

MIDDLEEASTLIVE BLOGGING THE UPRISINGS IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA



Syria receiving Iranian arms 'almost daily' via Iraq - live updates

Live • Report details arms deliveries over Iraqi airspace

- Helicopter crashes near Damascus - state TV
• Friends of Syria meeting in The Hague
• French institutions on alert over Muhammad cartoons

• Read the latest summary

Matthew Weaver and Brian Whitaker guardian.co.uk, Thursday 20 September 2012 11.07 EDT



Iranian Revolutionary Guards march during a parade ceremony. An intelligence report claims planes are flying from Iran to Syria via Iraq carrying Revolutionary Guards and weapons. Photograph: Vahid Salemi/AP

Live Sort by: Latest first Oldest first Auto update: On Off

1h 8m ago

Detail of petrol station attack in al-Raqqah

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights says the petrol station attack (see footage earlier) occurred in Ein Issa village, on the main road to al Raqqah.

It reported that 110 people were either killed or wounded.

"Lawyers and activists" blamed aerial bombardment. It's account cannot be independently verified.

AP says Ein Issa is about 25 miles from the Turkish border. It gives the death toll as at least 30 people, citing activists.

The attack comes after a battle for control of nearby border point at Tal Abyad. Turkish officials said the Free Syrian Army rebels took full control of the crossing yesterday after clashes with Syrian troops, but there was speculation that Kurdish activists were also involved in the battle.

View petrol station attack in a larger map

Updated 44m ago

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1h 15m ago

### Residents say 13 dead in al-Bab

Aircraft hit a residential area in al-Bab (Aleppo province) at 4pm today, residents say. Our colleague Mona Mahmood spoke via Skype to one resident who gave his name as Izzedine.

They committed a massacre by killing 13 civilians and wounding more than 32 people. Some of the bodies are still under the rubble, people are trying to get them out. A family in a single house were killed together – seven of them killed and two others wounded. They are from al-Mashhoud family.

They dropped a few barrels with TNT explosives. Many houses were levelled completely. There used to be more than 150,000 people living in the town but most of them fled to Turkey owing to the daily shelling by the Syrian army.

We have more than 6,000 fighters with FSA but most of them went to Aleppo. A few of them are left here at the entrance of the town.

Every time the Syrian army sustains a defeat in Aleppo, they come to hit al-Bab. All the strikes are by warplanes as the town is liberated and we do not have any Syrian soldiers [here].

Updated 1h ago

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1h 48m ago

### Red Cross warning on Syrian refugees in Jordan

Tens of thousands of Syrians refugees in Jordan are struggling to cope outside refugee camps and they face a bleak winter without more international aid, the Red Cross has warned.

A “drastic” increase in those fleeing the violence in the last two month is putting a strain on Jordan’s public services and has create an acute shortage of accommodation, it said.

Richard Casagrande, an aid worker with the organisation, said more than 130,000 Syrians, who are trying to survive in Jordan outside refugee camps, represented a hidden side to a growing humanitarian crisis.

He is part of a Red Cross team that has been working with the Jordanian Red Crescent to help Syrian refugees find homes, medicine and food.

Speaking to the Guardian from the Jordanian capital, Amman, he said:

We are dealing with something of a hidden problem because the majority of the [Syrian] refugees are living in communities across Jordan. So this is quite a different problem than the high-profile issue of the refugee camp in the north of Jordan, which is getting a lot of attention.

These refugee families [outside camps] are trying to find accommodation and just to get by. They have very few, if any, resources or limited ability to generate an income. What we see are many families who unable to pay their rent - rents having increased significantly in many areas. Adequate accommodation is becoming very hard to find ....

We are investigating the possibility of providing cash transfers to the most vulnerable families to help them to pay for their rent, to buy medicine, to buy uniforms and transportation costs to get children to school. We are also looking to provide needed items for winter such as blankets, mattresses, etc.

We also see a lot of need for psychological support for refugees after the experiences they have witnessed in Syria.

It is a difficult situation for many of them, because they are not sure how they are going to survive over the coming months and they are mostly relying on aid.

A lot of them have survived conflict. They have suffered a loss of family members. You see a large number of women and children here, who have either husbands, brothers or sons who are back in Syria engaged in the conflict. There are a number of men here who have survived torture, or have been injured in the conflict.

