

# Syrian FM visits Egypt for first time in over a decade

Saudi Arabia to invite Assad to Arab leaders summit: Report



Egyptian Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry (l) meets with his Syrian counterpart Faisal Mekdad at the ministry headquarters in Cairo on April 1, 2023. AFP

Syria's Foreign Minister Faisal Mekdad held a meeting with his Egyptian counterpart in the capital, Cairo, to discuss strengthening of bilateral relations as well as the latest regional and international developments. Mekdad met with Sameh Shoukry at the Foreign Ministry in Cairo on Saturday, in the first such visit since the Syrian conflict broke out more than a decade ago, Press TV reported.

The Egyptian Foreign Ministry said in a statement that the two ministers had a closed door meeting followed by discussions between the two countries' delegations. The ministry said discussions were focused on "supporting the Syrian people to restore (the country's) unity and sovereignty over its whole territories." "The ministers agreed to intensify channels of commu-

nication between the two countries at different levels during the coming phase," the statement said. Egypt also reiterated its backing for a "comprehensive political settlement to the Syrian crisis as soon as possible," it added. The meeting comes amid efforts by certain countries to restore Syria's membership in the Arab League, more than a decade after it was suspended from the

22-member bloc.

An Egyptian security source, speaking on condition of anonymity, told Reuters that the visit will help put in place steps to return Syria to the Arab League through Egyptian and Saudi Arabian mediation.

The Arab League suspended Syria's membership in November 2011, citing an alleged crackdown by Damascus on opposition protests. Syria has denounced the move as "illegal and a violation of the organization's charter." Syria was one of the six founding members of the Arab League in 1945. In recent months, an increasing number of countries and political parties have called for the reversal of its suspension from the Arab League.

Back in February, Shoukry travelled to Syria, in a visit he described as "primarily humanitarian" following the devastating earthquake that hit the war-torn Arab country and neighboring Turkey.

In recent months, observers have noted, there has been a race among Arab countries to mend their ties with the Syrian government,

more than ten years after the beginning of a conflict in Syria during which key Arab countries tried to oust Assad.

The new approach adopted by the UAE, which has proven to be much quicker than other Arab countries in making considerable foreign policy shifts to secure its interests, was welcomed by Syrian President Assad as "realistic and correct." Saudi Arabia is also planning to invite Syrian president to an Arab League summit that Riyadh is hosting in May, three sources familiar with the plans said. Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan will travel to Damascus in coming weeks to hand Assad a formal invitation to attend the summit scheduled for May 19, two of the sources said.

The Saudi government's communication office and the foreign ministries of both countries did not respond to requests for comments.

Assad's attendance at an Arab League summit would mark the most significant development in his rehabilitation within the Arab world since 2011.

## NEWS IN BRIEF

### Montenegro votes for president in tight run-off



AL JAZEERA - Montenegrins headed to the polls on Sunday to elect their next president in a run-off vote that could see a young upstart unseat incumbent Milo Djukanovic, who has dominated the country's political scene for decades. The outcome of the contest will likely determine the balance of power in the Balkan nation ahead of a snap parliamentary vote due in June, following months of gridlock after the government collapsed in August.

Montenegro's president, elected for a five-year term, has a mostly ceremonial position and most of the political power resides with the prime minister.

### China urges Japan to refrain from joining US chip curbs

BLOOMBERG - China's Foreign Minister Qin Gang urged Japan to refrain from supporting US efforts to suppress the Chinese semiconductor industry, while his counterpart pressed for the swift return of a Japanese citizen detained by Beijing.

During a meeting with his Japanese counterpart Yoshimasa Hayashi in Beijing on Sunday, Qin said a chip blockade will only strengthen Beijing's resolve to achieve self-reliance, according to a Foreign Ministry statement.

### Bulgarians vote in fifth parliamentary elections in two years

AL JAZEERA - Bulgarians cast their ballots in the fifth general election in two years, hoping to end political instability and help overcome the economic woes fuelled by the war in Ukraine. Turnout was expected to be low due to voters' apathy and disillusionment with politicians, who have failed to form stable governments and deliver governance in one of the poorest and most corrupt European Union member states. Ukraine's war has deepened the political crisis that has engulfed Bulgaria since 2020, the worst instability since the fall of communism.

