slid a second week in a row, sliding by 3.658 million barrels after the prior week's decline of 3.146 million. Gasoline is the primary motor fuel in the United States and makes up the largest component of the country's energy mix.

Distillate inventories dropped for a fourth week in a row, falling by 1.6 million barrels after a loss of nearly 2 million barrels over three prior weeks. Distillates are primarily processed into the diesel required by trucks, buses and ships, and also goes into making airline fuel.

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US Lawmaker Says No Reason to Panic About Purported National Security Threat

WASHINGTON, February 14 (Sputnik) - People in the United States have no reason to panic about a purported threat to national security announced by US House Intelligence Committee Chairman Mike Turner, panel ranking member James Himes said on Wednesday.

"People should not panic, that is unequivocal," Himes said, as quoted by The Hill. "It's something that the Congress and the administration does need to address in the medium to long run."

Earlier on Wednesday, Turner said that the House Intelligence Committee made information available to all lawmakers concerning a serious national security threat. Turner also requested that US President Joe Biden declassify all information related to the threat.

The threat is related to a destabilizing Russian capability, CNN also reported, citing unnamed sources.

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Sources Tell CNN That Unspecified National Security Threat Relates to 'Russian Capability'

WASHINGTON, February 14 (Sputnik) - The unspecified "serious national security threat" the chair of the US House Intelligence Committee has warned of is a "highly concerning and destabilizing" Russian capability, a CNN reporter said in a social media post on Wednesday.

Earlier in the day, US House Intelligence Committee Chairman Mike Turner said the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence has made available to all Members of Congress information concerning a serious national security threat. Turner called on President Joe Biden to declassify information about the unspecified threat so that Biden administration officials, US lawmakers and US allies can discuss the actions necessary to respond to this threat.

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NASA Looks Forward to Hearing From Russia on Readiness to Continue Cooperation - Official

WASHINGTON, February 14 (Sputnik) - NASA expects that Russia's Roscosmos will continue cooperation on the International Space Station through 2030, Space Operations Mission Directorate Associate Administrator Kenneth Bowersox said during a congressional hearing on Wednesday.

"We expect that our Russian partners will work to see what they can do after 2028. They have some technical concerns. They also have some budget concerns," Bowersox told the US House Space and Aeronautics Subcommittee.

Bowersox explained that the reason Roscosmos has not extended cooperation past 2028 is the way Russia's budget system works.

"We have a really good technical relationship with our Russian partners and we are looking forward to hearing from them that they are ready to stay with us through 2030. That's very important," he said.

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US Became Largest LNG Exporter in 2023 - Shell LNG Outlook

WASHINGTON, February 14 (Sputnik) – The United States became the largest LNG exporter in 2023, according to Shell's LNG Outlook 2024 report released on Wednesday.

The report said that the US exported 86 million tonnes of LNG last year, followed by Australia and Qatar, which each shipped around 80 million tonnes. Russia exported over 30 million

tonnes of LNG, followed by Malaysia.

It also estimated that global demand for LNG will rise by more than 50% by 2040 to around 625-685 million tonnes per year, as the industrial shift from coal to gas picks up in China, and South Asian and Southeast Asian countries also use more LNG to support their economic growth.

Global trade in LNG reached 404 million tonnes in 2023, up from 397 million tonnes in 2022, with tight supply restricting growth and keeping prices above historic averages. At the same time, relatively mild winter temperatures in countries that rely on gas for heating, combined with high gas storage levels, stronger nuclear power generation, and a modest economic recovery in China all helped bring down gas prices in the key importing regions of Europe and East Asia.

New regasification facilities helped improve the security of LNG supply in Europe following a slump in pipeline imports from Russia in 2022. Despite a well-supplied global market in 2023, the lack of Russian pipeline gas supply to Europe and a limited amount of LNG supply growth over the last year meant that the global gas market remained structurally tight.

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Sullivan Says Confident in Biden Decision Making Over Unspecified National Security Threat

WASHINGTON, February 14 (Sputnik) - White House National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan said on Wednesday that he is confident in the decisions President Joe Biden is making in response to an unspecified national security threat.

"I'm confident in President Biden and the decisions that he has taken; he is going to ensure the security of the American people going forward," Sullivan said during a press briefing.