With no end in sight to the fighting, the humanitarian crisis is likely to get worse over the next six month, Casagrande warned.

No one is expecting the situation in Syria to improve in the near future. People are not going to be able to return in the short term. So their focus is on finding a way in which they are going to be able to survive here in the

●● coming months.

It clear that without additional support from the international community many of them are not going to meet their basic needs.

Asked about possible tensions between Jordanians and Syrians, Casagrande said Jordan had been largely welcoming to refugees.

●● With the spike in numbers the public systems and infrastructure just aren't able to cope with these huge numbers. And we are starting to see tensions between the two communities especially in the north. But by and large the relationship is pretty good.

play audio

pause audio

## [Tens of thousands of Syrian refugees in Jordan face a bleak winter without more international aid, Red Cross warns](#)

The [British Red Cross](#) is renewing its appeal for help to those fleeing the violence in [Syria](#).



Syrian refugee children in Jordan. More than 180,000 people have fled to Syria, but only 30,000 are being accommodated in a refugee camp, according to the Red Cross Photograph: Red Cross

Updated 1h 26m ago

2h 9m ago

### [Airstrike kills 54, say activists](#)

At least 54 people have been killed by an airstrike that hit a petrol station in al-Raqqa province of Syria, Reuters reports citing activists.

**Update:** The video below, posted n YouTube, is said to show the aftermath of the attack.

Updated 1h 45m ago

2h 27m ago

### [Islamist fighters cooperate in Aleppo](#)

There are signs of increased cooperation among Islamist fighting groups in Aleppo. Our colleague Mona Mahmood has been talking via Skype to a spokesman for the Ahrar al-Sham brigades who told her: "We are working to unify all the Islamic brigades in Syria."

The spokesman, who gave his name as Abu Abdulrahman al-Souri, described a joint operation with the Jabhat al-Nusra brigade last weekend.

●● After thorough consultations with defected officers who were working in the scientific research centre's compound in New Aleppo neighbourhood, we learned that all the plans for conducting significant operations for the Syrian regime are prepared in that compound.

We wanted to know what the regime plans for the future and what sort of weapons it might use in the coming days.

More than 175 fighters of al-Shahaba brigade [the Ahrar al-Sham brigade in Aleppo] and Jabhat Al-Nusra brigade and FSA men armed with light weapons such as Kalashnikovs and RPGs cordoned off the compound for eight hours. A heavy battle broke out between our men and the Syrian army who were inside the compound. Reinforcements arrived to stop our storming of the compound, but they did not succeed.

We were able to storm the building and confiscate a lot of weapons belonging to the Syrian army such as RPGs, guns and ammunition. We found Iranian documents inside the compound and we will publish them soon.

●● We stayed in the compound for six hours and then left after the warplanes began to arrive – we did not want the whole area to be bombed by the Syrian army.

The Ahrar al-Sham brigades and Jabhat al-Nusr were two of 12 Islamist organisations featured in a new study of Syrian Jihadism [by the Swedish Institute for International Affairs](#).

On Monday, Press TV reported that Syrian troops [repelled an attack](#) on the centre by armed groups, "inflicting heavy losses on them". Abu Abdulrahman al-Souri continued:

●● Ahrar al-Sham brigades were able to kill more than 50 Syrian soldiers and took another 23 as prisoners. We lost six martyrs and a few of our men were wounded. We will set up a fair trial for the 23 prisoners ... The sentence will be according to the crime, if he is a killer, he will be killed.

On Monday, Human Rights Watch [expressed alarm](#) about exactly the kind of language used by Ahrar el-Sham's spokesman regarding the trial of prisoners.

Researcher Olle Solvang, who documented human rights abuses by rebels in Aleppo told the Guardian some rebel commanders appeared to condone extrajudicial killings. "They felt those who killed should be killed, and tried to justify executions by saying only the worst criminals were executed," Solvang said.

Updated 1h 24m ago

3h 42m ago

### Crashed helicopter 'collided with passenger plane'

A flash from Reuters:

The Syrian government says the crashed military helicopter ([see earlier post](#)) hit a passenger plane with 200 people on board but the plane landed safely at Damascus airport.

4h 12m ago

### Syria conference in London

There's a one-day [conference on Syria](#) at the London School of Economics today. Ian Black, the Guardian's Middle East editor, is there and we're hoping to hear from him later.

In the meantime, there are some interesting tweets under the [#lseyria](#) hashtag.

