

CLAWS Newsletter



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by Aishwarya Airy



About us

The Centre for Land Warfare Studies (CLAWS) is an independent think tank based in New Delhi, India, dedicated to strategic studies and land warfare in the Indian context. Established in 2004 and registered under the Societies Registration Act, 1860, CLAWS operates as a membership-based organization governed by a Board of Governors and an Executive Council, under the Aegis of the Indian Army.

With a futuristic outlook and a policy-oriented approach, CLAWS focuses on national security issues, conventional military operations, and sub-conventional warfare. The Centre closely monitors regional conflicts and military developments within India's strategic frontiers, particularly in South Asia.

Committed to fostering strategic culture and informed policymaking, CLAWS disseminates its research to armed forces personnel, policymakers, members of the strategic community, and interested civilians. By facilitating in-depth studies and discussions, CLAWS contributes to shaping India's defense policies and military preparedness.

The CLAWS Newsletter is a newly fortnightly series under the leadership of Dr. Tara Kartha, Director Research & Academics. The newsletter features insightful content curated by CLAWS researchers, each specializing in their respective verticals. This initiative aims to provide in-depth analysis, strategic insights, and updates on key issues.

Top Stories This Fortnight

1. **Iran-U.S. Nuclear Negotiations** *(April 12 onward, Times of Israel, IRNA, Newsweek, New Arab, Time Magazine, Axios)*

After months of stalled diplomacy and escalating military tensions, the United States and Iran held indirect talks in Muscat, Oman, on April 12 in an effort to address Tehran's advancing nuclear program. The meeting marked the renewal of high-level engagement between the two adversaries and the first exchange under the Trump administration.

The negotiations were mediated by Omani Foreign Minister Badr bin Hamad al-Busaidi, with delegations from both sides seated in separate rooms. Iran's Foreign Minister Abbas Araqchi led the Iranian team, while Steve Witkoff, the U.S. Special Envoy for the Middle East, represented Washington's interests. Messages were relayed back and forth by Oman.

While no details were divulged regarding the specifics of the negotiations, both sides initially described the talks as "positive" and "constructive," and agreed to meet again in a week. However, it is unclear where the next meeting will take place. Initial reports suggested that Rome had been picked as the destination for the second round of talks but Iran is reportedly insisting that the talks be held in Oman again. The U.S. has not commented on the location of the negotiations.

Both Trump and Iran's Khamenei have chosen to limit their response to the negotiations. "I think they're going well. Nothing matters until they're finished, so I don't like talking about them," Trump said, "But they're going well, I think things with Iran are going very well."

Ayatollah Ali Khamenei on the other hand, in his first remarks since the meeting, said he was neither "overly optimistic or overly pessimistic" regarding the Oman talks with the United States.

However, confusion arose following the talks about the scope of American expectations. Witkoff initially stated that the U.S. aimed to limit Iran's uranium enrichment capacity. A day later, he revised his position, saying a deal would require Iran to "stop and eliminate its nuclear enrichment and weaponization program." On April 15, Arlington-based Axios also reported that Trump convened a high-level meeting in the White House situation room to assess the progress of negotiations. Attendees included Vice President JD Vance, Secretary of State Marco Rubio, Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth, National Security Adviser Mike Waltz, CIA Director John Ratcliffe, and Witkoff himself. The meeting followed a call between Trump and Sultan Haitham bin Tariq of Oman, in which the two leaders discussed the ongoing mediation.

2. **As US Aims To Reduce Troop Presence in Syria, Israel worries about Turkey filling the vacuum** *(April 15 onward, Reuters, Yedioth Ahronoth)*

The United States is preparing to significantly scale back its military presence in Syria, with officials indicating that up to half of the 2,000 American troops currently stationed in the country could be withdrawn, according to a report by Reuters. The drawdown is expected to unfold over the coming weeks and months, primarily affecting American forces stationed in northeastern Syria who have been working alongside the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) to counter Islamic State threats.

A second U.S. official confirmed the drawdown plans to Reuters but emphasized that the final number of troops that are reduced remain uncertain, in part due to broader regional dynamics. These include ongoing

U.S. negotiations with Iran and a recent American military buildup in the Middle East, both of which are influencing the timing and scope of the decision.

