

## International

# Hamas delegation in first Syria visit in decade as relations thaw

## 'This is a new start for joint Palestinian-Syrian action'

**DAMASCUS:** Hamas resumes Syria historic ties in Damascus visit Palestinian movement Hamas on Wednesday said it restored relations with the Syrian government after a visiting delegation held a "historic meeting" with President Bashar Al-Assad in Damascus.

The Islamist group, which controls the Gaza Strip, was long one of Syria's closest allies, in large part due to a shared enmity towards Zionist entity.

But it left Syria in 2012 after condemning the Assad government's brutal suppression of protests in March 2011, which triggered the country's descent into civil war.

"This is a glorious and important day, in which we come back to our dear Syria to resume joint work," Hamas chief of Arab relations Khalil al-Hayya told reporters in Damascus.

"This is a new start for joint Palestinian-Syrian action," he said after meeting with Assad along with other representatives of Palestinian factions.

Hamas and Assad have agreed to "move on from the past and look to the future," al-Hayya added. By restoring ties with Damascus, Hamas cements its role within the "axis of resistance" against its arch-enemy Zionist entity, analysts said, an Iran dominated alliance that extends to Lebanon's Hezbollah movement and Yemen's Huthi rebels.

Hamas' move formalises a rapprochement that has been underway for some time and comes amid fundamental changes in Middle East relationships, including the Islamists' long-time ally Turkey restoring full diplomatic ties with Zionist entity in August.

Wednesday's meeting with Assad "is in line with the broader rapprochement between Hezbollah and Hamas evident in Lebanon over the past year or more," said Maha Yahya of the Carnegie Middle East Center.

Al-Hayya said there was consensus among Hamas leadership and supporters over the resumption of ties with Syria—a move also backed by the Palestinian group's foreign sponsors.

"All the states we notified of our decision were welcoming and supportive of the move, including Qatar and Turkey, who encouraged us to take the step," al-Hayya said. Turkey supports rebels against the Damascus government in Syria's civil war, but has lately signalled a willingness to reconcile.

**'Too early'**

The two-day Hamas visit to Syria comes after the Islamist group signed a reconciliation deal with its Palestinian rival Fatah in Algiers last week, vowing to hold elections by next October in a bid to settle a 15-year intra-Palestinian rift.

Analysts say that the latest moves by Hamas come in response to Arab governments—the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Morocco—normalising ties with Israel in recent years.

A Hamas leader told AFP that the group, which was headquartered in the Syrian capital before leaving the country, plans to reopen its Damascus office.

But it was "too early" to talk about relocating its headquarters to the Syrian capital, said the official



**DAMASCUS, Syria:** This handout picture released by the Syrian Presidency, shows Syria's President Bashar Al-Assad (2-L) receiving the leader of Palestinian militant group Islamic Jihad, Ziad Al-Nakhala (R) Hamas chief of Arab relations, Khalil Al-Hayya (2-R) and secretary general of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, Talal Naji (L), in the capital Damascus. —AFP

who spoke on the condition of anonymity. The thaw between Hamas and Damascus was brokered by Tehran and Hezbollah, a senior Hamas source said.

For the past decade, Syrian officials had accused Hamas of betrayal.

In a 2013 speech, Assad had accused Palestinian groups he did not identify of treating the country

like a "hotel" that they leave "when conditions are tough" in a thinly-veiled reference to Hamas.

Hamas has its origins in the transnational Muslim Brotherhood, whose Syrian branch was one of the leading factions in the armed opposition after Syria's civil war broke out. Hamas officials have said they broke ties with the Brotherhood in 2017. —AFP

## French-German govt talks delayed as discord builds

**BERLIN:** Germany and France postponed a meeting set for next week between their governments until January as Berlin said that "more time" was necessary to find common ground on a slew of issues. The delay to the regular meeting hosted alternately by either cabinet exposed a growing rift between the two EU powers, and comes as Europe struggles to cope with an energy and cost-of-living crisis unleashed by Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Chancellor Olaf Scholz's spokesman Steffen Hebestreit would not be drawn on the topics that the governments were unable to agree on. But he acknowledged that "there are a number of different issues that we are dealing with at the moment... on which we have not yet reached a unified position."

Both sides therefore decided it was "sensible" to postpone the talks originally to be hosted by France to January. Scholz will nevertheless hold bilateral talks with French President Emmanuel Macron on the sidelines of the EU summit starting Thursday, Hebestreit said, adding that the pair may also meet next Wednesday in Paris.

France and Germany have often tried to present a united front in a myriad of crises, but over the last weeks, criticisms have spilled out into the open on issues ranging from energy to defence.

After Scholz's government announced a 200-



**German Chancellor Olaf Scholz**

billion euro (\$198-billion) support scheme to protect its businesses and consumers from runaway energy prices, Macron has warned the programme risked leading to "distortions" in the bloc.

