

DAMASCUS/ISTANBUL (Dispatches) – Armed Druze factions and Arab tribes in Syria's southern Sweida province exchanged prisoners, officials said, in a move coordinated by the Syrian Arab Red Crescent and the Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham.

The exchange took place in the town of Al-Mtoneh, where 34 Arab tribesmen were released in return for two Druze detainees held since clashes erupted last July. Sweida has observed a ceasefire since July 19, following a week of fighting between Druze groups and Bedouin tribes amid Israeli military incursion in the area.

He is the wisest and the most knowing man who advises people not to lose hope and faith in the Mercy of Allah and not to be too sure and over-confident of immunity from His Wrath and Punishment.

Amir al-Momeneen Ali (AS)

# Trump Names Pot Shop Owner as Iraq Envoy, Citing Loyalty

WASHINGTON (Dispatches) – U.S. President Donald Trump has once again appointed a key supporter from his 2024 campaign to a major government role, naming Mark Savaya—a Detroit businessman and marijuana dispensary owner—as his new special envoy to Iraq.

The announcement came directly from Trump's Truth Social page, where he praised Savaya's "deep understanding of the Iraq-U.S. relationship, and his connections in the region," claims that stand in stark contrast to Savaya's actual background.

Savaya, according to his own LinkedIn and public information, has no prior experience in government or diplomacy. He is best known as the founder of Leaf and Bud, a chain of cannabis dispensaries in Detroit notorious for aggressive billboard advertising, including signs along 8 Mile Road that prompted local authorities to pass restrictive ordinances.

The company has recently closed some locations, and Savaya's name and products have been quietly removed from the website, raising questions about the stability of his business ventures.

Trump, however, touted Savaya as "a key player in my campaign in Michigan," where he said Savaya helped secure "a record vote with Muslim Americans."

This openly political justification



Newly appointed U.S. Special Envoy to Iraq Mark Savaya (left) poses for a picture next to U.S. President Donald Trump.

for a diplomatic appointment appears to be a clear case of cronyism, appointing loyal supporters regardless of their qualifications to critical government roles.

Savaya himself expressed his gratitude, saying on Instagram he is "deeply humbled, honored and grateful to President Donald J. Trump" and "committed to strengthening the U.S.-Iraq partnership under President Trump's leadership and guidance."

But his lack of experience in foreign policy and diplomacy casts serious doubts on his ability to fulfill the responsibilities of envoy to a volatile region.

The controversy surrounding this

appointment is further compounded by Trump's recent remarks at the Sharm el-Sheikh ceasefire talks, where he greeted and introduced Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammed Shia al-Sudani.

In an unusual and repeated emphasis, Trump described his country as one "with so much oil it does not know what to do with it. That is a big problem if you have so much oil you don't know what to do with it."

And with this aperçu, Sudani was dispatched, highlighting the country's resource wealth above its political or humanitarian situation in the eyes of the United States.

This framing reduces Iraq to little

more than an oil supplier and sends a transactional message about U.S. interests.

By focusing on plenty of oil, Trump appeared to overlook the urgent need for peace, stability, and respect for Iraq's sovereignty. The remarks drew criticism for seeming tone-deaf during a critical diplomatic moment meant to promote ceasefire and reconciliation.

Trump's contradictory stance on drug policy also looms over this story. While publicly opposing drug use, he supported marijuana legalization in Florida's 2024 ballot measure.

At the same time, he has called for executions of drug traffickers and authorized controversial military strikes against drug-smuggling vessels in the Caribbean—actions condemned by critics as illegal under international law.

Taken together, these actions paint a troubling picture of Trump's approach to Iraq: appointing an unqualified cannabis businessman as special envoy and publicly framing the country primarily through its oil resources show a pattern of prioritizing political loyalty and economic interests over genuine diplomatic engagement and respect for complex international realities.

Critics argue these moves undermine U.S. credibility and risk further destabilizing a region in desperate need of thoughtful leadership.

## With Al-Qaeda Affiliate in Power, U.S. Envoy Says Syria 'Back to Our Side'

DAMASCUS (Dispatches) – The U.S. envoy to Syria, Tom Barrack, has declared that Syria is "back to our side" following reports of a joint operation targeting an alleged Daesh operative near Damascus.

However, the claim has sparked skepticism as the area is under the control of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), an extremist group affiliated with Al-Qaeda and Daesh, which now governs Damascus.

