

ASSAD REJECTS SECURITY COOPERATION...

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greater and the losses of war less. Therefore, they are our partners in these achievements on the road to crush terrorism," Assad said. "Let's be clear. There will be no security cooperation nor opening of embassies or even a role for some countries that say that they want to play a role in ending the crisis in Syria before they clearly and frankly cut their relations with terrorism," Assad said. "At that point maybe we can speak about opening embassies."

Following months of steady military advances, Syria's government has sought to portray itself as the victor in a war that is winding down, and is looking ahead to reconstruction. The Syrian president said his country's economy is turning to growth again "at a very slow pace, although we are under an almost complete embargo". The government had billed the international trade fair, which opened three days ago, as a "victory" and a sign of renewed confidence in the war-torn nation. The Damascus International Fair was once the leading event on Syria's economic calendar but had not been held since shortly after the outbreak of the country's war in March 2011.

The Mortar News in Damascus Facebook page, which tracks violence in the capital, said the shell hit the entrance of the fair, killing four people and wounding four others. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, a Britain-based monitor of the war, said six people, including two women, were killed and around a dozen more wounded in the rocket fire near the entrance to the fair.

A rescuer speaking to AFP on condition of anonymity confirmed the toll. A source at a hospital in Jaramana, an area southwest of the capital, told AFP he had seen dead and injured being evacuated from the scene. There was no confirmation of the toll from officials. But state television briefly carried a breaking news alert reporting the rocket fire and saying it had caused injuries, citing its reporters at the scene. The alert was removed shortly afterwards, and a reporter broadcasting live from the fair interviewed several officials who made no mention of the rocket fire or casualties.

"We were preparing to receive visitors when I heard an explosion...then I saw smoke to the side of the entrance to the exhibition hall," 39-year-old Iyad Al-Jabiri, a Syrian working at a textile stand at the fair, told AFP. The fair opened on Thursday at the capital's Exhibition City and is scheduled to last 10 days.

It was touted as a sign that work towards rebuilding

Syria and revitalizing its ravaged economy was getting under way, despite the violence that continues in parts of the country.

While Damascus has been insulated from much of the worst violence of the country's war, several key rebel enclaves remain in the Eastern Ghouta region outside the city. Fighters in the area have regularly fired rockets into the capital, and government warplanes have frequently carried out devastating raids across Eastern Ghouta. In recent weeks, much of the area has been quieter after the implementation in July of a "de-escalation zone" covering parts of Eastern Ghouta.

The trade fair dates back to 1954 but was last held in the summer of 2011, months after the eruption of protests against Assad's government. Since then, the country has spiralled into a bloody civil war that has killed more than 330,000 people, displaced millions and devastated the economy. The fair is hosting firms from 23 countries that have maintained diplomatic relations with Damascus throughout the conflict. The United States and European countries, which maintain economic sanctions on the Assad regime, were not officially invited, although a handful of Western companies are attending on an individual basis.

Assad said that hardly a week passes without an attack in the West, referring to assaults carried out by IS supporters. "These facts are what forced them (the West) to change their stance," Assad said.

He welcomed recent deals to de-escalate violence in Syria, but vowed not to give the opposition in politics what it failed to gain through arms.

The de-escalation zones in central, northern and southern Syria were proposed in a plan approved in May by Russia, Turkey and Iran in the Kazakh capital, Astana. The plan included a cessation of hostilities, a halt to Syrian government air raids over designated areas, and provisions for humanitarian aid access.

Despite that deal, Assad said Syrians don't trust Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and that the Syrian leader does not consider him to be a guarantor. Erdogan's government is a main backer of Syrian rebels, and sent troops into Syria a year ago to battle IS and to halt the advance of Kurdish forces. Those troops, and allied Syrian forces, now control a stretch of Syrian territory along the border. "Any Turkish citizen who is in Syria without permission from the Syrian government will be considered an occupier," Assad said. — Agencies

QATAR HAS NOT APPROVED HAJJ FLIGHTS...

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barring direct flights between the countries. They also blocked Qatari flights from using their airspace. The four countries accuse Qatar of supporting terrorist groups and of trying to foment unrest in the region. They have tried for years to pressure Qatar to stop supporting Islamist opposition groups like the Muslim Brotherhood. Qatar rejects the allegation that it backs extremist groups and says the moves are politically motivated.

The Qatar-based Al Jazeera reported that the small Gulf country filed a complaint to the International Civil Aviation Organization against attempts to "terrorize" travelers flying on Qatari Airways. The complaint pointed to a report by the Saudi-owned Al Arabiya news channel that shows a simulation of a fighter jet forcing a Qatar Airways flight to land if it enters the quartet's airspace. The video says that these countries have the

right to use force if necessary, and shows a bomb striking an unmarked aircraft.

