

Erdogan offers seminary exchange for Greek mosque minarets

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ANKARA: Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan on Saturday suggested the mosque in Athens should open with minarets if the Greek premier wants to reopen a seminary in Istanbul.

Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras was in Turkey this month and visited the disputed landmarks of Hagia Sophia and the now-closed Greek Orthodox Halki seminary.

Tsipras said during the visit to the seminary located on Heybeli island off Istanbul on February 6 he hoped to reopen the school next time with Erdogan. Future priests of the Constantinople diocese had been trained at the seminary, which was closed in 1971 after tensions between Ankara and Athens over Cyprus.

Erdogan on Saturday complained that the Fethiye Mosque in Athens had no minarets despite Greek insistence that it would open.

The mosque was built in 1458 during the Ottoman occupation of Greece but has not been used as a mosque since 1821.

"Look you want something from us, you want the Halki seminary. And I tell you (Greece), come, let's open the Fethiye Mosque," Erdogan said during a rally in the northwestern province of Edirne ahead of local elections on March 31. "They said, 'we are opening the mosque' but I said, why isn't there a minaret? Can a church be a church without a bell tower?" he said, describing his talks with Tsipras.

"We say, you want to build a bell tower? Come and do it... But what is an essential part of our mosques? The minarets," the Turkish president added. Erdogan said Tsipras told him he was wary of criticism from the Greek opposition.

After the independence war against Ottomans began in 1821, the minaret is believed by some to have been destroyed because it was a symbol of the Ottoman occupation.

Ankara had returned land taken from the seminary in 1943 but there is still international pressure on Turkey to reopen it.

Erdogan has previously said that its reopening is dependent on reciprocal steps from Greece to enhance the rights of the Turkish minority.



Main category:

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[President Recep Tayyip Erdogan](#)

[mosque](#)

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Turkey bans rally for Kurdish MP on hunger strike
Turkey detains three over Istanbul building collapse

Syria stuck with Assad for now, says UK minister Jeremy Hunt

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LONDON: Syria has no future under Bashar Assad but is stuck with the president due to Russian support, Britain's top diplomat has said. Jeremy Hunt, the UK foreign secretary, said that Assad is likely to remain in his position "for the short-term and possibly longer," and called on Moscow to come forward with a solution.

"Assad ... is a truly horrific man who has shown that he won't hesitate to butcher his own people in order to prolong his hold on power. And what future would a country like Syria have with a leader like that?," Hunt said in an interview with Asharq Al-Awsat newspaper.

"But the reality is because of Russian support, he is there and he is likely to stay for the short-term and possibly longer. It is for the Russians now to come forward with their solution because they have chosen to intervene in the way they have."

Hunt said it was "impossible" for Syria to have a bright future with Assad still in power.

"This is a man who mercilessly gassed his own people in the most brutally possible way against all international norms, and the Russians chose to prop him up. So it is for Russia now to show they are going to create peace and stability in Syria," he said.

Hunt added that the UK has "no plans" to reopen diplomatic relations with Syria.

The British official said the US withdrawal from eastern Syria should not take place in a way that harms "our allies like the SDF (Syrian Democratic Forces) in Syria who fought very bravely along Western troops for many years."

Asked about Britain's role following the US pullout from Syria, Hunt said: "There is no prospect of British troops going in to replace the American troops leaving, but of course we had discussions with the United States on an ongoing basis and when I was in Washington a couple of weeks ago about how we stabilize the situation in Syria."

Hunt also spoke about the territorial defeat of Daesh in Syria and Iraq – but cautioned that was not the same as crushing the mindset behind the terror group.

"We have not yet eliminated the cause of the Daesh movement which is so evil

and so destructive and there is a lot more work left to do," he said.

"It is very important that the global coalition does not hang its hat up and say we are done now, because if we do that there is a very good chance that Daesh will be back."

"There (is) some evidence now in parts of Iraq that (Daesh is) regrouping and regathering strength."

On Yemen, Hunt underlined the need for a comprehensive solution that would prevent Iran from using the country as a base to destabilize neighboring states.

Asked about his recent participation in the Warsaw Conference on the Middle East, the British foreign secretary said that the meetings went beyond the Iranian role in the region to touch on reshaping alliances in the Middle East.

He added that he attended a "very productive meeting about Yemen," in the presence of US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, Saudi Foreign Minister Adel Al-Jubeir and his UAE counterpart Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed.

"We spent a long time talking about what is necessary to get peace over the line in Yemen," he said.

In this regard, Hunt affirmed that a comprehensive settlement in Yemen could only be reached through "a government of national unity in which the Houthis have a stake in which the security of all communities in Yemen is assured, in which Iran is no longer using Yemen as a base to destabilize Yemen's neighbors, and in which we can end the terrible humanitarian crisis which is the worst humanitarian crisis in the world right now."

According to Hunt, the problem lies in how to achieve a final solution and to build trust, in particular the importance of implementing the Stockholm Agreement and withdrawal from the city of Hodeidah "so that we can open up the Red Sea Mills," where 51,000 tones of UN wheat is stored.

He noted that he held a lengthy discussion with Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammed Javad Zarif about this issue.