U.S. special forces allegedly conducted a helicopter-borne raid in Dumayr, northwest of Damascus, to detain Ahmed Abdullah al-Badri, an alleged Daesh member. Kurdish-Syrian journalist Scharo Maroof revealed that Badri lived openly in Dumayr and had close ties with HTS officials, including hosting Damascus governor Muhammad Amer at his home in September.

HTS, led by Abu Muhammad al-Jolani—a former U.S. detainee who was later released—seized control of Damascus last December after overthrowing Bashar al-Assad. The group is designated a terrorist organization by the United States and several other countries.

Since assuming power, HTS has

been accused of staging fake raids against Daesh and orchestrating terror attacks to consolidate control and attract international support. One such incident was the suicide bombing at the Mar Elias Church in Damascus in June that killed 25 worshippers and injured dozens. Investigations later implicated HTS's general security service, although Daesh was initially blamed.

Saleh al-Hamwi, a former Nusra Front founder, stated on social media that HTS uses the Daesh threat to gain international backing and secure sanctions relief, while releasing Dash prisoners to maintain ongoing instability.

The United States and Israel have long supported extremist groups in Syria, including Al-Qaeda affiliates, through covert operations such as the CIA's Timber Sycamore program, aimed at toppling Assad's government.

Barrack's announcement of a renewed U.S.-HTS alliance has drawn criticism for ignoring the takfiri regime's extremist roots. Analysts warn that Washington's cooperation with HTS complicates efforts for peace and stability in the region.

## Not Really Serious, U.S. Envoys Rebuke Israeli Strikes on Qatar

ISTANBUL — Jared Kushner and U.S. envoy Steve Witkoff expressed frustration over Israel's missile strike in September on a Hamas negotiation compound in Doha, Qatar, describing it as a setback to ceasefire talks.

However, their response appeared more symbolic than substantive, reflecting Kushner's well-known close ties to Israel and Persian Gulf Arab states and a desire to preserve regional alliances rather than seriously challenge Israeli military actions.

The strike targeted a compound housing Hamas negotiators during sensitive peace efforts led by the United States and Qatar. The attack forced Hamas representatives to go underground, severely damaging trust with Qatar — a key intermediary in the Gaza ceasefire negotiations.

Kushner, former senior adviser to President Donald Trump and his son-in-law, described the strike as "not a smart strategic move" that "violated a lot of the trust we felt we deserved from the Israeli side." Witkoff called the attack a line-crossing event that "had a metastasizing effect" on talks.

Yet analysts argue Kushner's criticism was a mere slap on the wrist, designed to maintain his standing with both Israel and Arab states rather than hold Israel accountable.

Kushner's business and politi-

cal relationships with Israeli officials and Persian Gulf leaders, including Saudi Arabia, have long fueled skepticism about the impartiality of U.S. mediation in the region. His cautious comments serve more to manage diplomatic optics than to confront the reality of Israeli military aggression.

Following the strike, Kushner said Trump personally pushed Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu to apologize to Qatar's leadership. The apology was hailed as "pivotal" to resuming negotiations, but it underscored the U.S.'s limited leverage and the Israeli regime's unchecked use of force during peace efforts.

Kushner emphasized that U.S. strategy relies on "trust and pragmatic realism," a phrase critics say downplays the severity of Israeli actions and the imbalanced power dynamics between Israel and Palestinians.

The strike and the U.S. response reveal the fragility of Washington's mediation efforts, hindered by envoys who maintain strong ties with Israeli and Persian Gulf powers.

The incident raises persistent questions about whether U.S. diplomacy under figures like Kushner can genuinely serve as a neutral mediator or whether it primarily safeguards the interests of Israel and its Arab allies, undermining prospects for an equitable peace in the region.

## Afghanistan-Pakistan Ceasefire Brings Relief But Trade Paralyzed

SPIN BOLDAK, Afghanistan (AFP) – After a week of violence, residents on the frontier between Afghanistan and Pakistan are hoping a new ceasefire deal will end the clashes and revive crucial cross-border trade.

While the crossings remain closed, life has regained a semblance of normality, with bakers kneading bread, fruit and vegetable sellers wheeling out their carts, and customers frequenting shops.

"People can breathe and feel relieved. (But) before that, gunfire damaged a few houses in our village," said Sadiq Shah, 56, a shopkeeper from Baizai on the Pakistani side.

