

## JORDAN SAYS SYRIA TIES HEADED IN RIGHT DIRECTION

**AMMAN:** Jordan has said its relations with the Syrian regime are heading in the "right direction" and looked forward to a reopening of the border crossings with its war-torn neighbor. "Our relations with the Syrian state and regime are going in the right direction," government spokesman Mohamed Momani said on television on Friday night. Momani highlighted the "stability" of the situation in southern Syria, across the border from Jordan.

The government spokesman, who is also state

minister for information, said his remarks were "a very important message that everyone should hear". A ceasefire brokered by the United States, Russia and Jordan in the southern Syrian provinces of Daraa, Quneitra and Suweida has largely held since it entered into force July 9. Russia and Iran, the Syrian regime's main allies, and rebel-backer Turkey agreed in May to create four safe zones in Syria in a deal aimed at bringing a lasting truce.

Their negotiations are parallel to UN-sponsored

talks. Moscow believes the "de-escalation zone" in southern Syria can only be put in place with the agreement of the United States and Jordan. "The ceasefire is holding, and we hope there will soon be additional measures to consolidate stability and security in Syria," said Momani. "If the current situation continues and southern Syria stabilizes, it would allow for the reopening of the crossing points between the two states," he added.

Jordan is one of the few Arab countries not to have closed its embassy in Damascus, and the

Syrian diplomatic mission in Amman also remains open. The kingdom shares a border of more than 370 kilometers with Syria, where over 330,000 people have been killed and millions displaced since its conflict broke out in 2011. The economy of Jordan, a country devoid of natural resources, has been severely affected by the closure of borders with Iraq and Syria, which are both at war. The United Nations says Jordan is hosting more than 650,000 Syrian refugees, while the kingdom puts their actual number at 1.4 million. —AFP



**MOSUL:** A fighter of the Hashed Al-Shaabi (Popular Mobilization units) flashes the victory gesture during the advance in the eastern part of the town of Tal Afar, west of Mosul, after the Iraqi government announced the launch of the operation to retake it from Islamic State (IS) group control. —AFP

## IRAQ RECAPTURES TAL AFAR CENTRE, CITADEL FROM IS

### IRAQI FORCES DEAL WITH FINAL POCKETS OF MILITANTS

**TAL AFAR, Iraq:** Iraqi forces announced yesterday the ouster of Islamic State group jihadists from central Tal Afar and its historic citadel, leaving them poised to fully recapture one of the last IS urban strongholds in the country. The advance, less than a week into an assault on the strategic city, comes after Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi declared victory in July over the jihadists in Iraq's second city Mosul, where IS declared its "caliphate" in 2014.

"Units of the Counter-Terrorism Service liberated the Citadel and Basatin districts and raised the Iraqi flag on top of the citadel," operation commander General Abdulmir Yarallah said in a statement. The CTS and federal police units had also seized three northern districts and the Al-Rabia neighborhood west of the citadel, after having retaken the district of Al-Taliaa to the south on Friday. Clashes were ongoing on the northern outskirts and Iraqi forces were dealing with final pockets of jihadists inside the city, Yarallah said.

Columns of smoke could be seen rising over the city after the Hashed al-Shaabi paramilitary coalition fighting alongside government troops seized the Al-Khadra and Al-Jazeera districts. Abbas Radhi, a Hashed al-Shaabi fighter, said IS had resisted the advance mostly with sniper fire. "There are also booby-trapped cars, mortars. But they've been defeated, God willing," he said. Government troops and units of the Hashed al-Shaabi, backed by a US-led coalition against IS, launched the assault last Sunday after weeks of coalition and Iraqi air strikes.

Tal Afar sits on a strategic route between IS-controlled territories in Syria and Mosul, 70 kilo-

meters further east. Progress in Tal Afar has been far more rapid than in Mosul, which only fell to Iraqi forces after a grueling nine-month battle. Officials have said they hope to announce victory in Tal Afar by Eid al-Adha, the Muslim holiday set to start in Iraq on September 2.

#### Obstacle course

Until its takeover by IS, Tal Afar was largely populated by Shiite Turkmen, whose beliefs are anathema to the Sunni hardliners of IS. Directly targeted by the jihadists, most of the city's 200,000-strong population fled. Some members of Tal Afar's Sunni minority joined the jihadists' ranks, forming an IS contingent with a particular reputation for violence. Pro-government forces faced an obstacle course of roads blocked with earth embankments and strategically-parked trucks, as well as sniper fire and mortar shelling.

Troops also said they discovered a network of underground tunnels used by the jihadists to launch attacks behind lines of already conquered territory, or to escape. The International Organization for Migration said "thousands of civilians" had fled Tal Afar since the offensive began. Those who flee through desert areas face soaring temperatures for long periods, putting them at risk of dehydration, said Viren Falcao of the Danish Refugee Council.