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NASA Looks Forward to Hearing From Russia on Readiness to Continue Cooperation - Official

(Updates with more details in paras 5-9)

WASHINGTON, February 14 (Sputnik) - NASA expects that Russia's space agency Roscosmos will continue cooperation on the International Space Station (ISS) through 2030, Space Operations Mission Directorate Associate Administrator Kenneth Bowersox said during a congressional hearing on Wednesday.

"We expect that our Russian partners will work to see what they can do after 2028. They have some technical concerns. They also have some budget concerns," Bowersox told the US House Space and Aeronautics Subcommittee.

Bowersox explained that the reason Roscosmos has not extended cooperation past 2028 is the way Russia's budget system works.

"We have a really good technical relationship with our Russian partners and we are looking

forward to hearing from them that they are ready to stay with us through 2030. That's very important," he said.

Bowersox confirmed that NASA is working very well with its Russian colleagues on technical issues occurring at the Russian segment of the ISS.

"They are sharing information with us. We are sharing expertise with them with the goal of addressing these issues and trying to make sure that we reduce the chance of things happening in the future," he said.

Bowersox pointed out that NASA is obtaining valuable data from Roscosmos about the Russian segment of the ISS, specifically about many parts that are older than other segments of the space station.

"We are learning about how spacecraft ages in space. So, we are all getting valuable data there," Bowersox said.

The recent issues at the Progress and Soyuz vehicles have been caused by debris in space and specialists are trying to address them given that solving the problem is important to all countries, Bowersox added.

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Sullivan Says to Discuss Unspecified National Security Threat With 'Gang of 8' Thursday

WASHINGTON, February 14 (Sputnik) - White House National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan said on Wednesday that he is slated to meet with House leadership tomorrow to discuss a national security threat.

"I reached out earlier this week to the Gang of Eight to offer myself up for a personal briefing to the Gang of Eight and in fact, we scheduled a briefing before House members of the Gang of Eight tomorrow," Sullivan said during a press briefing.

Earlier in the day, US House Intelligence Committee Chairman Mike Turner said the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence has made available to all Members of Congress information concerning a serious national security threat. Turner called on President Joe Biden to declassify information about the unspecified threat so that Biden administration officials, US lawmakers and US allies can discuss the actions necessary to respond to this threat.

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State Department Probes Israel for Possible Misuse of US Weapons in Lebanon, Gaza – Reports

WASHINGTON, February 14 (Sputnik) – The US Department of State is investigating whether Israel has misused American weapons in attacks on Gaza and Lebanon, The Wall Street Journal reported on Wednesday, citing US officials

According to the report, the incidents under investigation include several airstrikes in Gaza and alleged white phosphorous attacks in Lebanon. For example, an Israeli airstrike on the Jabalia refugee camp in Gaza on October 31 killed more than 125 people. Investigators believe Israel used a US-provided 2,000-pound in the strike. They are also investigating whether Israel inappropriately used white phosphorous during several attacks on southern Lebanon in October. In addition, the report states that the investigation is part of a new protocol to give the US more options to restrict foreign military aid if it is abused. It was set up before Hamas' October 7 attack on Israel.

However, State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said Monday that the new protocol is "not intended to function as a rapid response mechanism." Amid the horrific death and injury tolls increasing daily in Gaza, the White House has also said it would not place conditions on arms transfers to Israel.

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Pro-Palestine Protesters Halt Traffic on San Francisco's Golden Gate Bridge on Wednesday

SAN FRANCISCO, February 14 (Sputnik) - A pro-Palestinian demonstration halted traffic in both directions of US Route 101 highway at the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco, the traffic-related website 511 SF Bay said in a note on Wednesday.

"Police Department activity on northbound and southbound US-101 at Golden Gate bridge - midspan in San Francisco. All lanes blocked," the note said.

According to the note, traffic was stopped in both directions at about 8:00 a.m. PST (16:00 GMT).

However, traffic flow was restored on all lanes some 15 minutes later, the note added.

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US House Panel Calls on Biden to Declassify Info on 'Serious National Security Threat'

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US Affirms Commitment to Russian Sanctions in EU Forum – State Department

WASHINGTON, February 14 (Sputnik) – The US State, Commerce, and Treasury Departments affirmed their shared commitment with the UK and EU to impose financial costs on Russia in the Sanctions Coordinators Forum in Brussels on Wednesday, according to a statement.

