**News**

# World News Briefs

## White House Downgrades Kushner's Security Clearance

WASHINGTON (AP) — The security clearance of White House senior adviser and presidential son-in-law Jared Kushner has been downgraded, significantly reducing his access to classified information, according to two people informed of the decision.

Kushner had been operating with an interim clearance at the "top secret/sensitive compartmented information" level for more than a year. Now he is authorized to access information only at the lower "secret" level, according to a White House official and a person familiar with the decision, both of whom spoke on condition of anonymity. Neither source was authorized to discuss the decision publicly.

Tuesday's news set off rampant speculation among Trump allies that Kushner's days in the White House might be numbered. On the same day, the departure of a third Kushner ally in the West Wing in as many months was announced. And the selection of a Kushner ally to serve as Trump's 2020 campaign manager appeared to suggest the campaign could provide Kushner with a convenient place to land after his White House duties end.

Kushner lost his access to the nation's deepest secrets after chief of staff John Kelly ordered that White House officials with interim clearances pending since before June 1, 2017, be cut off if they hadn't received permanent clearances by last Friday. A White House official confirmed to The Associated Press that Kelly's order has been implemented.

President Donald Trump could have reversed Kelly's decision and unilaterally offered Kushner a clearance, but deferred to Kelly. Kushner is one of dozens of White House aides who have been working without permanent security clearances for the better part of a year.

## Hicks Resigns From White House

WASHINGTON (AP) — White House Communications Director Hope Hicks, one of President Donald Trump's most loyal aides, resigned Wednesday.

The departure of one of the president's longest-serving advisers, who worked as a one-woman communications shop during his winning campaign, came as a surprise to most in the White House — and cast a pall over the West Wing at a tumultuous time. The news comes a day after Hicks was interviewed for nine hours by the House panel investigating Russia interference in the 2016 election and contact between Trump's campaign and Russia.

In a statement, Trump praised Hicks for her work over the last three years, saying he "will miss having her by my side."

Hicks, who occupied to the desk closest to the Oval Office in the West Wing, has been a central participant in or witness to nearly every milestone and controversy of the Trump campaign and White House. She began her White House tenure as director of strategic communications — a title that only partly captured her more expansive role as the president's gatekeeper to the press.

AP PHOTO/J. SCOTT APPLEWHITE

White House Communications Director Hope Hicks, one of President Trump's closest aides and advisers, arrives to meet behind closed doors with the House Intelligence Committee, at the Capitol in Washington, Tuesday, Feb. 27, 2018.

Hicks acknowledged to a House intelligence panel Tuesday that she has occasionally told "white lies" for Trump. But she said she had not lied about anything relevant to the Russia investigation. She has also been interviewed by special counsel Robert Mueller, in his expansive probe of Russian interference of the 2016 election and potential misdeeds committed by those in the president's orbit.

Hicks said in a statement, "There are no words to adequately express my gratitude to President Trump." She added she wished Trump and his administration the "very best."

## Thousands of Well-Armed Rebel Fighters Are in Syria's Ghouta

BEIRUT (AP) — The Syrian government's battle to recapture the rebel-held eastern suburbs of Damascus is likely to be a long and bloody fight because of the presence of thousands of battle-hardened fighters who have had years to prepare.

Many of the fighters entrenched in eastern Ghouta are originally from the area and move around using an elaborate network of underground tunnels, giving them an advantage against President Bashar Assad's forces and their Russian- and Iranian-backed allies.

The territory of some 400,000 residents is the last major opposition-controlled area near Assad's seat of power, and the rebels have been targeting the capital with volleys of mortar shells, disrupting life in a reminder that they can deprive the city of peace as the government, backed by Russia, rains down bombs and carnage on the besieged area. If government forces retake eastern Ghouta, only one small pocket south of the capital held by the Islamic State group will remain out of government control.

Among the more than 20,000 fighters in eastern Ghouta, a few hundred belong to the al-Qaida-linked Levant Liberation Committee, giving the government a pretext to continue with its assault.

In a letter on Monday to U.N. Secretary General Antonio Guterres, the three main rebel factions in eastern Ghouta said they were committed to making al-Qaida-linked fighters and their families leave within 15 days.

An official with one of the most powerful groups, the Army of Islam, said that if the al-Qaida-linked fighters don't leave or abandon the fight, "all options" are open against them, including the use of force.