

Top Arab MPs meet Assad in Damascus

A delegation of top Arab parliamentarians met with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad in Damascus on Sunday to bring his country back into the fold of the Arab world.

The heads of the Iraqi, Jordanian, Palestinian, Libyan, Egyptian and Emirati houses of representatives, as well as representatives from Oman and Lebanon, traveled to Syria as part of a delegation from the Arab Inter-Parliamentary Union, Reuters reported.

The visit, which is another sign of thawing ties, follows a mini-summit in Baghdad that affirmed the Arab League's intentions of having Syria return to the organization more than a decade after a devastating war broke out which killed over 300,000 people and displaced half the country's population of 23 million.

First to arrive in Damascus was Egypt's Parliament Speaker Hanafy al-Gebaly, the most senior Egyptian

official to visit Syria in over a decade. Iraq's Parliament Speaker Mohammed Halbousi — among several Arab leaders who have been calling for Syria's return to the Arab League — headed the delegation.

Gebaly told reporters in Damascus that the Arab delegation was "visiting brotherly Syria to support the Syrian people" after the quake. He cited the joint statement from the Baghdad meeting about the need to begin the process of "bringing Syria back to the Arab fold."

"We cannot do without Syria and Syria cannot do without its Arab environment, which we hope it can return to," said Halbousi, according to AP.

Syria was largely isolated from the rest of the Arab world after the Arab League suspended its membership in 2011 and many Arab countries pulled their envoys out of Damascus.

But Assad has benefited



from an outpouring of support from Arab states following the devastating earthquake on Feb. 6, which killed more than 5,900 people across his country. Donors have included Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, which both sup-

ported militants and terrorists seeking to overthrow Assad in the early years of the Syrian conflict.

Egypt's President Abdul Fattah al-Sisi spoke with Assad by phone for the first time on Feb. 7 and Jordan's foreign minister made his

first trip to Damascus on Feb. 15.

Assad then traveled to Oman on Feb. 20 — the first time he left Syria since the quake. His 2022 visit to the UAE was his first trip to an Arab state since the 2011 outbreak of war.



Syrian President Bashar al-Assad (2nd R) welcomes a delegation from the Arab Inter-Parliamentary Union in Damascus, Syria, on February 26, 2023.

● AP

NEWS IN BRIEF

Putin: Weapons aid makes NATO 'participant'



● REUTERS

BLOOMBERG — Russian President Vladimir Putin said NATO arms supplies to Ukraine make the alliance a "participant" in the conflict.

In a TV interview, Putin cast the year-long war in Ukraine as an existential battle for Russia's survival. "They have one goal: to disband the former Soviet Union and its fundamental part — the Russian Federation," Putin said.

Migrant shipwreck in Italy kills 58



● AP

REUTERS — Fifty-eight people died, including some children, when a wooden sailing boat carrying migrants crashed against rocks on the southern Italian coast early on Sunday, authorities said.

The vessel had set sail from Turkey several days ago with migrants from Afghanistan, Iran, and several other countries and crashed in stormy weather near Steccato di Cutro, a seaside resort on the eastern coast of Calabria.

Jordan hosts Israel-Palestine talks as violence escalates

Jordan is hosting a meeting between top Israeli and Palestinian officials in a bid to halt a surge in deadly violence in the occupied West Bank that has stoked fears of a wider escalation, according to officials.

The meeting on Sunday is being held in the Red Sea port of Aqaba and will be attended by representatives from the United States and Egypt, Al Jazeera wrote.

The planned talks come days after Israeli forces carried out a raid in the occupied West Bank city of Nablus that killed 11 Palestinians.

The death toll in Wednesday's raid was the highest since the second Intifada of 2000-2005.

The intensifying violence has killed 62 Palestinian adults and children since the start of this year.

Ten Israelis and a Ukrainian tourist died in the same period.

The United Nations meanwhile said last year was the deadliest period for Palestinians in the occupied West Bank since 2006, with Israeli forces killing 171 Palestinians, including 30 children, in that period.

A Jordanian government official, speaking to the AFP news agency, said Sunday's "political-security meeting is part of stepped-up ongoing efforts by Jordan in coordination with the Palestinian Authority and other parties to end unilateral

measures [by Israel] and a security breakdown that could fuel more violence". The talks aim to agree on "security and economic measures to ease the hardships of the Palestinian people," said the official, who requested anonymity. The Reuters news agency quoted an unnamed Jordanian official as also saying that "such a meeting has not happened in years ... It's a major achievement to get them together."