Meanwhile, Yedioth Ahronoth, an Israeli news outlet, reported that the U.S. has informed Israel of its phased withdrawal plans. The report noted that Israeli officials have expressed serious concerns about the implications of the move, particularly the risk of a security vacuum in Syria's north. Israel fears that Turkey could expand its influence in the region as a result and is reportedly lobbying the Trump administration to reconsider the decision.

Last month, the SDF signed a deal with Damascus to integrate Kurdish-led governing bodies and security forces with the central government, a development seen as a key factor in shaping the U.S. decision-making process.

3. Tariffs, Hostages, and the Middle East: Key Topics Discussed During Netanyahu's trip to the U.S. (*Times of Israel, April 7*)

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu made a rushed, high-stakes visit to Washington on April 7 to meet with U.S. President Donald Trump. The visit aimed to address a range of pressing issues, including tariff pressures, the war in Gaza, and shifting dynamics in the Middle East. This was the Israeli leader's second trip to the U.S. since Trump assumed office for a second term and the first trip since Trump's broad imposition of American tariffs, including on Israel.

At the centre of discussions were the 17% tariffs imposed on Israeli exports. Netanyahu reportedly pushed for their removal and proposed to reduce Israel's trade surplus with the U.S.

Netanyahu said Israel intends to "very quickly" eliminate the trade deficit with the U.S. and will also eliminate the "variety of trade barriers that have been put unnecessarily." Trump, however, remained firm on the tariffs and emphasized the importance of fair trade, while also pointing to the significant U.S. aid provided to Israel as part of the broader strategic alliance.

The leaders then spoke of the ongoing war in Gaza. Netanyahu provided updates on the efforts to secure the release of the 59 hostages still held by Hamas. Trump expressed cautious optimism about the possibility of a new agreement that could lead to further hostage releases and alleviate humanitarian conditions in the territory.

During the meeting, Trump announced that the United States would begin new negotiations with Iran over its nuclear program. Netanyahu, when asked whether he would support a diplomatic deal, said Israel would only back a "Libya-style" agreement, referring to the complete dismantling of Iran's nuclear capabilities.

Both leaders reiterated their shared stance that Iran must not be allowed to acquire nuclear weapons.

Tensions between Israel and Turkey were also discussed, particularly in light of Turkey's expanding military activities in Syria. Netanyahu raised concerns about its impact on Israel's operational freedom in the region.

Trump responded by emphasizing his strong personal ties with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and said he believed any issues between the two countries could be resolved.

"Any problem that you have with Turkey, I think I can solve," Trump said talking to reporters in the Oval Office as he hosted Netanyahu. "As long as you're reasonable."

The visit concluded without a public resolution of the tariff dispute.

4. Israel Hamas war:

- **Latest Updates: Hamas rejects Israeli Proposal for Ceasefire** (*Al Jazeera, Palestine News Network, Washington Post, PBS, April 12 onwards*)

The Israel-Hamas war continues to escalate, as Israeli forces complete the construction of what they call the strategic Morag Corridor, effectively isolating Rafah from the rest of the Gaza Strip. Rafah is now entirely surrounded by the Israeli military, with the 36th Division holding the Morag Corridor, and the Gaza Division operating in the Philadelphi Corridor, along the Egypt-Gaza border area.

Israel has vowed to “vigorously expand” its military operations in the south, despite international alarm over the growing humanitarian crisis and civilian casualties.

At the diplomatic level, ceasefire negotiations remain stalled. Israel’s latest proposal, which offered a 45-day truce in exchange for the release of half the hostages and the disarmament of Hamas, has been rejected by the group. Hamas called the disarmament clause a “red line” and a non-starter. The group’s leadership has instead proposed a phased deal beginning with a full ceasefire and humanitarian relief, but Israel has dismissed this approach.

Amidst this, Hamas has been trying to stop the wave of mass anti-Hamas and anti-war protests across the Gaza strip that broke out in late March. These rare demonstrations underline a growing internal discontent within the besieged territory. The protests have now largely petered out, media reports suggest, with Gazans attributing the decline to Hamas pressure and the preoccupation of the enclave’s besieged residents with searching for food and fleeing Israeli strikes and evacuation orders.