The screenshot shows five tweets from the #lseyria hashtag. Each tweet includes a profile picture, the user's name and handle, the text of the tweet, and the date (20 Sep 12). The tweets are as follows:

- Nadim Shehadi** (@Confusezeus): #lseyria Armanazi: Assad more comfortable with violence of today than with the political opposition he confronted last year.
- Tam Hussein** (@tamhussein): Should we be more concerned about wasta and such in Syria before even establishing democracy? [ow.ly/dQIV4](http://ow.ly/dQIV4) #lseyria
- Sarah** (@EssJay\_Bee): Suheir Atassi: "Syria was not a country. Syria was a business for a mafia" #LSEsyria
- James Denselow** (@jamesdenselow): #lseyria Ghayth Armanazi - "#Syria is the location of a clash between the Arab Spring and the Middle East's regional geopolitics"
- LSE Middle East** (@LSEMiddleEast): @MadawiDr asks @suheiratassi how does opposition feel about contradiction that Arab dictatorships like Saudi are sponsoring them? #lseyria

Updated 3h 54m ago

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4h 18m ago

**Summary**

Here's a summary of the latest developments:

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**Syria**

- **A helicopter has come down near Damascus after reports of heavy aerial bombardment of the city.** State media claimed the helicopter crashed in Douma, a north-eastern suburb. Activists said it was shot down by rebels.
- **Almost every day Iran has been using civilian aircraft to fly military personnel and large quantities of weapons across Iraqi airspace to help Syria crush the uprising, according to a western intelligence report seen by Reuters.** An Iraqi minister denied the report, saying "nothing like this is happening"
- **The United Nations says it is investigating reports that Syrian government forces have targeted children in the conflict.** Syria's ambassador to the UN, [Bashar Ja'afari dismissed the reports as propaganda.](#)
- **President Bashar al-Assad has told the Iranian foreign minister, Ali Akbar Salehi, that the war engulfing his country threatens not just Syria, but also Iran and Lebanon's Hezbollah, Radio Free Europe reports.** Salehi called for countries in the region "that can play a role" to get involved and act as "one big regional family of nations" over the Syria crisis.
- **The Friends of Syria group is meeting in the Netherlands to discuss new sanctions against the Assad regime.** Dutch foreign minister, Uri Rosenthal, said sanctions against the regime would help drive Assad from office.

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**Libya**

- **Police in Benghazi are refusing to serve under the city's new security chief who replaced official sacked after week's attack on the US consulate.** Colonel Salah Doghman told the Libya Herald: "When you go to police headquarters, you will find there are no police. The people in charge are not at their desks."

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**Tunisia**

- **The ruling Islamist party Ennahda says Muslims have the right to protest "in a peaceful and civilised manner" against cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad published by in a French magazine.** But in statement Ennahda also urged people not to fall in a "trap" that aims to create conflict between the west and Arab Spring countries.

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**Anti-Islam film**

- **An actor who starred in the anti-Islamic video which triggered violent protests last week is to seek a court order compelling YouTube to remove the video.** Cindy Lee Garcia, who appeared as a lover of the prophet Muhammad in the online trailer, is suing the video's maker as well as Google, which owns YouTube, claiming she was duped into working on the film and that her life has been threatened.

Updated 3h 24m ago

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4h 39m ago

**UN investigating attacks on children in Syria**

The [United Nations](#) is investigating reports that Syrian government forces targeted children in the conflict, AFP reports.

Speaking at the UN security council, Leila Zerrougui, the new UN special representative on children in conflict, also raised the issue of child soldiers fighting with rebel forces. She said:

 We have received information concerning indiscriminate bomb attacks which have killed children in Damascus and other areas, and continue to document incidents committed by armed actors, such as the Syrian Free Army, who may have children associated with their forces.

Syria's ambassador to the UN, [Bashar Ja'afari dismissed as a propaganda](#), a report by Unicef claiming that children are being targeted by government forces. Ja'afari said rebel forces were responsible, al-Jazeera reports.

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5h 33m ago

**Regime says 100 Afghans killed in Aleppo**

Syrian government forces are claiming to have killed "more than 100 Afghan terrorists" today during "a qualitative operation" in Bustan al-Qasr district of Aleppo.

The official news agency, Sana, says the Afghans were stationed near al-Fidaa al-Arabi school.