“We reaffirmed our shared commitment to supporting Ukraine’s sovereignty and opposing Russia’s aggression and that sanctions are a key tool in that effort. The delegations discussed the use of targeted sanctions to deter and disrupt malign Russian activity and to demonstrate our readiness to take action to defend international norms,” the release stated.

The forum was attended by delegations from the US, UK, EU, and Ukraine.

Since the start of Russia’s war on Ukraine, the US has designated more than 3,500 individuals and entities, blocking billions of dollars in assets. It has also used sanctions and export controls to restrict the Russian military’s access to key components and technology.

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NASA Looks Forward to Hearing From Russia on Readiness to Continue Cooperation - Official

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US Official Says Confident Washington Will Authorize Soon Arms Sales to Australia, UK

WASHINGTON, February 14 (Sputnik) - US Under Secretary for Arms Control and International Security Bonnie Jenkins said on Wednesday that she is confident Washington will soon certify arms sales exemptions for Australia and the United Kingdom under the AUKUS military partnership.

"We are working around the clock to do what we need to make sure that we can get the ITAR [International Traffic in Arms Regulations] exemption," Jenkins said during a US House Foreign Affairs Committee hearing on AUKUS. "I feel very confident that we will certify, we are just actually in the process of making this happen. Something that normally takes about six to 12 months, we are doing it much, much faster."

Jenkins noted that the United Kingdom has passed the National Security Act and Australia has two bills in the pipeline that will have a positive impact on the speed of lifting restrictions on arms sales to these two countries.

President Joe Biden has until mid-April to decide whether Australia and the United Kingdom have a system of export controls comparable with that of the United States in order to make an exemption under ITAR.

Should the Biden administration decide to grant the exemptions, all three members of the alliance will be able to jointly develop and build the most cutting-edge military technologies like hypersonics, House Foreign Affairs Chair Michael McCaul said during the hearing.

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Under Secretary Jenkins Says US Seeks Diplomatic Solution to Iran Nuclear Issue

WASHINGTON, February 14 (Sputnik) - Under Secretary of State for Arms Control and International Security Bonnie Jenkins said on Wednesday that the United States will persist in pursuing a diplomatic solution to prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon with ballistic delivery capabilities.

"The plan is to continue to seek a diplomatic resolution," Jenkins said during a hearing on AUKUS Implementation and Challenges to International Security and Arms Control.

The remarks were in response to a question from one of the chairmen about how the US government can assure the American people that there is a plan to prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon capable of being delivered by ballistic means.

"We're having a problem with that right now because there really is no good solution on the table," Jenkins said.

However, Jenkins added that the administration is continuing their collaboration with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) in its efforts to evaluate the situation in Iran.

Tensions between the United States and Iran escalated in 2018 after then-President Donald Trump pulled his country out of the 2015 nuclear deal and reimposed sanctions against Tehran, leading it to scrap limits on its nuclear program.

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US Congressman Says Considering Discharge Petition to Force Vote on Foreign Aid Bill

WASHINGTON, February 14 (Sputnik) - US House Democratic Caucus Chair Pete Aguilar said on Wednesday that lawmakers are considering using a discharge petition to force a floor vote on a \$95 billion supplemental funding bill with aid for Ukraine and Israel, which the US Senate passed earlier this week.

"This is one tool that we are considering in order to pass our national security priorities," Aguilar said during a press conference.

A discharge petition moves legislation out of committee and directly to consideration on the House floor, if it receives support by a majority of members.

US House Speaker Mike Johnson said earlier this week that he has no plans to bring the bill to the floor.

In addition, Johnson said on Wednesday that US House Republicans will insist on addressing domestic border security before passing foreign aid.

The bill includes approximately \$60 billion for Ukraine and \$14 billion for Israel.

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NASA Strives to Have At Least One Working Commercial CLD Before ISS Deorbiting - Official

WASHINGTON, February 14 (Sputnik) - The National Aeronautics and Space Administration is trying to have at least one operational Commercial Low Earth Orbit Destination (CLD) in orbit before deorbiting the International Space Station so that there is a continuous human presence in LEO, Kenneth Bowersox, associate administrator for NASA's Space Operations Mission Directorate said during a congressional hearing on Wednesday.