- **Indefinite troop deployment to halting humanitarian aid: Israel Defence Minister’s controversial remarks on Gaza**

Indefinite troop deployment (*EuroNews, PBS, April 16*): Israel’s defence minister Israel Katz said that Israeli military forces will remain in Gaza, Lebanon, and Syria indefinitely as part of the country’s ongoing security strategy. Katz emphasized that the troops would be deployed in “security zones” within these regions to protect Israeli communities from threats posed by groups such as Hamas and Hezbollah.

Katz also made it clear that this presence is not temporary, and Israeli forces will not withdraw from areas cleared of enemy forces, indicating a long-term commitment to securing key territories.

The military “will remain in the security zones as a buffer between the enemy and (Israeli) communities in any temporary or permanent situation in Gaza — as in Lebanon and Syria,” he said.

This move sparked significant controversy. Palestinians, along with Lebanon and Syria, view the ongoing Israeli military presence as an occupation, which they argue violates international law. Hamas has firmly stated that it will not release the remaining hostages unless Israel withdraws from Gaza and a lasting ceasefire is agreed upon. Israel, however, insists that maintaining control over these security zones is essential to prevent another attack like October 7.

The decision to maintain this military presence has raised concerns among international actors, who warn that it could further destabilize the region, potentially exacerbating tensions and prolonging the conflict.

No humanitarian aid (*Al Arabiya news, Asharq Al-Awsat*): Katz also said that Israel would continue blocking humanitarian aid from entering Gaza and that the blockade was a deliberate tactic to exert pressure on Hamas during the ongoing ceasefire and hostage negotiations.

“Israel’s policy is clear: no humanitarian aid will enter Gaza, and blocking this aid is one of the main pres-

sure levers preventing Hamas from using it as a tool with the population,” Katz said.

The UN’s Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) reported that essential supplies, including medical aid, fuel, and water, have been severely restricted, leaving Gazans in dire conditions. Aid organizations, including Doctors Without Borders (MSF), have also described the situation as a “mass grave” for Palestinians and those attempting to assist them.

- **Al-Qassam Brigades Say Contact Lost With Fighters Holding Israeli-American Hostage** (*Middle East Monitor, BBC, April 15*)

Hamas announced that it had lost contact with the group of fighters responsible for holding 21-year-old Israeli-American soldier Edan Alexander, following what it described as an Israeli airstrike on their location. The statement was made by Hamas military spokesman Abu Obaida, who said, “We are still trying to reach them at this moment.”

Obaida accused Israel of “deliberately trying to relieve the pressure on the dual-nationality captives issue in order to continue its genocidal war against our people.”

The group did not specify when the communication was lost and offered no evidence to support the claim.

The announcement comes just days after the Qassam Brigades released a video of Alexander, in which he directly appealed to former U.S. President Donald Trump for help securing his release. In the video, Alexander also accused Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of neglecting the hostages’ plight in Gaza.

Israel has not commented directly on the report but regularly states that it avoids targeting areas where hostages may be held.

5. Dubai Crown Prince’s India Visit Deepens Strategic, Tech, and Defence Ties (*PIB, MEA, Hamdan, April 8-9*)

His Highness Sheikh Hamdan bin Mohammed Al Maktoum, Crown Prince of Dubai, Deputy Prime Minister, and Minister of Defence of the UAE, visited India from April 8 to 9. This was his first official visit to India in his current capacity and underscored the growing strategic alignment between the two nations across technology, defence, trade, and regional security.

Sheikh Hamdan’s visit was anchored by high-level meetings with Prime Minister Narendra Modi, highlighting the mutual commitment to the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. He also held substantive discussions with Defence Minister Rajnath Singh, External Affairs Minister Dr S. Jaishankar, National Security Advisor Ajit Doval, and Minister of State for Electronics & IT Rajeev Chandrasekhar.

The conversations spanned a range of issues—from boosting defence cooperation and enhancing joint military exercises to expanding collaboration in cybersecurity and maritime security in the Indian Ocean and Red Sea. Sheikh Hamdan and India’s Rajnath Singh agreed to explore deeper collaboration in defence industries, including joint production and technology transfer.

A major focus of the visit was on digital innovation and economic transformation. Sheikh Hamdan also interacted with Indian tech leaders, seeking to build bridges between the UAE’s smart economy initiatives and India’s thriving startup ecosystem. Both sides agreed to strengthen cooperation in artificial intelligence, fintech, quantum computing, and space technologies.