Saudi Arabia's facilitation of the hajj for Qataris came after a visit to the kingdom by a Qatari royal family member who resides outside Qatar and whose branch of the family was ousted in a coup more than four decades ago. Sheikh Abdullah Al-Thani, who holds no official post in Qatar, also met Saudi King Salman at his summer palace in Morocco over the weekend and launched a verified Twitter account to raise his profile. He has since taken credit for setting up a hotline inside Saudi Arabia for Qataris who require additional assistance during the hajj, which starts at the end of the month.

Sheikh Abdullah used his new Twitter account yesterday to express his disappointment over Saudi aircraft not being given permission to pick up Qatari pilgrims. "I hope the brothers in Qatar cooperate to facilitate the pilgrimage of citizens," he wrote. — AP

MEDIA TESTED ANEW IN 'WAR' WITH TRUMP

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They should stand for factual reality." In the line of fire over his response to the Charlottesville events, which ended with the death of a young protester, Trump lashed out at the mainstream media with which his camp has declared itself at "war", charging that they "totally misrepresent what I say about hate, bigotry etc".

With many in Trump's loyal supporter base, the charge is likely to resonate: Major cable news outlets like CNN and MSNBC are indeed seen as increasingly hostile to the US administration - with pro-Trump outlets like the ultra-conservative Breitbart News at the other end of a polarized media landscape. "Dislike of Mr Trump within the mainstream media is unalterable," conservative columnist Peggy Noonan wrote in the Wall Street Journal in June. "It permeates every network, from intern to executive producer and CEO."

Muddying the waters, Noonan argues that "media bias now is in part a financial decision", with outlets eager to use Trump to boost ratings. "What we need from media folk is a kind of heroic fairness. What we have instead is endless calculation," she said. But the tumultuous Trump presidency has also triggered a genuine debate about how to uphold the cherished American tradition of even-handed reporting.

Stephen Ward, a former director of the Center for Journalism Ethics at the University of Wisconsin, said many media are being forced to rethink their "old-fashioned view of objectivity". Ward said journalists cannot simply be "stenographers" - liable to repeating the misstatements of facts to which the current president is prone. "The old style of objectivity allows you to be manipulated by the sources talking to you," Ward said.

"What is needed now is interpretive journalism that backs up its perspectives with facts," he said - as well as the resolve to "call a liar a liar and a racist a racist".

Dan Kennedy, a Northeastern University journalism professor, agreed that news outlets need to avoid a "mindless" effort at balance. "The idea that everything has to be balanced is never correct," Kennedy said. Even before the latest polemic, New York University journalism professor Mitchell Stephens wrote in a Politico essay that it's time to think differently about journalistic objectivity. "An abandonment of the pretense to 'objectivity' - in many ways a return to American journalism's roots - is long overdue," Stephens wrote in June. For many news organizations, he said, "their obsession with nonpartisanship lingered long enough to leave them deeply vulnerable to manipulation by a boisterous, rudderless presidential candidate like Trump".

A study released last week by the Berkman-Klein Center at Harvard University offered a lesson on media ethics, concluding that mainstream outlets allowed themselves to be manipulated during the 2016 presidential campaign, enabling Trump supporters to set the narrative for a large amount of coverage. The study found that Trump supporters succeeded in creating a false equivalency between the email scandal dogging the Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton, and potentially far more serious concerns over the Republican candidate's fitness for office. The effort to divert attention was led by "the rightwing media ecosystem" but widely picked up by the mainstream press, the study found. "The fact that the traditional professional media were the targets of intentional manipulation does not absolve them of responsibility for checking the materials put in front of them," the authors wrote. — AFP

QATAR: NO DELAYS TO WORLD CUP

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Qatar has been isolated since June 5 when Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates and Egypt cut ties with the World Cup host - accusing it of backing extremism and fostering ties with Iran - triggering the biggest political crisis in the Gulf for several years. Doha denies the claims. Qatar initially gave priority to Gulf suppliers for the vast construction projects - the country is spending \$500 million a week on World Cup projects - accompanying the controversial tournament.

Since the conflict began some have questioned whether the gas-rich emirate can subsequently meet deadlines to build or renovate the eight stadiums currently earmarked for 2022. But Doha has said it swiftly replaced Saudi and UAE companies with Chinese and Malaysian contractors, among others, since June 5.

Also yesterday, the Supreme Committee published plans for the design of its sixth tournament stadium, Al-Thumama, and the first to use a Qatari architect, Ibrahim Jaidah.

The 40,000-seater Doha stadium will be based on a traditional qahfiya cap worn throughout the region and matches will be played there up to the quarter-final stage in 2022. "We've always been very careful to combine the past with the future in our designs," said Thawadi. "The qahfiya is a continuation of that theme."

Construction work will be carried by a Qatari and Turkish company. Turkey is one of Qatar's strongest allies. Qatar is preparing eight stadiums for 2022, though this may eventually increase to nine. A final decision is expected by governing body FIFA this year. Originally, up to 12 venues were to be used for the tournament. — Agencies

SHUNNED LEBANON BAND FINDS AUDIENCE...