"In order to maintain an uninterrupted human presence in LEO, NASA is striving to have at least one operational CLD in orbit before ISS is deorbited," Bowersox said.

Bowersox shared that NASA is partnering with industry teams to start the development of CLDs.

"NASA plans to award at least one contract for CLD services in FY 2026, which will provide for the first time a firm schedule that the Agency can use to track progress toward making a seamless transition from ISS to CLD services at the end of the decade," he revealed.

The International Space Station, whose construction began in 1998, was initially intended to be operated for only 15 years. The term was later extended until 2020, and then until 2024. NASA has said that it expects to extend the station's operation until 2030.

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Johnson Says Requested Meeting With Biden About US Border Security, White House Rejected

WASHINGTON, February 14 (Sputnik) - US House Speaker Mike Johnson said on Wednesday that he has requested a meeting with President Joe Biden about border security, but that the White House has rejected his request.

"I've been requesting a meeting with the president for weeks now, a month. I've been asking to sit down with the president to talk about the border and talk about national security, and that meeting has not been granted," Johnson said during a press conference.

Johnson said he will continue to insist on a meeting, adding that it is a "problem" if the Speaker of the House cannot sit down with the president.

House Republicans will insist on addressing the United States' border security before sending aid to foreign countries, Johnson said.

Earlier this week, Johnson said that he has no plans to bring a \$95 billion supplemental funding bill passed by the US Senate to the House floor. The bill provides approximately \$60 billion for Ukraine and \$14 billion for Israel.

However, a congressional source told Sputnik on Tuesday that House lawmakers may divide the legislation into separate portions in an effort to pass the measures.

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Microsoft Says Hackers From Russia, China, Iran, DPRK Exploiting AI Tools

WASHINGTON, February 14 (Sputnik) – Microsoft said on Wednesday that hacker groups allegedly linked to Russia, China, Iran and North Korea are exploiting its OpenAI tools to enhance their cyberoperations.

All four countries deny involvement in cyber attacks.

"In collaboration with OpenAI, we are sharing threat intelligence showing detected state-affiliated adversaries—tracked as Forest Blizzard, Emerald Sleet, Crimson Sandstorm, Charcoal Typhoon, and Salmon Typhoon— using LLMs [large language models] to augment cyberoperations," Microsoft said in a report.

The company alleged that Forest Blizzard is a "highly effective Russian military intelligence actor" linked to the Main Directorate of the General Staff of the Armed Forces.

"Its activities span a variety of sectors including defense, transportation/logistics, government, energy, NGOs, and information technology," the report stated.

North Korea's Emerald Sleet allegedly uses Artificial Intelligence in getting expert opinions on North Korea. Content generation is likely to be used in phishing campaigns, the report said.

Crimson Sandstorm is an "Iranian threat actor" purportedly connected to the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, according to Microsoft. "The use of LLMs has involved requests for support around social engineering, assistance in troubleshooting errors, .NET development, and ways in which an attacker might evade detection when on a compromised machine," the report

said.

The company also identified two Chinese groups of concern. Charcoal Typhoon, according to Microsoft, mostly focuses on tracking groups and individuals in Taiwan, Thailand, Mongolia, France, Nepal and globally who oppose Beijing's policies. Another group, Salmon Typhoon, has been assessing the effectiveness of using LLMs throughout 2023 to source information on potentially sensitive topics, the report said.

"Our research with OpenAI has not identified significant attacks employing the LLMs we monitor closely," the report stated.

Microsoft reassured clients that the company has taken measures to disrupt assets and accounts associated with the alleged threat actors and shape the guardrails and safety mechanisms around its models.

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US Immigration Officers May Release Thousands of Migrants to Address Budget Gap - Reports

WASHINGTON, February 14 (Sputnik) - US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) may release thousands of immigrants from its custody in order to address a \$700 million budget shortfall, the Washington Post reported on Wednesday, citing four ICE officials and the Department of Homeland Security.

ICE officials have started circulating an internal proposal to save funds by both releasing migrants and reducing detentions from 38,000 beds to 22,000, the report said.