Berlin has also been accused of blocking at the EU level a cap on gas prices which it fears would remove an incentive for consumers to save energy, thereby worsening the situation. France, however, which is suffering an electricity shortage because several of its nuclear power plants are out of service, has been pushing for the cap.

Berlin was meanwhile unhappy with Paris over a lack of support for its bid to revive the so-called Midcat gas project for pipelines linking Portugal, Spain, through France to Germany. On military issues, Germany's recent success in rallying 14 NATO members to join its air shield project has irked France which is eyeing a separate plan. —AFP

## 'Shocking' UK report links poor care to death of 45 babies

**LONDON:** A damning report Wednesday found that 45 babies who died at two British hospitals might have survived if their care had been up to standard, in the latest UK maternity scandal. Dr Bill Kirkup who led the official independent investigation described his findings as "stark" and "shocking".

"Had care been given to the nationally recognised standards, the outcome could have been different... in 45 of the 65 baby deaths" examined, he told reporters. Kirkup said there had been "failures of professionalism, of compassion and of kindness" at the hospitals run by East Kent Hospitals NHS Trust in southeast England.

"Women were not listened to... they were disregarded and that led directly to instances of harm" including baby deaths, he said. The doctor, who seven years ago published similar findings after probing baby deaths at another group of hospitals in north-western England, said lessons had once again not been learned. "On at least eight separate occasions over a 10-year period, the trust board (at East Kent) was presented with what should have been inescapable signals that there were serious problems. "They could have put it right. The first instance was in 2010 but they didn't. In every single case they found a way to deny that there were problems."

**'This cannot go on'**

The shocking findings about the state of some of

Britain's maternity services come on top of two other similar scandals and another probe that was announced in May. The East Kent investigation was sparked by the death of baby Harry Richford, who died seven days after he was born by emergency caesarean in November 2017.

An inquest into his death concluded that he died due to seven gross failings amounting to neglect. Kirkup revealed similar findings in 2015 after investigating maternity services at University Hospitals of Morecambe Bay NHS Trust.

Speaking ahead of the release of Wednesday's report, he said it was deeply concerning that the same problems seemed to be reappearing time and time again. "When I reported on Morecambe Bay maternity services in 2015, I did not imagine for one moment that I would be back in seven years' time talking about a rather similar set of circumstances and that there would have been another two large, high-profile maternity failures as well on top of that."

"This cannot go on. We have to address this in a different way. "We can't simply respond to each one as if it's a one-off, as if this is the last time this will happen. We have to do things differently."

The report follows another published in March that found over 200 babies could have survived if they had been given better care at the Shrewsbury and Telford Hospital NHS Trust in central England. Babies were stillborn, died shortly after birth or were left severely brain-damaged over a 20-year period from 2000 to 2019, according to that review. It found that nine of 12 mothers who died during the period could have had "significantly" better treatment, and others were made to have natural births when they should have been offered caesarean sections. The findings prompted an apology in parliament by the then Health Secretary Sajid Javid. —AFP

## UK govt of Truss rocked as interior...

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"Pretending we haven't made mistakes, carrying on as if everyone can't see we've made them, and hoping things will magically come right is not serious politics," she wrote.

Braverman spent just 43 days in the role of home secretary, and her departure is the latest crisis unleashed by the government's tax-cutting budget, announced last month. Despite the chaos, Truss vowed earlier Wednesday that she would not quit as she faced boozing lawmakers at her first parliamentary questions since abandoning her flagship plan.

Opposition Labour leader Keir Starmer asked the House of Commons: "What's the point of a prime minister whose promises don't even last a week?" Starmer mocked Truss by leading his MPs in chants of "Gone, gone!" as he read out a list of her dropped policies. "Why is she still here?" he concluded. Truss responded: "I am a fighter and not

a quitter. "I am someone who is prepared to front up. I'm prepared to take the tough decisions," she said.

But there was silence on her own Conservative benches as Truss issued her riposte to Starmer. The session took place less than 48 hours after new finance minister Jeremy Hunt dismembered Truss' tax plans in a humiliating blow. He sat at her side in parliament, nodding along to her responses. While castigating Truss for conducting "an economic experiment on the British public", Starmer said dismissively: "How could she be held to account when she's not in charge?"

At least five Conservative party MPs have already publicly called for Truss to be replaced. Polls show Truss's personal and party ratings have plummeted, with YouGov saying Tuesday that she had become the most unpopular leader it has ever tracked. A separate survey of party members found that less than two months after electing her as Tory leader and prime minister, a majority now think she should go. Labour has opened up huge poll leads over the ruling Conservatives, amid the recent fall-out as well as the worsening cost-of-living crisis, with inflation jumping above 10 percent on Wednesday on soaring food prices. —AFP

top of the often arduous battle to gain custody over their children, women are frequently exposed to "sexual harassment" by men who believe they have the right to make sexual advances towards divorced women, Edwar lamented. Some families even refuse to allow divorced women to work or go out freely, for fear of the "stigma" and what people will say. "As for men - socially, everything is acceptable. Today, he divorces, tomorrow he remarries."