Officials have said the capture of the city would make it even more difficult for the jihadists to transport fighters and weapons between Iraq and Syria. The jihadist group has lost much of the territory it controlled and thousands of its fighters have been killed since late 2014, when US and Arab allies formed an inter-

national coalition to defeat the group. Iraq announced the "liberation" of Tikrit, 160 kilometers north of Baghdad, in early 2015.

Sunni-majority Ramadi, capital of Anbar province, fell in February 2016, followed by nearby Fallujah four months later. But the group's biggest defeat was in Mosul, where some 30,000 Iraqi forces backed by US-led air support launched a vast operation in October. Three months later, they retook the city's east and turned their attention to the west, finally declaring the whole city "liberated" on July 9.

#### Future offensives

The jihadist group still retains territory in Iraq and neighboring Syria, where a US-backed Kurdish-Arab coalition is fighting to drive the group from its de facto Syrian capital Raqqa. Once Tal Afar is retaken, Baghdad is expected to launch a new offensive on Hawija, 300 kilometers north of Baghdad. IS is also present in the vast western province of Anbar, where it controls several zones along the border with war-ravaged Syria, including the Al-Qaim area.

The Tal Afar advance came as the foreign and defence ministers of France visited Baghdad on Saturday to affirm their country's support in the fight against IS. Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian and Defense Minister Florence Parly, who arrived in the Iraqi capital on Friday evening, were scheduled to meet Abadi. "As long as our common enemy has not been eradicated, France will continue to take part" in the campaign, said Parly, whose country's forces have carried out air and artillery strikes in support of Iraqi operations. —AFP

## ZAMBIA PRESIDENCY SLAMS POLICE FOR HALTING OPPOSITION PRAYERS

**LUSAKA:** The Zambian presidency yesterday condemned as "regrettable" a police decision to halt a prayer meeting this week at which the main opposition leader Hakainde Hichilema was due to appear. On Thursday heavily armed police blocked entry to the capital's Anglican cathedral where the United Party for National Development (UPND) leader had been due to make his first public appearance since being freed from jail last week. "The action to stop a church meeting is regrettable," Amos Chanda, spokesman for President Edgar Lungu, told reporters.

Hichilema was released last week after four months in custody on treason charges. Blocking his first public appearance since then was widely seen as highlighting a crackdown on dissent by Zambian authorities. Nicknamed "HH", he had been charged with treason for allegedly failing to give

way to Lungu's motorcade in April. He disputes the results of last year's election, which he narrowly lost, and refuses to recognize Lungu as the president.

In July Lungu decreed a 90-day state of emergency, giving the police increased powers of arrest and detention, alleging that opposition parties were behind a string of arson attacks aimed at creating "terror and panic". But Chanda said that "even under a threatened state of emergency police should exercise maximum restraint". "The police should ensure that civil liberties are not infringed upon," he stressed.

Police officials justified their action on Thursday, alleging that the event's organizers had failed to hand in a written notification to them. Chanda said other planned opposition events should go ahead without police obstruction. —AFP

## SYRIA KURDS PREPARING 1ST VOTE IN 'FEDERAL REGION'

**QAMISHLI, Syria:** Syrian Kurdish authorities yesterday began laying the groundwork for the first local elections in the federal system they are establishing in the country's north, an official said. Hadiya Youssef, co-chair of the federal system's constituent assembly, said three rounds of elections would be held starting in September. "In this phase, we are outlining the electoral process by holding meetings with the local councils and societal stakeholders," Youssef said on the sidelines of a summit in the Kurdish-majority city of Qamishli.

The meeting brought together Kurdish, Arab, Syriac and other parties to discuss how each of the three electoral phases would be managed. The first round on September 22, according to Youssef, would see residents vote for representatives on the neighborhood level. Elections for executive councils for towns and regions are planned for November 3. Then, on January 19, they would elect legislative councils for each of the three cantons, as well as a single

joint legislative assembly.

"Every region will have its own legislative council, with the prerogative to set laws in the region as long as they do not contradict the social contract," Youssef said. Legislative assemblies would have four-year terms, but local delegates and executive councils would have two-year terms. Taking advantage of the Syrian army's withdrawal from swathes of northern territory, Kurdish authorities declared three "autonomous" cantons there in 2013.

Last year, leading Kurdish and Arab parties announced they would establish a "federal" system across the cantons, a declaration lambasted by Syria's regime, the opposition, and local rivals. Youssef yesterday defended the plan, saying it was not aimed at breaking Syria apart. "Our federal system is geographic and does not aim to divide Syria," she said. "The objections from the regime and opposition parties all say that they do not support Syria's partition-neither do we." —AFP



**ARBIL:** Iraqi Kurds ride in a powerboat flying Kurdish flags near sunset during the Watercraft festival, in lake Darband in Raniya district, 70 kilometers east of Arbil, the capital of the autonomous region of Kurdistan. —AFP

## FUGITIVE THAI EX-PM YINGLUCK IN DUBAI

**BANGKOK:** Fugitive former Thai premier Yingluck Shinawatra fled to Dubai and may try to seek asylum in the UK, a junta source said yesterday, after she ducked a legal ruling, wrong-footing the court and her supporters alike. Yingluck, 50, was due on Friday morning to arrive at the Supreme Court for the ruling in her trial for criminal negligence that could have seen her jailed for 10 years. But she did not show up, staging a vanishing act that wrote a dramatic closing chapter to the 16-year political saga of her mega-rich Shinawatra family.