Some of the proposed cost-cutting measures include deportations, but much of the savings would happen through mass releases, according to the report.

The move comes after the Senate's failure to pass a \$118 billion national security supplemental with border policy provisions that would have provided \$6 billion in extra funds for ICE enforcement, erasing the agency's \$700 million shortfall, the report said.

On Tuesday, the US Senate passed a \$95 billion foreign aid bill that includes \$60 billion for Ukraine aid, \$14 billion for Israel as well as funding for Taiwan, but no financing for US border security. That bill is now languishing in the US House, where its passage remains uncertain.

The Senate earlier rejected a \$118 billion national security supplemental bill that included some \$60 billion in additional aid for Ukraine, \$14 billion for Israel, and some \$20 billion for border policy measures, among other priorities

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West Virginia Attorney General Calls for Harris to Remove Biden – Letter

WASHINGTON, February 14 (Sputnik) – West Virginia's attorney general has called on US Vice President Kamala Harris to invoke the 25th Amendment against US President Joe Biden and

remove him over his “profound cognitive decline.”

“For too long, Americans have had to stand by and watch as their President has experienced a profound cognitive decline,” Patrick Morrisey wrote in a letter on Tuesday. “I am writing to urge you to invoke your powers under Section 4 of the Twenty-Fifth Amendment and declare that President Biden is unable to discharge the powers and duties of his office.”

Morrisey cited Special Counsel Robert Hur’s recent report on Biden’s mishandling of classified documents, which concluded that criminal charges were not warranted, but raised alarm about the president’s memory.

The attorney general also mentioned numerous incidents over the past few months in which Biden had publicly confused politicians’ names and basic issues.

Biden, 81, has dismissed ongoing accusations of his cognitive decline, insisting that his memory was “fine” after the release of the Hur report.

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Ukraine Defense Contact Group Remains Resolute in Support for Kiev - Austin

WASHINGTON, February 14 (Sputnik) – The Ukraine Defense Contact Group remains undaunted about its support for Kiev, US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin said on Wednesday. “The Kremlin keeps on betting that we will all lose interest in Ukraine and that our support will flicker and fade ... This contact group remains resolute, undaunted, and firm. And make no mistake, United States continues to stand ... with Ukraine,” Austin said.

He said the group would work on Wednesday on Ukraine’s near-term requirements, including its urgent needs for more artillery, ammunition and air defense missiles.

He added that it would continue to adapt its support to Ukraine’s both short-term and long-term security needs.

In an interview with Tucker Carlson last week, President Vladimir Putin said Russia has communicated to the US that if it wants hostilities in Ukraine to end, it should stop supplying weapons to Kiev.

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Canadian Govt. Allocates \$44Mln to Ukraine for F-16 Supplies – National Defense

WASHINGTON, February 14 (Sputnik) – The Canadian Government has announced C\$60 million (\$44.2 million) in assistance for the Ukrainian military to set up a sustainable F-16 fighter aircraft capability, National Defense said on Wednesday.

The funds were announced by Canadian Minister of National Defense Bill Blair in Brussels during the 19th Ukraine Defense Contact Group (UDCG) meeting.

“At today’s meeting, Minister Blair announced that Canada will make a new contribution of \$60

million to the UDCG Air Force Capability Coalition,” National Defense said in a statement.

Accordingly, the donation assistance will help to purchase “vitaly needed” F-16 supplies and equipment such as spare parts, weapon stations, avionics and ammunition.

National Defense said the new aid draws from an existing \$368.9 million military assistance fund for Ukraine announced in June 2023, and further noted that the latest contribution builds on January’s F-16 Training Coalition for Ukraine US\$11.1 million funding announcement.

Since the start of Russia’s special military operation in Ukraine in February 2022, the Canadian government has committed more than US\$1.86 billion in military assistance to Kiev, providing Leopard 2 main battle tanks, armored combat support vehicles, anti-tank weapons, M777 howitzers and associated ammunition, among other items.

Russia has consistently warned against the continued arms deliveries to Ukraine, saying that they only prolong the conflict. Moscow also sees the Ukraine conflict as a hybrid war led by the United States.

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Austin Says He’s In Good Condition After Latest Hospitalization, Prognosis Excellent

WASHINGTON, February 14 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin told members of the Ukraine Defense Contact Group on Wednesday that he is in good condition after his recent hospitalization and his cancer prognosis is excellent.