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5h 48m ago

### Downing of helicopter - activist's account

An activist in Damascus has insisted that the helicopter was shot down by rebels after a night of heavy aerial bombardment.

Susan Ahmad, a spokeswoman for the Revolutionary Command Council for Damascus and its suburbs, denied state media reports that the helicopter had simply crashed over Douma.

Speaking to the Guardian via Skype, she said:

☞☞ This morning at 9.30am the Free Syrian Army manage to shoot down a helicopter. But until now there is no brigade that has claimed responsibility for this operation ...

I can't confirm that 100%. This is what I got to know from eye witnesses in the area. It is not a guess. They say that the helicopter was hovering over the area when members of the Free Syrian Army targeted the helicopter using light weapons. They managed to shoot it down.

The helicopter came down in Tel al-Kurdi on the outskirts of Douma. We hope that we can get pictures and videos in the coming hours, after the Free Syrian Army claims responsibility.

Ahmad said the incident came after a night of heavy bombardment:

☞☞ It was a very bad night. Helicopters and MiG warplanes didn't stop. They were hovering over Damascus all the night.

They were bombarding the southern part of Damascus.

It is common to hear the sound of explosions inside Damascus every minute, she claimed.

☞☞ People are trying not to leave their homes unless they really need to, because they don't feel safe any more.

play audio

pause audio

## [Damascus activist says Syrian helicopter was shot down in Tal al-Kurdi, Douma after night of heavy bombardment](#)

Updated 5h 7m ago

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5h 56m ago

### Official report of Syria-Iran talks

The Syrian government news agency, Sana, has published [an account](#) of President Assad's meeting yesterday with Ali Akbar Salehi, the Iranian foreign minister.

☞☞ President Bashar al-Assad said Syria has shown openness to all the initiatives that were put forth to solve the crisis in Syria, indicating that the key to the success of any initiative hinges on the good intentions to help Syria ...

President al-Assad underlined the importance that all initiatives be built on correct bases that respect the Syrian sovereignty, the Syrian people's free decision and rejecting foreign interference.

President al-Assad stressed that the current battle targets resistance as a whole, not only Syria.

The talks, which were held in a highly positive and important atmosphere, discussed bolstering mutual cooperation in all fields as to enable the people of the two countries to smooth over the difficulties posed by the unjust unilateral sanctions that are aimed to break their will and subjugate them to serve Western and Israeli interests.

The two sides also discussed the latest developments of the Syrian crisis, with emphasis put on the continual work and coordinating mutual efforts to end the crisis. President al-Assad conveyed to the Iranian minister the appreciation of the Syrian people for the Iranian good offices in this regard.

President al-Assad congratulated the Iranian side on the remarkable diplomatic and political performance at the Non-Aligned Movement

## Summit.

For his part, Salehi expressed his country's boundless support to the Syrian government's efforts to restore security and stability in the wake of the monumental reforms in which it responded to the public demands at the outset of the crisis.

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6h 48m ago

### **Tunisian call for 'civilised' protests**

The Islamist Ennahda party which heads Tunisia's government says Muslims have the right to protest "in a peaceful and civilised manner" against cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad published by the French satirical magazine Charlie Hebdo, [Tunisia Live reports](#).

But Ennahda also urged people not to fall in a "trap" that aims to create conflict between the west and Arab Spring countries: "Muslims, be aware not to be driven by enemies of Islam to a war among yourselves or to link your religion with terrorism."

Updated 6h 28m ago

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6h 59m ago

### **Benghazi police 'reject new chief'**

Police in Benghazi are refusing to serve under the city's new security chief who has been appointed following last week's attack on the US consulate, the Libya Herald reports.

Hussein Ahmedia, Benghazi's chief of police, and Wanis al-Sharif, the deputy minister with responsibility for eastern Libya, were both sacked over their handling of the affair and replaced by Colonel Salah Doghman.

Doghman, who says he was directly appointed by the interior minister, is quoted as saying:

"When you go to police headquarters, you will find there are no police. The people in charge are not at their desks. They have refused to let me take up my job."

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7h 20m ago

### **Activists claim rebels shot down helicopter**

The British-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights claims the helicopter was shot down in the Tel al-Kurdi area near Douma - north-east of Damascus.

Explosions were heard in Douma, where state TV reported that a helicopter crashed.

