

African Union to host Libya 'reconciliation' conference

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TUNIS: The African Union will host a "reconciliation" conference in July aimed at uniting Libya's political rivals, AU commission chief Moussa Faki said late Saturday.

"It's an opportunity for the Libyans," Faki said during a press conference in Tunis, on the sidelines of an Arab League summit in the Tunisian capital. Announcement of the July talks in Addis Ababa followed a meeting on Libya which included Faki, UN chief Antonio Guterres and the EU's top diplomat Federica Mogherini.

"It's high time that the (political) actors discuss the fate of their country," Faki said.

Libya has been mired in chaos since the 2011 ouster of dictator Muammar Qaddafi and a series of international efforts have so far failed to unite the country.

The United Nations is due to hold another conference next month in the central Libyan city of Ghadames, which is aimed at drawing up a "roadmap" to lead to elections.

Between 120 and 150 delegates are expected to attend the forum from April 14-16, UN envoy Ghassan Salame said earlier this month.

The UN backs a Government of National Accord in the capital Tripoli, while a rival administration in the east is supported by Khalifa Haftar and his self-styled Libyan National Army.

Reaching a lasting accord is seen as vital for creating stability in the country, as well as getting the economy back on track.



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Libya holds municipal elections in first vote for five years
Ship hijacked near Libya by migrants rescued at sea

[Pope urges Catholics in Morocco to dialogue, not proselytize](#)

Author:

By NICOLE WINFIELD and AMIRA EL MASAITI | AP

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Sun, 2019-03-31 11:49

RABAT: Pope Francis sought to encourage greater Christian-Muslim dialogue on Sunday, telling his flock that showing the country's Muslim majority they are

part of the same human family will help stamp out extremism. On his second and final day in Morocco, Francis told Catholic priests and sisters that even though they are few in number, they shouldn't seek to convert others but rather engage in dialogue and charity. "In this way, you will unmask and lay bare every attempt to exploit differences and ignorance in order to sow fear, hatred and conflict," he said. "For we know that fear and hatred, nurtured and manipulated, destabilize our communities and leave them spiritually defenseless." Francis has stressed a message of Christian-Muslim fraternity during his first trip to Morocco, a majority Muslim nation of 36 million. Proselytism is a prominent issue in religious discourse in the north African country, even though Christians, Muslims and Jews have coexisted peacefully here for centuries.



Pope Francis (R) blesses worshipers during a visit to the St Peter's Roman Catholic Cathedral in Rabat on March 31, 2019 . (AFP/Vatican Media)

After reaching out to the Sunni majority and Morocco's ever growing community of migrants from countries in sub-Saharan Africa on Saturday, Francis turned his attention Sunday to Christian minorities. His aim was to highlight their constructive presence in Moroccan life.

Francis visited a social center run by Catholic religious sisters that serves a poor Muslim community south of the capital, Rabat, with medical, educational and vocational services. The Temara center operates a pre-school, treats burn victims, trains women in tailoring and provides meals for 150 children a day.

Catholic catechism isn't taught at the pre-school.

"Their teachers are all Muslims and speak in Arabic and they prepare them on Muslim religion," said sister Gloria Carrillero. "We did not come here with the purpose of doing proselytism. We came here just to help."



Pope Francis meets children during a meeting with representatives of other Christian denominations at Saint Peter's Cathedral in Rabat, Morocco, March 31, 2019. (Vatican Media/Reuters)

Catholics represent less than 1 percent of Morocco's population and most are foreign-born migrants. Morocco also has between 2,000 and 6,000 homegrown converts to Christianity who are obliged to practice their faith privately because Morocco prohibits Muslim conversions.

These Moroccan converts often celebrate Masses in their homes and hide their religious affiliations for fear of prosecution and arrest. Yet many flocked to Francis' afternoon Mass in a Rabat sports stadium with the hope the pope's visit would compel Moroccan authorities to be more tolerant of religious diversity.