“I am in good condition and my cancer prognosis remains excellent,” Austin said while participating virtually in the 19th meeting meeting of the Ukraine Defense Contact Group, which is taking place in Brussels.

Austin had to cancel his plans to attend the meeting in person after being hospitalized over the weekend for the second time in 2024. US Assistant Secretary of Defense Celeste Wallander is instead participating at the meeting.

Doctors at Walter Reed National Military Medical Center said on Sunday that Austin had been admitted to the critical care unit for supportive care and close monitoring in connection with a bladder issue.

Austin was initially hospitalized on January 1 over complications following a December surgical procedure to treat prostate cancer. The US Defense Department failed to communicate Austin’s hospitalization to the White House for several days, prompting a Pentagon Inspector General probe and bipartisan calls for him to leave his leadership position.

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Austin Says US, Allies Building Coalitions for Ukraine's Long-Term Security

WASHINGTON, February 14 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin said during a meeting of the Ukraine Defense Contact Group on Wednesday that they are building coalitions for Ukraine's long-term security.

"Almost two years in, we continue to send security assistance to the battlefield and we are now building coalitions for Ukraine's long-term security," Austin said.

Austin in his remarks did not mention the \$95 billion foreign aid bill with \$60 billion in new Ukraine assistance that is now stalled in the House of Representatives after being passed by the Senate.

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US Became Largest LNG Exporter in 2023 - Shell LNG Outlook

WASHINGTON, February 14 (Sputnik) – The United States became the largest LNG exporter in 2023, according to Shell's LNG Outlook 2024 report released on Wednesday.

The report said that the US exported 86 million tonnes of LNG last year, followed by Australia and Qatar, which each shipped around 80 million tonnes. Russia exported over 30 million tonnes of LNG, followed by Malaysia.

It also estimated that global demand for LNG will rise by more than 50% by 2040 to around 625-685 million tonnes per year, as the industrial shift from coal to gas picks up in China, and South Asian and Southeast Asian countries also use more LNG to support their economic growth.

Global trade in LNG reached 404 million tonnes in 2023, up from 397 million tonnes in 2022, with tight supply restricting growth and keeping prices above historic averages. At the same time, relatively mild winter temperatures in countries that rely on gas for heating, combined with high gas storage levels, stronger nuclear power generation, and a modest economic recovery in China all helped bring down gas prices in the key importing regions of Europe and East Asia.

New regasification facilities helped improve the security of LNG supply in Europe following a slump in pipeline imports from Russia in 2022. Despite a well-supplied global market in 2023, the lack of Russian pipeline gas supply to Europe and a limited amount of LNG supply growth over the last year meant that the global gas market remained structurally tight.

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US Strikes Mobile Anti-Ship Cruise Missile in Houthi-Controlled Area of Yemen - CENTCOM

WASHINGTON, February 14 (Sputnik) – The US military has conducted a strike on a Houthi mobile anti-ship cruise missile in Yemen, the US Central Command said on Wednesday.

"On Feb. 13, at approximately 2:35 p.m. (Sanaa time), U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) forces successfully conducted a self-defense strike against one mobile anti-ship cruise missile

(ASCM), in Iranian-backed Houthi controlled areas of Yemen, that was prepared to launch against ships in the Red Sea," the CENTCOM said in a statement.

Later on the same day, one anti-ship ballistic missile (ASBM) was launched from Houthi-controlled areas of Yemen into the Gulf of Aden, it added.

"U.S. Navy ships tracked the missile but took no action because the missile was not projected to impact near any ships. There were no reports of injuries or damage from ships in the area," the statement said.

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#### Kushner Not Planning to Return to White House If Trump Reelected - Reports

WASHINGTON, February 14 (Sputnik) - Former President Donald Trump's son-in-law Jared Kushner does not intend to return to the White House if Trump is reelected in November this year, Axios reported.

During an interview at the Axios BFD conference, Kushner said he plans to focus on his investment firm, Affinity Partners.

"I've really enjoyed the opportunity as a family to be out of the spotlight ... and so we've both really enjoyed the opportunity to be down here in Florida with the kids," Kushner, who served as one of Trump's top advisors, said on Tuesday.