Earlier this month, Jordan's King Abdullah met US President Joe Biden and held talks with his Middle East envoy Brett McGurk in which Washington — a staunch ally of Israel, Egypt, and Jordan

— warned of the threats to regional security and lobbied for a resumption of stalled talks on Palestinian statehood.

McGurk is set to take part in Sunday's meeting, according to officials.

King Abdullah also met Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in Jordan's capital, Amman, in January.

The king stressed "the need to maintain calm and cease all acts of violence", the royal palace said at the time.

Abdullah also reaffirmed Jordan's position in support of a two-state solution between Israel and the Palestinians to end the decades-old conflict.

Jordan has been concerned about stepped-up



Palestinians protest a deadly Israeli raid in the West Bank city of Nablus, as well as a crackdown on Palestinian prisoners by Israel's right-wing government, at the Al-Aqsa Mosque compound in the Old City of Jerusalem, on February 24, 2023.

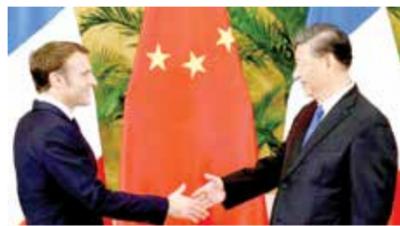
● MAHMOUD ILLEAN/AP

Jewish settlement building and has accused Israel of trying to change the status quo in Jerusalem's holy sites.

Israel captured the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and

the Gaza Strip in the 1967 Middle East war, territories the Palestinians seek for an independent state. Palestinian statehood talks have been stalled for almost a decade.

Macron will visit china in 'early April' to broker peace



French President Emmanuel Macron said he would visit China in early April and called on Beijing to "help us pressure Russia" to end the war in Ukraine. Speaking a day after China called for urgent peace talks as it released its plan to end the war in Ukraine, Macron said peace was only possible if "the Russian aggression was halted, troops withdrawn, and territorial sovereignty

of Ukraine and its people was respected," according to AFP.

"The fact that China is engaging in peace efforts is a good thing," the French leader said, asking Beijing "not to supply any arms to Russia".

He also sought Beijing's help to "exert pressure on Russia to ensure it never uses chemical or nuclear weapons and stops this aggression prior to negotiations". China's 12-point paper calling for a "political settlement" of the crisis follows accusations from the West that China is considering arming Russia, a claim Beijing has dismissed as false.

Timed to coincide with the first anniversary of the Ukraine war, the paper urges all parties to "support Russia and Ukraine in working in the same direction and resuming direct dialogue as quickly as possible".

It also makes clear its opposition to not only the use of nuclear weapons but the threat of deploying them, after Russian President Vladimir Putin threatened to use Moscow's atomic arsenal in the conflict.



French President Emmanuel Macron (L) meets with Chinese President Xi Jinping on the sidelines of the previous G20 Summit in Bali, Indonesia, on November 15, 2022.

● AFP

Thousands in Italy protest West's weapons supplies to Ukraine

Thousands of Italians joined their German brothers and sisters in demonstrating across the country in Rome, Florence, and Genoa against Western sanctions imposed on Russia and transfer of lethal military hardware to Ukraine, a day after the first anniversary of the Ukraine-Russia war.

The protesters chanted "No to war" and "Peace", demanding an end to the war and urging the Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni's government to stop supplying Kiev with weapons, Press TV reported.

The anti-war protesters also held demonstrations in Milan, Italy's second-largest city, Pisa, Florence, and Lecce among several other cities.

In Genoa, people took to the streets and chanted "Exit Italy from NATO", calling for Italy's withdrawal from the European Union and NATO.

"Our vision is to restore relations with our Russian friends and work for the good of the world," one of the demonstrators said.

Italy's PM Meloni has repeatedly said that supporting Ukraine is the best way to reach a possible negotiated settlement with Moscow and that Rome aims to be a lead player in that regard and in Ukraine's reconstruction.

This is while prices in Italy rose by 8.1 percent in 2022, hitting a 37-year high, due to soaring energy and food prices linked primarily to the conflict in Ukraine and the related rearmament spending that all members of the bloc are engaged in.



Demonstrators attend an anti-war rally in Rome, Italy, on February 25, 2022.

● RICCARDO DE LUCA/AA



Mexico's opposition to protest electoral overhaul



Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador

● REUTERS

REUTERS — Mexico's opposition plans a mass protest on Sunday against President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador's drive to shrink the independent electoral authority, arguing the changes threaten democracy — an accusation he vigorously denies.

Mexico's Congress last week approved a major overhaul of the National Electoral Institute (INE), which Lopez Obrador has repeatedly attacked as corrupt and inefficient.