

# Arab League welcomes Syria back into bloc



Syria's Foreign Minister Faisal Mekdad attends the Arab Foreign Ministers Preparatory Meeting ahead of the 32nd Arab League Summit in Jeddah on May 17, 2023.  
● AFP

Arab League Secretary General Ahmed Aboul Gheit welcomed Syria back into the bloc on Wednesday, as Arab foreign ministers gathered for a preparatory meeting ahead of

the full summit.

Earlier this month, the Arab world's top diplomats agreed to fully reinstate Syria's membership after a 12-year suspension over

government's crackdown on protesters. President Bashar al-Assad is set to attend the summit in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, on Friday, where he will likely rub shoulders with Arab

presidents and kings who for years sought to weaken him.

Syrian Foreign Minister Faisal Mekdad is already in Jeddah to attend the preparatory meetings and has held talks with his Jordanian, Emirati and Lebanese counterparts among others. Lebanon's Foreign Minister Abdullah Bou Habib said he had spoken to Mekdad about the return of refugees and curbing drug smuggling in the region, two issues that have been key to Arab countries' negotiations with Syria in recent months.

Saudi Arabia's Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan said Wednesday that the region is at a crossroads, facing a host of challenges. He called for cooperation between Arab countries to achieve security, stability and economic prosperity. Bin Farhan also welcomed Syria's return, as did the league's Secretary-General Ahmed Aboul Gheit and Algerian Foreign Minister Ahmed Attaf.

Damascus continues to appeal for much-needed

investment in the war-torn country — crippled by the conflict and Western sanctions — and has moved to restore ties with Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Egypt, and Iraq. After the meeting, Mekdad told reporters he hopes Arab governments will help with reconstruction and Syrian refugee returns. Syria's return to the Arab fold comes as Damascus is also trying to amend ties with Turkey, a key backer of the armed Syrian militants in the country's northwest. But a few Arab countries remain sceptical of Syria's return to the league, primarily Qatar.

Qatar's top diplomat, Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al Thani, said Wednesday that his country opposes Syria's return but that it doesn't want to stand "against the Arab consensus". Each Arab country, however, can unilaterally normalize relations with Syria, he said.

For that to happen from Qatar's perspective, Syria needs to go "through a just and comprehensive solution" to its conflict, Sheikh Mohammed added.

## NEWS IN BRIEF

### Ecuador's Lasso dissolves congress

AP — Ecuadorian President Guillermo Lasso on Wednesday put an end to impeachment proceedings against him by dissolving the opposition-led National Assembly, which had accused him of embezzlement.

The right-wing president, who has denied any wrongdoing, can govern for up to six months by decree under the South American country's constitution.

The National Electoral Council now has seven days to call presidential and legislative elections, which must be held within 90 days. Those elected will finish the terms of Lasso and the lawmakers he ousted, which had been set to end in May 2025.

### Thailand's opposition holds coalition talks



● AP

REUTERS — Thailand's opposition parties, which trounced their military-allied rivals in this week's election, met for coalition talks on Wednesday as the liberal Move Forward Party, which won the most votes, looks to form a government. Move Forward leader Pita Limjaroenrat was seen greeting senior officials from five other parties at a Bangkok restaurant before ushering them upstairs for closed-door talks.

Sunday's vote saw Move Forward come in first ahead of another opposition party, the political heavyweight Pheu Thai, in a major blow to the establishment's pro-military parties led by Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha.

# Turkey opposition contests thousands of ballots after election

Turkey's main opposition party said on Wednesday it had filed complaints over suspected irregularities at thousands of ballot boxes in Sunday's landmark elections, in which President Tayyip Erdogan performed better than expected.

However, opposition party officials said the objections were unlikely to alter the result of the presidential vote, which is headed to a runoff on May 28 between Erdogan and challenger Kemal Kilicdaroglu, Reuters reported.

Muharrem Erkek, a deputy chairman of the secularist

Republican People's Party (CHP), said irregularities at each ballot box ranged from one single wrongly counted vote to hundreds of such votes.

He said the CHP had formally raised objections over 2,269 ballot boxes nationwide for the presidential election and 4,825 for the parliamentary vote that also took place on Sunday, though they represent a tiny proportion of the total number.

"We are following every single vote, even if it does not change the overall results," Erkek told reporters in Ankara.

Erdogan's ruling AK Party and its nationalist allies won a strong parliamentary majority, while in the presidential vote, Erdogan fell just shy of the 50% threshold needed to win outright.

Kilicdaroglu, the CHP chair, received 44.9% in what was seen as the biggest electoral challenge to Erdogan's 20-year rule. A third candidate, Sinan Ogan obtained 5.17%.

Erdogan, now in pole position, says only he can ensure stability in Turkey, a NATO member state, as it grapples with a cost-of-living crisis, soaring inflation



Election officials count ballots at a polling station after polls have closed in Turkey's presidential and parliamentary elections, in Diyarbakir, on May 14, 2023.  
● AFP

and the impact of devastating earthquakes in February.

The opposition alliance

that includes the CHP has urged young voters to turn out to support Kilicdaroglu in the runoff.

# Southern Europe braces for climate change-fuelled summer of drought



● REUTERS

Southern Europe is bracing for a summer of ferocious drought, with some regions already suffering water shortages and farmers expecting their worst yields in decades.

As climate change makes the region hotter and drier, years of consecutive drought have depleted groundwater reserves. Soils have become bone dry in Spain and south-

ern France. Low river and reservoir levels are threatening this summer's hydropower production, Reuters reported.

With temperatures climbing into summertime, scientists warn Europe is on track for another brutal summer, after suffering its hottest on record last year — which fuelled a drought European Union researchers said was the worst in at least 500 years.

So far this year, the situation is most severe in Spain.

"The situation of drought

is going to worsen this summer," said Jorge Olcina, professor of geographic analysis at the University of Alicante, Spain.

There's little chance at this point of rainfall resolving the underlying drought, either. "At this time of the year, the only thing we can have are punctual and local storms, which are not going to solve the rainfall deficit," Olcina said.

Southern Europe is not alone in suffering severe water shortages this year. The Horn of Africa is enduring its worst drought

in decades, while a historic drought in Argentina has hammered soy and corn crops.

More frequent and severe drought in the Mediterranean region — where the average temperature is now 1.5C higher than 150 years ago — is in line with how scientists have forecast climate change will impact the region. France is emerging from its driest winter since 1959, with drought "crisis" alerts already activated in four departmental prefects, restricting non-priority water withdrawals — including

for agriculture, according to government website Propluvia.

Portugal, too, is experiencing an early arrival of drought. Some 90% of the mainland is suffering from drought, with severe drought affecting one-fifth of the country — nearly five times the area reported a year earlier. In Spain, which saw less than half its average rainfall through April this year, thousands of people are relying on truck deliveries for drinking water, while regions including Catalonia have imposed water restrictions.

### Eight dead, thousands evacuated as floods batter Italy

REUTERS — At least eight people died and thousands were evacuated from their homes as torrential rain battered Italy's northern Emilia-Romagna region, triggering widespread floods, officials said on Wednesday. Civil Protection Minister Nello Musumeci said some areas had received half their average annual rainfall in just 36 hours, causing rivers to burst their banks, sending water cascading through towns and submerging thousands of acres of farmland.