## Thousands protest in Portugal over housing crisis

Thousands of people took to the streets of Lisbon and other cities across Portugal on Saturday in protest against soaring rents and house prices at a time when high inflation is making it even tougher for people to make ends meet.

"There is a huge housing crisis today," Rita Silva, from the Habitat housing group, said at the Lisbon protest. "This is a social emergency," Reuters reported.

Portugal is one of Western Europe's poorest countries, with government data showing more than 50 per cent of workers earned less than €1,000 (\$1,440) a month in 2022. The monthly minimum wage is €760.

Rents in Lisbon, a tourist hotspot, have jumped 65 per

cent since 2015 and sale prices have skyrocketed 137 per cent in that period, figures from Confidencial Imobiliario, which collects data on housing, show.

Rents increased 37 per cent in 2022 alone, more than in Barcelona or Paris, according to another real estate data company, Casafari.

The situation is particularly hard on the young. The average rent for a one-bedroom flat in Lisbon is around €1,350, a study by housing portal Imovirtual showed.

The Socialist government announced in March a housing package that, among other measures, ended the controversial "Golden Visa" scheme and banned new licences for

Airbnb properties.

But critics say it is not enough to lower prices in the short term.

At the protest, which was organised by the movement Home To Live and other groups, 35-year-old illustrator Diogo Guerra said he hears stories about people struggling to access housing every day.

"People who... work and are homeless, people are evicted because their house is turned into short-term accommodations (for tourists)," he said.

Low wages and high rents make Lisbon the world's third-least viable city to live in, according to a study by insurance brokers CIA Landlords. Portugal's current 8.2 per cent inflation rate has exacerbated the problem.



REUTERS

## At least 26 dead after tornadoes rake US Midwest, South

Storms that dropped possibly dozens of tornadoes killed at least 26 people in small towns and big cities across the South and Midwest, tearing a path through the Arkansas capital, collapsing the roof of a packed concert venue in Illinois and stunning people throughout the region Saturday with the damage's scope.

Confirmed or suspected tornadoes in at least eight states destroyed

homes and businesses, splintered trees and laid waste to neighborhoods across a broad swath of the country. The dead included at least nine in one Tennessee county, four in the small town of Wynne, Arkansas, three in Sullivan, Indiana, and four in Illinois, according to AP.

Other deaths from the storms that hit Friday night into Saturday were reported in Alabama and Mississippi, along with one

near Little Rock, Arkansas, where city officials said more than 2,600 buildings were in a tornado's path. Residents of Wynne, a community of about 8,000 people 50 miles (80 kilometers) west of Memphis, Tennessee, woke Saturday to find the high school's roof shredded and its windows blown out. Huge trees lay on the ground, their stumps reduced to nubs. Broken walls, windows and roofs pocked

homes and businesses. Debris lay scattered inside the shells of homes and on lawns: clothing, insulation, toys, splintered furniture, a pickup truck with its windows shattered.

Nine people died in Tennessee's McNairy County, east of Memphis, according to Patrick Sheehan, director the Tennessee Emergency Management Agency.

"The majority of the

damage has been done to homes and residential areas," said David Leckner, the mayor of Adamsville. The National Weather Service said that tornado was a high-end EF3 twister with wind speeds up to 165 mph (265 kph) and a path as long as 25 miles (40 kilometers).

The storms struck just hours after US President Joe Biden visited Rolling Fork, Mississippi, where tornadoes last week de-

stroyed parts of town.

More than 530,000 homes and businesses were without power as of midday Saturday, over 200,000 of them in Ohio, according to PowerOutage.us.

The sprawling storm system also brought wildfires to the southern Plains, with authorities in Oklahoma reporting nearly 100 of them Friday. At least 32 people were said to be injured, and more than 40 homes destroyed.