Sheikh Hamdan also visited Mumbai, where he inaugurated the Dubai International Chamber’s new office which is to be based in Bengaluru. This marks the Chamber’s second representative office in India, following the establishment of its Mumbai office in 2018. The new office is expected to play a pivotal role in

linking Dubai-based companies with India's southern innovation corridors and will serve as a key hub under the "Dubai Global" initiative to expand the Emirate's commercial presence worldwide.

At the Dubai-India Business Forum in Mumbai, co-hosted by Dubai Chambers and India's Ministry of Commerce and Industry, Union Minister Piyush Goyal welcomed Sheikh Hamdan and lauded the depth of the relationship. The forum showcased bilateral investment opportunities and celebrated historical ties, with Goyal noting this year marks 100 years since Sheikh Saeed—Sheikh Hamdan's grandfather—visited India. The visit concluded with an agreement to intensify institutional exchanges and convene a strategic dialogue later this year to fast-track cooperation in priority sectors.

IMEEC UPDATE: RITES signs MoU with DP logistics *(April 10, Khaleej Times, Zawya)*

RITES Limited, a leading Indian transport consultancy and engineering firm, has signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with global logistics giant DP World to jointly explore opportunities in trade, logistics, and infrastructure development. This collaboration aims to enhance connectivity between India and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and aligns with the broader objectives of the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEEC).

The MoU was signed during the 'CEO-Connect: Dubai-India Economic Ties & Opportunities' event in Mumbai, attended by prominent leaders including Sheikh Hamdan Bin Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, Crown Prince of Dubai, and Piyush Goyal, India's Minister of Commerce and Industry. The agreement focuses on developing critical infrastructure assets such as ports, multimodal logistics parks, rail connectivity, and free trade zones.

A key aspect of this partnership is the enhancement of the Virtual Trade Corridor (VTC), a digital platform launched in September 2024 to streamline customs, logistics, and regulatory processes between India and the UAE. Developed with support from RITES, the VTC aims to simplify and accelerate trade between the two nations.

The agreement aims to further leverage the VTC to streamline customs, logistics, and regulatory processes between the two countries.

TURKEY

Turkey and Israel hold talks to avoid conflict over Syria *(NYT, AP News, April 11)*

Turkey and Israel have initiated technical discussions to establish a de-escalation mechanism aimed at preventing accidental military conflict in Syria. These talks come amid heightened tensions following the fall of Syrian President Bashar Assad and growing competition between Turkey and Israel over their strategic interests in the region. A rare meeting held in Azerbaijan focused on working out a mechanism "to prevent undesired incidents in Syria," according to a statement by the Turkish Defense Ministry. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's office confirmed that both sides agreed to maintain an open channel of dialogue.

Turkey Eyes Military Presence at Syria's T4 Air Base, Draws Israeli Concern *(Middle East Eye, Turkiye Today, April 2 onwards)*

Turkey is reportedly moving to establish a military presence at Syria's Tiyas Air Base (T4) in Homs province, despite recent Israeli airstrikes targeting the site. Plans include deploying Turkish-made Hisar-type air defense systems and advanced surveillance and strike-capable drones. The base is strategically positioned to enhance Türkiye's aerial control over central Syria and support operations against ISIS remnants. Additionally, Ankara

is considering the temporary deployment of S-400 systems to bolster protection during the reconstruction phase, pending approval from Russia. Israel has expressed concerns, viewing the potential Turkish military presence as a threat to its operational freedom in the region. In response, Israeli airstrikes in late March reportedly damaged infrastructure at the T4 and nearby Palmyra bases, signaling opposition to Turkey's plans.

• **Antalya Diplomacy Forum 2025** (11-13 April)

Under the theme "Reclaiming Diplomacy in a Fragmented World," the 4th Antalya Diplomacy Forum convened leaders and diplomats to address geopolitical tensions and promote cooperation. Hosted by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Turkey, the forum took place from 11-13 April 2025, in Antalya.

Turkey (*TRT World*): Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan held a series of high-level meetings during the forum. Erdogan met with Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev, reaffirming strong bilateral ties and praising Azerbaijan's role in the South Caucasus peace process. He also discussed economic collaboration with Montenegrin President Jakov Milatovic, emphasizing increased trade. Meetings with Kosovo's President Vjosa Osmani-Sadriu and Libya's Prime Minister Abdul Hamid Dbeibeh highlighted Turkey's ongoing support for political stability and development in the Balkans and North Africa.