In a Facebook update, the Observatory said activists from the area said the helicopter was shot down by rebel fire.

Updated 6h 52m ago

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7h 36m ago

### **Iraq denies it is allowing Iranian weapons to reach Syria**

Iraq has challenged the findings of that western intelligence report by denying that Iranian aircraft have flown over its airspace to supply weapons and soldiers to Syria.

Lieutenant-General Hussein Kamal, Iraq's deputy interior minister for intelligence, told Reuters:

 The official spokesman of the Iraqi government has denied that issue altogether. There is nothing like this happening.

Earlier this week, the commander of Iran's Revolutionary Guards, Major General Mohammad Ali Jafari, admitted the presence of his men in Syria. But he claimed this did not amount to a military presence in Syria.

On Wednesday the US Treasury issued a list of a list of 117 Iranian-operated aircraft which it deems to be "blocked property".

Treasury under secretary David Cohen said:

 The identification of Iranian aircraft also further highlights Iran's ongoing effort to support the Assad regime's WMD programs and crackdown against the Syrian people.

Updated 7h 2m ago

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7h 49m ago

### **Helicopter crashes near Damascus.**

A military helicopter has crashed near the capital, Damascus, AP reports citing Syria state TV.

 The report said the helicopter went down Thursday south-east of Douma, a Damascus suburb. There were no further details.

- The government increasingly has been using helicopters and other aircraft in its fight against an 18-month-old rebellion. Rebels claim to have shot down helicopters in the past, although the regime has blamed the problems on mechanical difficulties.

Activists named seven people it claimed were killed in Douma on Wednesday. An opposition [Facebook group in Douma](#), which carries graphic videos of the victims, said:

- Regime forces continued to launch shelling attacks on residential areas, triggering massive explosions in several different locations while military helicopters hovered over the city.

Updated 7h 27m ago

8h 1m ago

### Summary

Welcome to Middle East Live. Here's a summary of the latest developments:

#### Syria

- **Almost every day Iran has been using civilian aircraft to fly military personnel and large quantities of weapons across Iraqi airspace to help Syria crush the uprising, according to a western intelligence report seen by Reuters.** It quotes the document as saying:

- Planes are flying from Iran to Syria via Iraq on an almost daily basis, carrying IRGC (Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps) personnel and tens of tonnes of weapons to arm the Syrian security forces and militias fighting against the rebels ...

This is part of a revised Iranian modus operandi that US officials have only recently addressed publicly, following previous statements to the contrary ... It also flies in the face of declarations by Iraqi officials.

[Iran was also] continuing to assist the regime in Damascus by sending trucks overland via Iraq.

- **John Kerry, chairman of the US Senate's foreign relations committee, has warned Iraq that the US could withdraw aid unless it stops allowing Iran to transport weapons to Syria.** The New York Times quoted him saying: "It just seems completely inappropriate that we're trying to help build their democracy, support them, put American lives on the line, money into the country, and they're working against our interest so overtly."

- **President Bashar al-Assad has told the Iranian foreign minister, Ali Akbar Salehi, that the war engulfing his country threatens not just Syria, but also Iran and Lebanon's Hezbollah, Radio Free Europe reports.** Salehi called for countries in the region "that can play a role" to get involved and act as "one big regional family of nations" over the Syria crisis.

- **The Friends of Syria group is meeting in the Netherlands to discuss new sanctions against the Assad regime, the BBC reports.** Financial experts and diplomats are to meet in the Hague to find ways to close loopholes and make existing sanctions more effective, it says.

#### French Muhammad cartoons

- **French embassies and schools around the world have been put on high alert in fear of a backlash after a magazine published cartoons mocking the prophet Muhammad and Muslims.** Paris has ordered special security measures at official buildings, including diplomatic and consular representations, and instructed those in 20 particularly sensitive countries to close on Friday, the Islamic prayer day.

#### Anti-Islam film

- **An actor who starred in the anti-Islamic video which triggered violent protests last week is to seek a court order compelling YouTube to remove the video.** Cindy Lee Garcia, who appeared as a lover of the prophet Muhammad in the online trailer, is suing the video's maker as well as Google, which owns YouTube, claiming she was duped into working on the film and that her life has been threatened.
- **The Guardian's data team has put together a timeline of every violent protest over the film.** It includes maps, details and, in many cases, photographs of more than 30 incidents.

Updated 6h 59m ago

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