

Syria's Foreign Minister, Israeli delegation meet in Paris as US pushes for normalising ties

BEIRUT, Aug 20 (AP)

SYRIA'S Foreign Minister held a rare direct meeting with an Israeli delegation in Paris on Tuesday, talks that were brokered by the United States as part of a diplomatic push for Syria and Israel to normalise relations despite a recent surge in tensions between them. Syria's state-run SANA news agency said Foreign Minister Asaad al-Shibani met with Israeli officials to discuss de-escalating tensions and restoring a 1974 ceasefire agreement—a deal that established a demilitarised separation zone between Israeli and Syrian forces and stationed a UN peacekeeping force to maintain calm.

The statement gave no details on the outcome of the Paris meeting. But a senior Trump administration official, who was not authorised to comment publicly on the matter, confirmed the talks.

“The United States continues to support any efforts that will bring lasting stability and



peace between Israel and its neighbours,” the official told The Associated Press, adding that the backing follows President Donald Trump’s outlined “vision of a prosperous Middle East” that includes a “stable Syria at peace with itself and its neighbours—including Israel.”

“We want to do everything we can to help achieve that,” the official added.

In the past, Syrian officials have acknowledged holding indirect talks with Israel to defuse tensions, but this was the first time they acknowledged taking part in direct negotiations. There was no immediate confirmation of the meeting from Israel.

Tensions have soared between the two

neighbours following the overthrow of Syrian President Bashar Assad in December in a lightning rebel offensive led by Islamist insurgents.

Shortly after Assad’s overthrow, Israeli forces seized control of the UN-patrolled buffer zone in Syria set up under the 1974 agreement and carried out airstrikes on military sites in what officials said was aimed at creating a demilitarised zone south of Damascus.

Israel has said it will not allow hostile forces to establish themselves along the frontier, as Iranian-backed groups did during Assad’s rule. It distrusts Syria’s new government, which is led by former Islamist insurgents.

Syrian President Ahmad al-Sharaa, a former al-Qaida commander who severed ties with the militant group years ago, has pledged to build a new country that respects the rights of minorities, but sectarian violence has erupted on a number of occasions, raising concerns about Syria’s fragile transition.

India, EAEU pave way for talks on FTA

■ With a combined GDP of \$6.5 trillion, the proposed FTA is expected to expand market access for Indian exporters

NEW DELHI, Aug 20 (IANS)

INDIA and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), comprising Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyz Republic and Russia, on Wednesday signed the Terms of Reference to launch negotiations for a Free Trade Agreement (FTA), according to a statement issued by the Ministry of Commerce and

Industry.

The terms of reference were signed in Moscow by Additional Secretary, Department of Commerce, Ajay Bhadoo, on behalf of India, and Deputy Director, Trade Policy Department, Eurasian Economic Commission (EEC), Mikhail Cherekaev.

During his visit, Bhadoo also called on the Minister in charge of Trade, EEC, Andrei Slepnev. The heads of negotiation groups apprised the Minister about the milestone achieved with the signing of the terms of reference and discussed the next steps to formally launch the negotiation process, including

organisational aspects of the future trade deal, the statement said.

Both sides noted the growing trade turnover between India and the EAEU, which stood at \$69 billion in 2024, which represented a 7 per cent increase over the corresponding figure for 2023.

With a combined GDP of \$6.5 trillion, the proposed FTA is expected to expand market access for Indian exporters, support diversification into new sectors and geographies, enhance competitiveness, and deliver significant benefits to Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs), the offi-

cial statement said.

The terms of reference provide the framework for negotiations and are expected to unlock untapped trade potential, increase investments and establish a stronger, durable India-EAEU economic partnership. Both sides reaffirmed their commitment to the early conclusion of the agreement and to building a long-term institutional framework for trade cooperation, the statement added.

Trade discussions between India and Eurasia include various sectors, such as pharmaceuticals, fertilisers, and electric vehicles.

India test-fires 'Agni 5' ballistic missile

NEW DELHI/BALASORE, Aug 20
(PTI)

IN A demonstration of its strategic military might, India on Wednesday successfully test-fired the 'Agni 5' intermediate range ballistic missile that has a range of up to 5,000 km.

The Defence Ministry said the test-firing of the missile from the Integrated Test Range in Odisha's Chandipur validated all operational and technical parameters.

The Agni-5 missile can bring almost the entire Asia including the northernmost part of China as well as some regions in Europe under its striking range.