When pressed if Trump called with a job offer, Kushner stated he would say no.

He also said that Trump's presidential bid in 2016 "really was a family campaign," whereas now the Republican frontrunner has "a very professionally run campaign" with a strong team around him.

"I was very fortunate to play a role in the campaign and then join him in the administration," he said.

The US presidential election will be held on November 5. Trump and former US Ambassador to the UN Nikki Haley are vying for the nomination as candidate from the Republican Party. Incumbent President Joe Biden announced his reelection bid last April.

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#### RPT - Mideast Unrest Could Lead to Rebirth of Arab Spring 'on Steroids' - Ex-IMF Official

WASHINGTON, February 14 (Sputnik) - The unrest in the Middle East stemming from the Gaza conflict could ignite another Arab Spring "on steroids" if the crisis continues for a long period of time, Hossein Askari, former IMF Executive Board member and special adviser to the Saudi Arabian finance minister, told Sputnik.

The so-called Arab Spring was a series of anti-government protests and uprisings that began in the Tunisian town of Sidi Bouzid and spread across much of the Arab world, toppling leaders in

Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen.

"I think you could see the rebirth of the Arab Spring on steroids," Askari said about the potential long-term impacts of continued violence in the region. "Arab governments cannot continue to ignore the plight of Palestinians. They will have to take a firm stand against the United States and cut off all ties to Israel."

Since the start of Israel's war in Gaza in early October, US and coalition forces in the Middle East have come under more than 200 attacks, mostly in Iraq and Syria, by groups that belong to the so-called Axis of Resistance. The United States and its partners have participated in airstrikes against targets in Iraq, Syria and against Houthi forces in Yemen, which have been attacking Israel-connected commercial vessels in the southern Red Sea.

Askari said he believes the Middle East is on a path to further instability, largely because of the problems brought about by the leaders of Israel and the United States.

"These leaders are more motivated by their own political predicament than what is moral or what is best for their countries. Then, as long as conditions keep on deteriorating, Arab leaders are in danger of being toppled if they don't enter the arena of war and support the Palestinians," Askari said.

The United States may eventually be forced to remove its troops from Iraq and scale down its operations in Bahrain and Qatar, where it maintains military bases, Askari added.

The US and Iraqi governments are currently in the middle of talks about the future presence of US troops in the country. Recently, Baghdad strongly protested after the US military conducted strikes in the country in response to an attack that killed three US service members in Jordan.

"The face of the Middle East will change dramatically," Askari said.

Askari believes a Palestinian state could be established within the next five years.

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RPT - No Timing on US House Vote for Senate Foreign Aid Bill, May Be Split Into Pieces - Sources

WASHINGTON, February 14 (Sputnik) - There is no timeline set on when the Republican-majority House of Representatives may hold a vote on the Senate's foreign aid bill, but it's possible it could be divided for separate votes to make passage easier, congressional sources told Sputnik on Tuesday.

Earlier in the day, the Senate passed the \$95 billion foreign aid bill that includes \$60 billion for Ukraine aid, \$14 billion for Israel, among other funding for US national security priorities, but excludes border policy reforms.

"There are rumors that the [House] Speaker may break the Senate bill up into separate pieces as there may be more support if he does it that way ... or he may do nothing," the source said.

"Not clear at this point but there would be tremendous opposition to a Ukraine funding bill."

The source explained that there is growing Republican opposition to providing more funding to Ukraine but strong Republican support to continue assisting Israel. The "neocons and warmongers" in the congressional Republican Party will be applying significant pressure on

House Speaker Mike Johnson to do something, the source added.

Another congressional source said there is no timing for when a vote could take place on the foreign aid bill, but Democrats will continue to push for passage of the legislation.

Late Monday, Johnson issued a statement expressing opposition to the Senate's foreign aid bill, adding that the House will have to continue to work "its own will on these matters" since the bill fails to address the United States' most pressing issue: border security. Johnson has suggested the Senate consider border security legislation that has already cleared the House.

Last week, Senate Republicans blocked a \$118 billion national security supplemental package that includes \$60 billion for Ukraine, \$14 billion for Israel and border policy reforms. Republicans claim the reforms in the bill would not do enough to deter illegal immigration on the US southern border.