"With this visit, we want to tell the pope and the Moroccan society that we are proud to be Christians," said Moroccan Christian Adam Rbati, who was attending the Mass with his Christian wife and newborn son. "It might not change much, but it will certainly create the space for future positive change."

Francis touched on the issue of religious freedom in his opening speech to King Mohammed VI on Saturday, urging Morocco to move beyond just freedom of worship to true respect for an individual's faith.



Pope Francis blesses a child upon his arrival for a visit to the Rural Center for Social Services at Temara, south of Rabat, on March 31, 2019.
(AFP/Vatican Media)

“That is why freedom of conscience and religious freedom – which is not limited to freedom of worship alone, but allows all to live in accordance with their religious convictions – are inseparably linked to human dignity,” he said.

In a speech to Catholic priests in the city cathedral Sunday, Francis drew applause when he told them they should not proselytize. The church grows, he said, when people are attracted to its message, witness its charity and engage in dialogue as part of a human family.

He called for prayer “in the name of this fraternity, torn apart by the policies of extremism and division, by systems of unrestrained profit or by hateful ideological tendencies, that manipulate the actions and the future of men and women.”







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King Salman: We reject move to undermine Syrian sovereignty of Golan Heights

Sun, 2019-03-31 13:20

TUNIS: Any moves to undermine Syria's sovereignty over the Golan Heights should be rejected, Saudi Arabia's King Salman told the Arab League summit on Sunday.

US President Donald Trump last week signed a proclamation recognizing the Golan as Israeli, less than four months after saying Jerusalem is Israel's capital.

King Salman said at the Arab League summit in Tunis that he absolutely rejects any measures that impact on Syrian sovereignty over the Golan Heights.



"We reaffirm our absolute rejection of any measures that encroach upon Syrian sovereignty over the Golan, and we stress the importance of reaching a political solution to the Syrian crisis that will guarantee Syria's security, unity and sovereignty and prevent foreign intervention."

He also reiterated Saudi Arabia's position supporting the establishment of a Palestinian state in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, with East Jerusalem as its capital. He said the Palestinian issue was a top priority for Saudi Arabia.



Tunisian President Beji Caïd Essebsi said that the Golan Heights is occupied Arab land, and rejected the US decision over sovereignty of territory.

Arab League Secretary-General Ahmed Aboul Gheit said that the US decision is contrary to all international conventions.

He also said that Iran and Turkey have "worsened some crises and created new problems," calling on Arab leaders to "unite as one force under one umbrella against the regional interventions."

Meanwhile, Qatar's Sheikh Tamim abruptly left the Arab League summit after it opened and did not give a speech, Qatar News Agency reported. He left the Arab League summit "in protest at criticism of Turkey," Al Arabiya reported citing news websites close to Qatar.

Qatar's Sheikh Tamim left the [#ArabLeagueSummit](https://t.co/v9QdEz7gyR) "in protest at criticism of Turkey" <https://t.co/v9QdEz7gyR>

pic.twitter.com/8EhU8qPY9c

– Arab News (@arabnews) [March 31, 2019](#)

Arab League spokesman Mahmoud Afifi said earlier that the 22-member bloc will aim to issue a proclamation affirming the international consensus that the Golan is occupied Syrian land.

King Salman praised the positive outcome of the Arab League Summit as he left Tunisia.

The king also met with UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres on the sidelines of the summit. During the meeting, they reviewed regional developments and various efforts aimed at achieving peace and stability in the region.



In their final statement after the daylong summit, the leaders affirmed that the Golan, a strategic plateau once used to shell northern Israel, is “Syria’s occupied territory.”

The leaders also called on Iran to stop interfering in the internal affairs of Arab countries and condemned the Houthis’ firing of missiles into Saudi Arabia.

The annual summit also addressed the issue of readmitting Syria as a member of the Arab League, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Iranian interference in Arab countries, and the war in Yemen.

The pan-Arab bloc froze Syria's membership in 2011 over a bloody government crackdown on protesters.