The test-firing of the strategic asset came around three-and-half months after the military conflict between India and



Pakistan.

"Intermediate range ballistic missile 'Agni 5' was successfully test-fired from the integrated test range, Chandipur in Odisha on August 20," the Defence Ministry said in a brief statement.

"The launch validated all operational and technical parameters. It was carried out under the

aegis of the Strategic Forces Command," it said.

India test-fired Agni-5 missile in March last year as well.

The Agni 1 to 4 missiles have ranges from 700 km to 3,500 km and they have already been deployed. Last month, India successfully test-fired nuclear-capable short-range ballistic missiles Prithvi-II and Agni-I.

The Prithvi-II missile has a range of around 350 kms and it is capable of carrying a payload of up to 500 kgs. It can carry both conventional as well as nuclear warheads. The Agni-1 missile has a range of 700-900 kms and it can carry a payload of 1,000 kg.

Both Prithvi-II and Agni-I missiles have been an integral part of India's nuclear deterrence.

Govt approves procurement of 97 Tejas jets for IAF

NEW DELHI, Aug 20 (PTI)

THE Government has approved the proposed procurement of 97 Light Combat Aircraft Tejas fighter jets and six advanced airborne early-warning and control (AEW&C) aircraft for the Indian Air Force at a cost around Rs

85,000 crore, people familiar with the matter said on Wednesday.

The two procurement projects were learnt to have been given the green light by the Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS) headed by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, they said.

The Tejas jets will be procured

at a cost of around Rs 67,000 crore while the AEW&C project will cost the exchequer around Rs 18,000 crore, it is learnt.

Second-hand Airbus-321 planes bought earlier from Air India by the defence ministry will be used for the AEW&C project that is aimed at enhancing the

IAF's surveillance and signal intelligence systems. The procurement of the 97 LCA Tejas (MK-1A) comes nearly four years after the defence ministry sealed another deal involving the indigenously-built jet. The single-engine MK-1A will be a replacement for the IAF's MiG-21 fighters.

Jaishankar discusses bilateral ties, geopolitics with Russian scholars

MOSCOW, Aug 20 (IANS)

EXTERNAL Affairs Minister (EAM) S Jaishankar on Wednesday engaged in an interaction with prominent Russian scholars and think tank representatives, discussing bilateral ties between India and Russia, the evolving global geopolitics and India's perspective during his ongoing three-day official visit to Russia.

"Pleased to interact with prominent scholars and think tank representatives of Russia. Discussed India-Russia relations, contemporary world geopolitics, and India's viewpoint," the EAM posted on X.

Jaishankar also laid a wreath at the 'Tomb of the Unknown Soldier' in Moscow's Alexander Garden, a war memorial dedi-



External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar interacts with prominent scholars and think tank representatives of Russia, in Moscow on Wednesday. (ANI)

cated to the Soviet soldiers who died during Second World War.

The EAM is scheduled to co-chair the 26th Session of the India-Russia

Read Editorial
WHIRLWIND
on page 8

Inter-Governmental Commission on Trade, Economic, Scientific, Technological and
(Contd on page 5)

US troops will not be sent to defend Ukraine: Trump

Ukraine's hopes of getting back Crimean Peninsula, joining NATO alliance are impossible, says Trump

WASHINGTON, Aug 19 (AP)

PRESIDENT Donald Trump on Tuesday offered his assurances that US troops would not be sent to help defend Ukraine against Russia after seeming to leave open the possibility the day before.

Trump also said in a morning TV interview that Ukraine's hopes of joining NATO and regaining the Crimean Peninsula from Russia are "impossible."

The Republican President, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and other European leaders held hours of talks at the White House on Monday aimed at bringing an end to Russia's war against Ukraine. While answering questions from journalists, Trump did not rule out sending US troops to participate in a European-led effort to defend Ukraine as part of security guarantees sought by Zelenskyy.

Trump said after his meeting in Alaska last week with Russian President Vladimir Putin that Putin was open to the idea of security guarantees for Ukraine.

But when asked on Tuesday on FoxNews Channel's "Fox & Friends" what assurances he could provide going forward and beyond his term that American troops would not be part of defending Ukraine's border, Trump said, "Well, you have my assurance, and I'm President."

Trump would have no control over the US military after his terms ends in January 2029.

White House press secretary Karoline Leavitt later on Tuesday emphasised that "US boots will not be on the ground" as part of any potential peacekeeping mission.

The President also said in the interview that he is optimistic that a deal can be reached to end the

(Contd on page 5)