Speculation swirled yesterday on the whereabouts of Thailand's first female prime minister—and her possible escape route. The junta source, who is well-placed in the security hierarchy, gave a detailed description of her escape, saying she took a private jet from Thailand to Singapore and onto Dubai, the base of Shinawatra family patriarch Thaksin, who is Yingluck's older brother.

"Thaksin has long prepared escape plan for his sister... he would not allow his sister to spend even a single day in prison," the source added, requesting anonymity. "But Dubai is not Yingluck's final destination," the source said, adding she may be aiming "to claim asylum in Britain". Thaksin, who once owned Manchester City football club, owns property in London and spends significant amounts of time in the city.

The Shinawatra's political network remained tight-lipped yesterday in a media blackout that only served to heighten speculation over her dash from Thailand and the likelihood of a possible

deal with the junta to allow her to leave. A senior source inside the family's Pheu Thai party, also requesting anonymity, yesterday said Yingluck had fled the country for Dubai a few days before the ruling. The Shinawatra political dynasty emerged in 2001 with a series of groundbreaking welfare schemes that won them votes and the loyalty of the rural poor.

But their popularity rattled Thailand's royalist, army-aligned elite, who battered successive governments linked to the clan with coups, court cases and protests. Yingluck's government was toppled by a coup in 2014 and she was put on trial over negligence linked to a costly rice subsidy that propped up her rural political base. Thaksin, Yingluck's elder brother, has been based partly in Dubai since he fled Thailand in 2008 to avoid jail for a corruption conviction. He was toppled from power by a 2006 coup. —AFP

#### Houdini act

Thai newspapers reported that Yingluck fled through a land border to Cambodia, flew to Singapore and on to Dubai, perhaps two days before her court date. It was a curveball that appeared to surprise even her family—an elder brother and sister waited at the court for her arrival alongside thousands of supporters. Shinawatra loyalists expressed sympathy with her shock move, saying the ruling would have been predetermined as her case was politically motivated. "If she has fled abroad it is because this set of judges are appointed by the military and do not come from a democratic system," Surachet Chaikosol, 59, a Red Shirt activist said. —AFP

## TURKEY OPPOSITION CHIEF CHALLENGES ERDOGAN WITH 'JUSTICE' CONGRESS

**CANAKKALE, Turkey:** Turkey's main opposition leader yesterday warned President Recep Tayyip Erdogan that the whole country has a "thirst for justice", opening an unprecedented four-day meeting protesting alleged violations under his rule. Kemal Kilicdaroglu, head of the secular Republican People's Party (CHP), is hoping the "justice congress" in the western Canakkale region will keep up the momentum of a month-long march highlighting judicial abuses in Turkey after the July 15 failed coup.

With politics heating up in Turkey even two years before the next elections, Erdogan will later yesterday host a mass rally at the opposite end of the country marking the anniversary of the 1071 Battle of Malazgirt where pre-Ottoman tribes defeated the Byzantines. More than 50,000 people have been arrested under Turkey's state of emergency, imposed after last year's failed coup, and almost three times that number have lost their jobs, including teachers, judges, soldiers and police officers.

"Eighty million have a thirst for justice," Kilicdaroglu said, referring to Turkey's population. "It is my duty to seek justice. It is my duty to stand by the innocent and be against tyrants," he told some 10,000 people attending Saturday's event.

#### The last straw

Kilicdaroglu earlier this summer walked 450 kilometers from Istanbul to Ankara to protest against the sentencing of one of his MPs, Enis Berberoglu, to 25 years in jail for leaking classified information to an opposition newspaper. Under the simple slogan "justice", the march culminated last month in a huge rally in Istanbul that attracted hundreds of thousands, the biggest event staged by Erdogan's critics in years.

Kilicdaroglu condemned the crackdown as a "civilian coup" and said that the jailing of Berberoglu "became the last straw". Referring to the jailing of journalists after the coup bid, Kilicdaroglu said: "You cannot talk about law, rights and justice in a country where more than 150 journalists are in prison." The pick of the region for the CHP congress is also significant as it was the site of the World War I Battle of Gallipoli where the Ottoman army successfully repelled Allied forces.

The CHP was founded in 1923 by Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, who was a Turkish commander in the Gallipoli campaign where the heroism of Turkish troops is said to have helped lay the foundation of the modern republic. In a relaxed atmosphere, supporters pitched tents under shady woods to be their homes for the duration of the four-day congress which will have special sessions on different kinds of rights abuses. —AFP



**CANAKKALE:** Participants take part in a 'Justice workshop' during the 'Justice Congress' of the main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) in Canakkale. —AFP