Additionally, Erdogan conferred with Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban, focusing on deepening cooperation in trade, energy, and defense. He also met with Nechirvan Barzani of Iraq's Kurdish Regional Government and Qatar's Prime Minister Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al Sani, discussing regional relations and cooperation.

Armernia-Azerbaijan (*Commonspace.Eu, Azer News*): Armenian Foreign Minister Ararat Mirzoyan and Azerbaijani Foreign Minister Jeyhun Bayramov met during the Antalya Diplomacy Forum, engaging in discussions aimed at advancing peace and regional cooperation. While no specific agreements were reached, both ministers acknowledged the importance of continued dialogue to enhance mutual understanding and lay the groundwork for future negotiations.

Mirzoyan said that the two sides had agreed on the text of the peace deal and while "it is not perfect, but it is a solid starting point for peace."

Syria (*Reuters, Anadolu Agency*): Syrian President Ahmed al-Sharaa also participated in the forum, emphasizing Syria's dedication to resolving conflicts through dialogue and diplomacy. He highlighted the importance of respecting Syria's sovereignty and territorial integrity, particularly in light of ongoing Israeli airstrikes and territorial incursions. During the forum, Erdogan informed Syrian President Ahmed al-Sharaa that Turkey will persist in its diplomatic efforts to lift international sanctions on Syria. Erdogan emphasized the importance of revitalizing trade and economic cooperation between the two countries and affirmed Turkey's continued support for Syria.

Iran (*Tehran Times*): Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister Saeed Khatibzadeh engaged in several bilateral meetings. He met with Norwegian Deputy Foreign Minister Andreas Kravik to discuss strengthening political consultations and bilateral ties. Additionally, Khatibzadeh held talks with Kurdistan Region President Nechirvan Barzani and Turkish Deputy Foreign Minister Ahmed Yildiz, focusing on regional cooperation and diplomatic relations.

IRAN

• **Iran develops over 900 domestic defence systems, ministry reports** (*Tehran Times, Caliber, Meher News, April 12*)

Iran has announced a significant leap in its defence capabilities, revealing that its military industry now produces over 900 indigenous defence and weapon systems. Rear Admiral Reza Talai-Nik, a spokesperson for the Ministry Of Defence said the achievement demonstrates the country's successful modernization of its armed forces. "Our defence industry has reached a point where over 900 types of defence and weapon systems are now produced domestically," he noted, adding that Iran is now equipped with some of the most advanced drone and military technologies available. This marks a dramatic expansion from the 31 rudimentary defense tools the country possessed before the 1979 Islamic Revolution. The official credited Iranian youth, scientists, and universities for playing a crucial role in driving innovation in the defence sector.

• **Iran Beefs up Afghan Border with High-Tech Wall and Weaponry Amid Rising Security Concerns** (*Khaama, Tasnim, April 14*)

Iran is intensifying efforts to secure its 900-kilometer border with Afghanistan through the construction of a sophisticated, militarized border wall. Led by the Iranian Army Ground Force, the initiative is the country's most ambitious to date—featuring cutting-edge surveillance systems and integrated weaponry designed to combat terrorism, illegal crossings, and the thriving drug trade. Brigadier General Kioumars Heidari, commander of the Army Ground Force, called the project "at the cutting edge of world technology," stressing that it far surpasses a traditional barrier. The four-meter-high wall will be embedded with advanced sensors, monitoring equipment, and weapons systems, signalling Tehran's deepening concerns over instability spilling from Taliban-controlled Afghanistan. According to Major General Hossein Mousavi, 30 kilometres of the wall have been completed, with an additional 50 kilometres nearing completion. The full project is expected to be operational within three years.

• **Eight Pakistani Workers Killed in Targeted Attack Iran; BLA Claims Responsibility** (*Dawn, PressTV, Siasat, April 13*)

Eight Pakistani motor mechanics from Punjab were killed in a targeted attack in Iran's Sistan-Baluchestan province on Saturday. The victims, employed at a car workshop in Mehrestan, were tied up and shot dead by armed men who fled the scene. Iranian authorities confirmed the killings and launched an investigation. The Balochistan National Army (BNA) claimed responsibility for the attack, though media reports suggest that Jaishul-Adl, another militant group, made a similar claim. This is the second such attack on Pakistani nationals in Sistan-Baluchestan; in January 2024, nine Pakistanis were similarly killed in Saravan.