But statistics show that this has left many women undeterred. "Courts have registered a rise in divorces, particularly over the past decade," a magistrate was quoted as saying in 2019 on the judicial council's website. A social worker who sifts through divorce cases filed in courts so as to try to re-establish common ground between couples likewise acknowledges that "divorce has become much more common".

Speaking on condition of anonymity at a Baghdad court, she said that "only in 10 percent of cases are we able to find a solution" and abandon the divorce proceedings. Manal now lives back in her parents' home and works for a feminist organization. —AFP

## Assembly hails 'new era' after Deputy...

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branded as sovereign issues and only the state can handle them. The petitions demanded to declare such laws unconstitutional, but the court rejected the petitions and confirmed that the laws are in line

## Lebanon power plant sparks...

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dioxide, a dangerous pollutant released when fuel is burnt. The environmental group's 2018 study singled out the Zouk plant, built in the 1940s, as well as cars on a busy motorway and privately owned electricity generators as the main causes of pollution.

The walls of Zeina's balconies in her old Zouk Mikael home are blackened by the smoke, and laundry she used to hang outside would be damaged by toxic chemicals emanating from the plant, she said. "Whenever they refill the station with fuel oil, we would close the windows," Zeina said. "The smell is unbearable."

Lebanon's economy has been in free-fall since a financial crisis hit late in 2019, with authorities now barely able to afford more than an hour of mains electricity a day. The Zouk Mikael plant, one of the country's largest, now runs at minimum capacity when it operates at all, but still its emissions are causing high rates of pulmonary disease, experts warn. Among them is Paul Makhoul, a lung doctor at the Notre Dame du Liban Hospital in Jounieh, who said he abandoned his local apartment after noticing a rise in respiratory disease among patients.

In 2014, he found that lung ailments had increased by three percent in patients living near the plant compared to the previous year, an annual rise he estimates has now doubled. "When I saw the results, I moved

with the constitution.

Also on Wednesday, the court of appeals sentenced former interior ministry official Sheikh Mazen Al-Jarrah Al-Sabah and former parliament election candidate Nawaf Al-Shallahi to five years in prison and fined them KD 1,360,000 each on money laundering charges. The suspects were found guilty of receiving bribes from a Bangladeshi MP currently jailed in Kuwait to issue work permits illegally in order to bring in labor and facilitate human trafficking operations.

from there," he said. "I fled." Makhoul mainly blames the type of fuel burnt at the Zouk Mikael plant, which he says is rich in sulfide and nitric oxide - carcinogenic chemicals that affect the respiratory system and the skin. Compounding the problem, he said, is the fact the seaside plant is located at a low altitude, with heavy smoke trapped in the densely-populated area by nearby mountains that overlook the Mediterranean.

Pictures went viral online last month of thick black smoke again billowing from the Zouk plant as it burnt low-quality fuel oil to produce just one hour of power that day. The energy ministry said the plant had been forced to use heavy fuel to "keep supplying the airport, hospitals and other vital institutions" with electricity. Since then, the plant has mostly operated at night. —AFP

"Sometimes, we wake up to a loud noise in the middle of the night" when the station kicks into action and burns fuel oil, said Zeina's 80-year-old aunt Samia, who still lives near the plant. Elie Beaino, who heads the Zouk municipality, said a second plant, built without authorization in 2014, runs somewhat more cleanly on higher-quality fuel or gas, but that it has stopped working as its operators cannot afford those higher-quality hydrocarbons. "Most residents want the power plants to close down," he said.

Lawmaker Najat Saliba, an atmospheric chemist, said residents near Zouk are at least seven times more likely to develop cancer than those of Beirut, citing a 2018 study she helped author for the American University of Beirut. She said the heavy fuel oil it uses releases harmful chemicals. "The solution is to import quality fuel oil and gas," she said, adding however that Lebanon cannot afford those fuels. "We have two options today," she said. "To switch the lights off at the airport and in hospitals, or to sit under a black cloud in Zouk." — AFP

## Divorce rates soar in Iraq as...

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Premature - often child - marriages are also a driver of divorce. A total of 4,092 adolescent girls were divorced in the two years to the end of 2021. Veteran feminist Hanaa Edwar also pointed to "financial pressure on families" as a cause. "This creates a psychological burden and problems," she said. And Iraq was not spared the surge in domestic violence that came with the coronavirus pandemic - though Edwar salutes women for increasingly finding the courage to leave. "There is an awareness among women that if violence persists in their lives and their children's lives, then it's better to divorce."

But in a deeply patriarchal society like Iraq, a divorced man and a divorced woman are not equal. On