Fighting between Afghanistan and Pakistan broke out after explosions in Kabul on October 9.

The Taliban government blamed the blasts on its neighbor and launched a

retaliatory border offensive, prompting Islamabad to vow a strong response.

After further clashes left soldiers and civilians dead, the two sides declared an initial 48-hour ceasefire on Wednesday.

New Pakistani strikes hit Afghanistan on Friday, with Islamabad saying it was targeting armed groups that the Taliban harbor and allow to launch attacks on Pakistani territory -- a claim that Kabul denies.

The two sides approved a second ceasefire on Sunday, to the relief of many along the border.

"It's incredible: both sides are Muslim, (ethnic) Pashtuns, so why fight?" said Shah. "Previously, trade with Afghanistan went through here, and now we're shooting at each other. What country does that?"

The border only opened temporarily

this week to admit Afghan migrants expelled by Pakistan under a campaign that it launched back in 2023.

In the Pakistani town of Torkham, a normally busy crossing point into the Afghan province of Nangarhar, stranded drivers bought tea from a vendor as they waited in colorful trucks.

More than 1,500 trucks, trailers and containers carrying cement, medicines, rice and other basic goods are waiting in Torkham, according to a senior Pakistani customs official in nearby Peshawar.

Abdul Rahman Habib, spokesman for the Taliban's economy ministry, said fruit and vegetables were rotting as they awaited export to Pakistan.

"Businessmen are losing money," he said, without giving an estimate of the damages.

Habib warned that if this situation per-

sisted, "it could increase prices and unemployment, and destabilize markets".

"Trade relations should be separate from political issues," he told AFP.

Niaz Muhammad Akhund, a 39-year-old car salesman in Spin Boldak, an Afghan town where fighting flared last week, said "people here are very happy with the ceasefire".

"(They) have no farmland or other source of income -- everyone depends on cross-border trade, on both sides," he said.

Nematullah, a 24-year-old vendor, also told AFP he hoped "this problem won't resurface".

Across the road on the Pakistani side, market worker Imran Khan called on the two countries to establish a "mechanism to end these conflicts and to start treating each other like brothers".

## Iraq's Water Crisis in Focus as Turkish Delegation Visits for Talks

BAGHDAD (Dispatches) – A senior Turkish delegation is set to visit Baghdad in the coming days to negotiate water sharing and oil export issues amid an escalating water crisis in Iraq, Kurdish news agency Shafaq reported.

The talks aim to establish a legal framework governing shared resources as Iraq grapples with severe drought and shrinking water supplies.

The delegation will include high-ranking Turkish officials and is expected to discuss Iraq's water quota from Turkey, oil export agreements through Turkey's Ceyhan port, and efforts to raise export ceilings.

The visit follows an Iraqi delegation's trip to Ankara earlier this month, led by Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Fuad Hussein, to discuss water management and deepen bilateral cooperation.

Iraq is facing one of its worst droughts in nearly a century, with water reserves drastically re-

duced due to climate change, declining rainfall, and upstream dam projects by Turkey and Iran on the Tigris and Euphrates rivers.

The Turkish government's control over critical water flows has increasingly been viewed in Baghdad as a tool of political leverage, aggravating Iraq's environmental and humanitarian challenges.

Water shortages threaten Iraq's agriculture, which has lost nearly 30% of arable land over the last 30 years due to shifting climate patterns, exacerbating rural livelihoods and food security.

The water crisis also compounds wider development challenges. The World Bank warned in 2022 that Iraq faces a "climate emergency" requiring \$233 billion in green investments by 2040 to avoid further socio-economic decline.

Oil exports through Turkey's Ceyhan terminal represent a vital economic lifeline for Baghdad, accounting for a significant share of Iraq's crude exports.

Iraqi officials are leveraging oil export terms to pressure Ankara for legally binding guarantees on water flows. The government aims to formalize cooperation to prevent unilateral Turkish water policies that have worsened Iraq's drought.

Negotiators from both sides are under pressure to deliver a durable agreement balancing economic interests with urgent environmental survival.

Observers say the talks reflect the complex interplay of water scarcity, geopolitical leverage, and economic dependency shaping Iraq-Turkey relations.

Whether the upcoming visit leads to a binding legal framework for sustainable water management or becomes another chapter in a fraught and protracted dispute remains uncertain.

The outcome will have major implications for Iraq's future stability and resource security.