Iraq

• **Iran Smuggles Long-Range Missiles to Iraqi Proxies, Says Report** (*The Times, Reuters, April 8,*)

Iran has reportedly transferred long-range missiles to allied Shia militias in Iraq for the first time, according to a report by The Times. Citing regional intelligence sources, the report states that the surface-to-surface missiles were smuggled across the 1,000-mile Iran-Iraq border under the direction of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Air Force. It marks the first known instance of such weapons being delivered to Iranian-backed forces in Iraq, the media outlet said, citing sources. The surface-to-surface missiles that have allegedly been smuggled into Iraq possess the capability to reach Europe. In addition to the long-range systems, two other missile

types—the Quds 351 cruise missile and the Jamal 69 ballistic missile—were also allegedly supplied. The report indicates that these transfers were done amid regional tensions and ahead of the negotiations between Iran and the United States over Tehran’s nuclear programs. The development follows a Reuters report a week prior that several powerful Iran-backed militias in Iraq had expressed willingness to disarm to reduce the risk of conflict with the U.S.

IRAQ

- **Iraq, Iran Sign Memorandum on Energy Cooperation** (*Iraqi News Agency, April 14, April 12*)

Iraq and Iran signed a memorandum of understanding on to strengthen collaboration in the energy sector. The agreement was signed in Baghdad by Iraq’s Deputy Prime Minister for Energy Affairs and Minister of Oil, Hayyan Abdul Ghani Al-Sawad, and Iranian Oil Minister Mohsen Paknejad. According to Iraq’s Ministry of Oil, the discussions focused on expanding cooperation in areas such as gas investment, the exchange of expertise, and joint development initiatives aimed at advancing the shared interests of both countries. Al-Sawad emphasised Iraq’s ongoing efforts to invest in gas projects and achieve self-sufficiency in oil derivatives. Paknejad, in turn, highlighted the importance of sustained engagement and acknowledged the deep cultural ties between the two nations. This development comes shortly after Iraqi President Abdul Latif Jamal Rashid and Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian held a phone call on 11 April, during which both leaders agreed to enhance coordination on regional and international developments. According to a statement from Iraq’s Presidency, the two presidents discussed bilateral ties, regional security, and the need for continued dialogue to address common challenges and promote stability.

- **Iraq Sets Parliamentary Election Date for November** (*Iraqi News Agency, April 9*)

Iraq has confirmed that its next parliamentary elections will be held on 11 November, following a Cabinet vote and an announcement from Prime Minister Mohammed Shia al-Sudani’s office. The decision comes amid ongoing debates over electoral law amendments and efforts to extend the current parliament’s term. The last Iraqi parliamentary elections were held on Oct. 10, 2021.

SYRIA

- **Saudi Arabia to Pay Off Syria’s World Bank Debt** (*Reuters, Syrian Observer, April 15*)

Saudi Arabia is reportedly considering paying off Syria’s \$15 million debt to the World Bank, a move that could unlock international grants for reconstruction and support Syria’s paralyzed public sector. According to media reports, this would mark Saudi Arabia’s first known financial support to Syria since the new government took office in 2024. The payment would pave the way for the World Bank to approve grants for vital projects, such as rebuilding Syria’s power grid and aiding public sector pay. A technical delegation from the World Bank recently met with Syria’s Finance Minister Mohammed Yosr Bernieh, signalling progress in economic cooperation between Syria and the international financial institution. The move also indicates growing Gulf Arab support for Syria, following earlier plans that were delayed due to concerns about U.S. sanctions. This comes as Qatar also recently offered to supply gas to Syria to help alleviate its electricity shortages, with U.S. approval.

In a significant development, Syria plans to send a high-level delegation to the World Bank and IMF spring meetings in Washington later this month, marking the first visit by Syrian officials to the U.S. since the change in leadership.