Many Arab countries have recently renewed ties with the government of President Bashar Assad.









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King Salman and Tunisian PM hold talksArab League heads of state in new drive for unity and cohesion

[Egypt's President El-Sisi raises minimum wage by 67 percent](#)

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By SAMY MAGDY | AP

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Sat, 2019-03-30 18:56

CAIRO: Egypt's President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi on Saturday announced that he has raised the minimum wage to 2,000 Egyptian pounds (\$115.74) per month from 1,200 (\$69.27), a 67 percent increase.

The move came ahead of a possible national referendum on constitutional amendments that would potentially allow him to remain in power until 2034. Egypt's Parliament, which is packed with El-Sisi supporters, overwhelmingly approved a package of constitutional changes last month that would further enshrine the military's role in politics. The supposed referendum is expected to be held in the coming weeks.

El-Sisi said in televised comments the raise will be applied to all Egyptian workers. The move was part of a package of measures, including a raise in pensions and bonuses, intended to ease the burdens of Egyptians hurt by painful austerity measures in recent years. Egypt's Finance Ministry said the increase would kick in in July.

The austerity measures were part of an ambitious economic reform program intended to revive the country's economy mauled by years of political turmoil and violence.

The reforms included floating the currency, substantial cuts in state subsidies on basic goods, and introducing a wide range of new taxes. The measures led to a significant rise in prices and services, something critics say has hurt the poor and middle class the hardest.

The reforms were agreed on with the International Monetary Fund in exchange for a \$12 billion loan.

El-Sisi thanked Egyptians, especially women, for enduring the harsh measures. "Another path would have led to the collapse of the state," he said in a ceremony honoring Egyptian women.

Removing state subsidies is something that El-Sisi's predecessors could not do because of fears of unrest. The late President Anwar Sadat attempted in 1977 to remove subsidies on bread, a main staple for Egyptians, sparking

deadly street riots. He backed down. In comparison, El-Sisi's reforms fueled popular discontent but never boiled over onto the streets. Demonstrations are virtually banned in Egypt under a 2013 law, with offenders facing up to five years in prison if convicted. The economic reform program has won El-Sisi lavish praise from Egypt's Western backers and bankers. His policies, however, have made more difficult the plight of a majority of Egyptians who are now forced to cope with steep hikes in the price of everything from utilities and fuel to food and transportation.



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Trump to host Egypt's El-Sisi on April 9: White House
Egypt's Sisi names military general as transport minister after train crash

[Libya holds municipal elections in first vote for five years](#)

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TRIPOLI: Libya held rare municipal elections in nine communities on Saturday, although turnout in the country's first voting for five years reached only about 38 percent.

The North African state, which has been mired in conflict and chaos since the 2011 toppling of Muammar Qaddafi, has not held any elections since 2014, when a heavily contested national vote ended up splitting the country into rival administrations and parliaments.

Only nine out of 69 municipal councils in southern and western Libya voted on Saturday, officials said. No violence or sabotage was reported.

Libya created 120 municipal councils in 2013 in a bid to end 42 years of centralization and one man rule under Qaddafi. Some councils held elections in 2014.

The municipal board of each council includes seven members, which then elects a mayor.

"We'll go on each Saturday until 33 councils hold their elections then we resume after the holy month of Ramadan so all councils are elected," Salem Bentahia, head of the elections commission, told Reuters.

The Muslim fasting month of Ramadan ends in early June.

In Zuwara, a town west of Tripoli near the Tunisian border, there was a modest turnout in the morning.

"We wish every success to this board and for it to achieve all the aspirations of this city's residents in all areas," Abdulsalam Ramdan Abdulsalam said as he cast his vote.

The United Nations is holding a national conference in April in a bid to end the political conflict between the internationally recognized government in Tripoli in the west of Libya and a parallel administration version in the east.

The UN efforts aim to prepare the country for long-delayed national elections.



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