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"Are we the rebellious teenagers of the Middle East? No, I think we're just a band that's writing about our lives and about the stuff that affects us," he said. "And because of the way we are as individuals and people, a lot of what does inspire us is political, because that's the stuff that we freak out about on a daily basis."

The band's most recent song, Roman, focuses on overcoming betrayal. The video was directed by a woman, Jessy Moussalem, and is dominated by women, their hair and hijabs flapping in the wind side by side in the back of a truck as Sinno sings among them. "I think it's literally speaking about what I would like to see and what I think men should do, especially in the Middle East, which is just to shut up and sit back," Sinno said in an interview ahead of a concert in the Lebanese town of Ehdén.

At sunset, young fans gathered at the venue, wearing shirts emblazoned with the Arabic numeral "3", the symbol of Mashrou' Leila's latest and third album.

Others wore Nirvana and Beatles T-shirts. Both Lebanese and non-Lebanese fans said they liked the band because it is not at all like traditional Arabic music. "They have this sort of Western twang," a Lebanese fan, Anthony, said. "The way he sings and vocalizes, it's not very clear what he's saying."

In fact, Sinno said the music they most identified with growing up came out of the United States and Britain. The band draws inspiration from R&B, jazz, rock, Seattle grunge and metal, he added, and they listen to a lot of Michael Jackson, Tina Turner, Madonna and Fleetwood Mac. Beirut, with its eclectic mixture of noise and language, also had a big influence on the band. Asked if he believes the band's music had alienated audiences, Sinno said that's always a risk, but one he's willing to take.

Critics in the region often focus on Sinno's way of singing: He elongates words so they are often incomprehensible. The Arabic word for jasmine hung in the air for 11 seconds in a live rendition of "Shim el Yasmine", or "Smell the Jasmine". — Reuters

SPAIN POLICE UNCOVER GAS ARSENAL AT BOMB...

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led the 90-minute ceremony, while heavily-armed police stood guard outside and snipers deployed on rooftops. Catalonia resident Teresa Rodriguez said she came to pray for the victims, who came from three dozen countries, some as far afield as Australia, China and Peru.

The individual tragedies lengthened on Sunday as the family of a seven-year-old British-Australian boy, Julian Cadman, who had been listed as missing, confirmed that the lad was among the 13 killed in Barcelona. "What happened in Las Ramblas is really hard for us, we go for walks there often, it could have happened to me, my children or anyone. And here we are. It's huge, huge," Rodriguez said, fighting back tears. Nearly 100,000 people were expected later yesterday at the Camp Nou stadium for Barcelona's first home game of the season, to be marked by a minute of silence for the victims.

Traces of triacetone triperoxide (TATP) - a homemade explosive that is an IS hallmark - were also found at the bomb factory in Alcanar, about 200 km south of Barcelona, where the gas canisters were uncovered. Investigators said they believe the terror cell comprised at least 12 men, some of them teenagers. An imam, Abdelbaki Es Satty, was among the suspects, police confirmed. Investigators are seeking to unravel the role of the imam, who is believed to have radicalized many of the youths in a small town called Ripoll at the foot of the Pyrenees.

Several suspects - including Abouyaaqoub - grew up or lived in the town of about 10,000 residents. On Saturday, police raided the imam's apartment in Ripoll, his flatmate, who would only identify himself as Nourdem, told AFP.

Investigators are looking for DNA traces to see if the imam had been blown up in the explosion in Alcanar.

The imam was reportedly known to police, with Spanish media saying he had spent time in prison. El Pais and El Mundo quoting anti-terror forces said the imam had met prisoners linked to the Al-Qaeda-inspired bombing of Madrid trains that killed 191 people in March 2004 in what remains the worst terror attack in Europe. A man who identified himself as Moha, 46, who lives in Ripoll, said the imam was initially part of the only mosque in town, but "later left and (set up) his own prayer hall in a garage". "There has been a change in the community since he arrived more than two years ago," said Moha.

He said youths who used to frequent a Moroccan cafe near the first mosque where they would watch football matches stopped doing so more than a year ago. In the Moroccan town of M'irt, relatives of Abouyaaqoub also accused the imam of radicalizing the young man, as well as his brother Houssein. "Over the last two years, Younes and Houssein began to radicalize under the influence of this imam," their grandfather told AFP.

Most of the suspects are children of Moroccan immigrants, including Ripoll-born Moussa Oukabir, 17, one of five suspects shot dead in Cambrils. His older brother Driss is among the four arrested. In Morocco, their father Said broke down on hearing the news. "I hope they will say he's innocent... I don't want to lose my two sons," he told AFP. A cousin said Moussa "loved playing football, having a good time, chatting up girls". "The last few months, he started to become interested in religion. He used to go to a mosque in Ripoll. Maybe that's where he was brainwashed," the cousin said. — AFP

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