- **Southern Syria's armed faction to integrate into government forces** (*Arab news, New Arab, Reuters April 13*)

The Eighth Brigade, one of the last remaining independent armed groups in Syria, has officially dissolved and integrated into the Syrian government's armed forces. In a video statement, the group's spokesperson confirmed the transfer of personnel and military assets to the Ministry of Defence. Led by Ahmed Al-Awdeh, a former army officer, the Eighth Brigade reportedly has close ties to the UAE and Jordan. Once a dominant force in Daraa province and part of the Southern Operations Room (SOR)—a coalition of factions formed to oust Bashar al-Assad—the group had long resisted state control. Unlike other factions, it did not participate in the 25 December 2024 meeting, during which multiple armed groups agreed to disband and join a unified national army. The decision to dissolve comes after two days of clashes between Eighth Brigade fighters and government forces in Daraa, along with talks between Syrian Defence Minister Mohammed Al-Qadri and brigade leaders. The announcement also coincides with Syrian interim president Ahmad Al-Sharaa's visit to Abu Dhabi, where he met UAE President Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed.

- **Report claims Syrian president has familial ties to Russia** (*The Moscow Times, April 8*)

Syrian President Ahmad al-Sharaa has family ties to Russia, as his brother Maher al-Sharaa, recently appointed secretary-general to the presidency, is married to Russian-Syrian citizen Tatiana Zakirova, according to investigative news outlet Agentstvo. Zakirova, a former businesswoman, has ties to companies that secured Russian state contracts. Maher, a trained obstetrician-gynaecologist, has worked in Russia and Syria. The Kremlin may leverage these connections to influence Damascus amid its efforts to restore relations and maintain a military presence in Syria following the December overthrow of Bashar al-Assad, Agentstvo reported. The details were based on leaked personal data and family photos.

- **Al-Sharaa's Diplomatic Engagements:**

UAE, April 13 (*Al Arabiya*): In Abu Dhabi, Syrian President Ahmed al-Sharaa met with UAE President Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan to discuss bilateral relations and regional developments. The UAE expressed support for Syria's reconstruction and aspirations for stability and prosperity. Sharaa was accompanied by Foreign Minister Assad al-Shibani. This is the Syrian leader's second trip to a Gulf nation since assuming office. His first trip was to Saudi Arabia in February. Al-Sharaa's visit is part of efforts to reassure regional partners of his government's commitment to an inclusive political system following the ousting of Bashar al-Assad.

Lebanon, April 14 (*Arab News*): Lebanese Prime Minister Nawaf Salam met Syrian President Ahmad al-Sharaa in Damascus, marking his first official visit and a renewed attempt to redefine Lebanon-Syria relations after the fall of Bashar al-Assad's regime. The visit underscores Beirut's push for a diplomatic reset, emphasizing mutual sovereignty and stability.

Salam was accompanied by key ministers—foreign, defense, and interior—reflecting the breadth of the bilateral agenda. Talks focused on unresolved border issues, the status of refugees, security cooperation, and the need to demarcate the 375-km porous frontier. The visit follows a Saudi-brokered agreement signed in Jeddah between Lebanese and Syrian defense ministers to curb cross-border violence and smuggling. A joint operations room is expected to monitor the truce, supported by Saudi Defense Minister Khalid bin Salman.

Economic discussions included potential agricultural, oil, and transit investments aimed at turning both countries into regional export hubs.

South Korea, April 10 (*EuroNews*): South Korea and Syria have formally established diplomatic relations,

signing an agreement in Damascus, according to Seoul's foreign ministry. The move marks a historic milestone, especially significant given Syria's long standing alignment with North Korea, Seoul's regional adversary. The South Korean foreign ministry said the move "opens a new chapter for bilateral cooperation with Syria, which had long remained distant due to its close ties with North Korea." South Korean Foreign Minister Cho Tae-yul met with his Syrian counterpart Asaad al-Shaibani and interim President Ahmad al-Sharaa. Discussions focused on post-conflict reconstruction and easing Syria's isolation. Cho expressed South Korea's willingness to share development expertise, while Damascus highlighted the need for international support in lifting sanctions.

Across the Middle East

- **Saudi: Expansion of Aramco-Sinopec Petrochemical Joint Venture** (*PR Newswire, April 10*)

Sinopec and Saudi Aramco have signed a significant agreement to expand the Yanbu Refinery in Saudi Arabia, reflecting the growing strategic partnership between China and Saudi Arabia. This deal highlights the deepening energy ties between the two countries, with Sinopec, one of China's largest oil companies, and Aramco, Saudi Arabia's state-owned oil giant, collaborating on refining and petrochemical ventures.

The expansion of the Yanbu Refinery is part of Saudi Arabia's broader efforts to diversify its economy beyond oil, in line with the Vision 2030 initiative. The project will also boost the refining and petrochemical capacities of the region, addressing the growing global demand for petrochemical products.

- **Saudi: Progress Toward U.S.-Saudi Civil Nuclear Agreement** (*Cradle, JNS, Reuters, April 13*)

The United States and Saudi Arabia are advancing toward a landmark agreement on civilian nuclear cooperation, marking a significant step in Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 initiative to diversify its energy sources. U.S. Energy Secretary Chris Wright confirmed that both countries are on a "pathway" to formalizing this partnership, with a memorandum of understanding expected later this year. The proposed agreement would involve a Section 123 accord under the U.S. Atomic Energy Act, which ensures non-proliferation safeguards for nuclear cooperation.

A key challenge remains, however, as Saudi Arabia has yet to fully accept the U.S. stipulations on non-enrichment and non-reprocessing—conditions that are central to the agreement to prevent nuclear technology from being used for weapons development. The U.S. insists on these provisions to mitigate proliferation risks in the region.

This nuclear collaboration forms part of a broader strategic framework that also includes defense and technological partnerships.

- **Yemen: UAE backed militias plan ground offensive against Houthis in Yemen** (*WSJ, April 15*)

Anti-Houthi Yemeni militias supported by the UAE are reportedly planning a ground offensive to seize the strategic Red Sea port of Hodeidah from the Houthi rebels, a Wall Street Journal report said. The planned operation seeks to capitalize on the U.S. bombing campaign that has launched over 350 strikes since March 15, targeting the Houthis. Private American security contractors have reportedly advised Yemeni militia, including the Southern Transitional Council (STC) and the Joint Forces on the West Coast, on the proposed offensive. These factions are poised to move north and attempt to take Hodeidah—an economic and strategic lifeline for the Houthis. Capturing the port would not only cut off key the rebel group's economic and arms smuggling lifelines but would also push them back from large parts of the coast from

where the group has launched attacks on ships transiting nearby waters. This development comes amid intensified U.S. airstrikes targeting Houthi positions in Yemen. The U.S. military has yet to confirm the latest drone loss. The Houthis assert that their actions are in support of Palestinian resistance, linking their military operations to the broader conflict in Gaza. The situation continues to escalate, raising concerns about regional stability and the safety of international shipping lanes.

- **Yemen: Houthi group claims downing of 19th US MQ-9 drone since November 2023**

(Caliber, Xinhua, April 14)

Yemen's Houthi rebels have announced the downing of another U.S. MQ-9 Reaper drone, marking the 19th such incident since November 2023. According to Houthi military spokesperson Yahya Sarea, the drone was shot down over Hajjah province in northwestern Yemen while conducting what the group described as "hostile missions." The MQ-9 Reaper, an advanced unmanned aerial vehicle valued at approximately \$30 million, is primarily used by the U.S. for surveillance and precision strikes. The Houthis claim to have employed a locally manufactured surface-to-air missile to bring down the drone.

- **Jordan arrests 16 over plotting terrorist attack** *(Telegram, The New Arab, Washington Post)*

Jordan arrested 16 individuals linked to the Muslim Brotherhood who were allegedly plotting attacks inside the kingdom using rockets and drones. The arrests culminate a years-long surveillance operation by the General Intelligence Department, which said the suspects had received training and funding in Lebanon and had been under surveillance since 2021.

Authorities discovered secret workshops producing rockets and drones with ranges of 3–5 km, intended for attacks on Jordanian targets. Confessional videos released by intelligence services showed suspects admitting to training in Beirut under a Brotherhood-linked leader named Abu Ahmed. They detailed efforts to recruit members, build rockets, and store weapons in the militant stronghold of Zarqa.

Officials said the foiled plot is part of broader regional efforts by Iran and its allies to destabilize pro-Western Arab governments. Lebanon and Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas expressed support for Jordan, condemning the plot.

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