According to Hunt, he was told by Zarif that Iran wants to play its part in finding a solution. "We took those commitments at face value but we do now need to see that translated into the Houthis leaving the Port of Hodeideh."

"All of us know that if that does not happen soon, we are going to see a return to hostilities and that would be an absolute tragedy to the people of Yemen," Hunt said.

A version of this story was originally published in Asharq Al-Awsat



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The making of memories: Syrian artist Sara Naim uses material from her homeland to create striking abstract imagery

[Sudan lawmakers postpone meeting on Bashir term limits](#)

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Sat, 2019-02-16 13:56

KHARTOUM: A Sudanese parliamentary committee has postponed a meeting on amending the country's constitution to allow President Omar Al-Bashir to run for a new term, state media reported Saturday.

The session, set for Sunday, has been shelved for the time being, the official SUNA news agency said, without giving a new date.

Bashir, who is facing deadly nationwide protests against his three-decade rule, is considering running for a third term in elections scheduled for next year.

But for that to happen, lawmakers must amend the country's constitution, which currently allows presidents two five-year terms.

"The committee's meeting has been postponed and a new date will be announced," SUNA reported.

Bashir's ruling National Congress Party (NCP) and its allies have an overwhelming majority in parliament, and in August the party named the veteran leader as its candidate for the 2020 poll.

The parliamentary committee was formed in late 2018 to consider the constitutional amendments necessary to keep Bashir in power, and it was set to meet Sunday for the first time.

Bashir, 75, swept to power in an Islamist-backed coup in 1989, but he faced his first multi-party election in 2010.

In 2015, he took 94 percent of the vote in the face of opposition boycotts. He later said he would not run for a third term.

Rights groups have said both elections lacked credibility.

Bashir has proved to be a political survivor, facing down both domestic and international challenges over the years, but since December 19 he has faced daily nationwide rallies against his rule.

Analysts say the ongoing protest movement is the biggest threat Bashir has faced since coming to power, with demonstrators calling for his resignation. Protesters chanting "freedom, peace, justice," have taken to the streets daily, blaming Bashir for the country's dire economic conditions.

Officials say 31 people have died in protest-related violence so far, while Human Rights Watch has put the death toll at 51.

Bashir has remained defiant, saying the ballot box is the only route through which a government can be changed.



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Sudanese policeman dies from wounds after protesters stone vehicle
Sudan accuses protest leaders of threatening national security

[US-backed fighters closing in on Daesh gunmen in eastern Syria](#)

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By SARAH EL DEEB | AP

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Sat, 2019-02-16 13:42

BAGHOUZ, Syria: A US-backed force in Syria is closing in on Daesh militants in a tiny area less than a square kilometer (square mile) in eastern Syria, and will soon declare the defeat of the militant group, a commander with the group said Saturday.

The capture of the last pocket still held by Daesh fighters in the village of Baghouz would mark the end of a devastating four-year global campaign to end

the extremist group's hold on territory in Syria and Iraq – their so-called “caliphate” that at the height of the group's power in 2014 controlled nearly a third of both Iraq and Syria.

“We will very soon bring good news to the whole world,” said Ciya Furat, a commander with the Kurdish-led force known as the Syrian Democratic Forces, speaking at a news conference at the Al-Omar Oil Field Base in the Deir Ezzor province.

President Donald Trump said the White House will make an announcement about Syria and the fight against Daesh by the end of Saturday.

“We have a lot of great announcements having to do with Syria and our success with the eradication of the caliphate and that will be announced over the next 24 hours,” Trump told journalists at the White House on Friday.

An Associated Press team in Baghouz Saturday, hundreds of meters away from the last speck of land where Daesh militants were holed up, saw several aircraft overhead and two airstrikes hit the area. SDF fighters said were fired by the US-led coalition.

The Syrian Democratic Forces declared the final push to capture the village a week ago after more than 20,000 civilians, many of them the wives and families of foreign fighters, were evacuated.

Since then, SDF commanders say they have been surprised to discover that there were hundreds more civilians in the enclave, after they were brought up by the militants from underground tunnels. Their presence has slowed down the SDF advance.

Furat, the SDF commander, said Daesh fighters are now besieged in an area that is about 700 square meters (840 square yards). He said that SDF fighters were able to liberate 10 of their colleagues that were held by Daesh.

Furat's comments were carried by Kurdish news agencies, including Hawar News.

“We are dealing with this small pocket with patience and caution. It is militarily fallen but civilians are used as human shields,” SDF spokesman Mustafa Bali told The Associated Press. Bali added that the SDF believes that Daesh gunmen are also holding previously kidnapped Syrians in the area.

Rami Abdurrahman, who heads the Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, a war monitor, said SDF fighters are almost in full control of the area once controlled by extremists, adding that there might still be Daesh fighters hiding in a network of underground tunnels.

The Observatory said that some 200 Daesh gunmen surrendered Friday, days after about 240 others surrendered and were taken by SDF fighters and members of the US-led coalition.

“The defeat of Daesh will come within days,” Furat said. He added that after the physical defeat of Daesh, the SDF “will continue in its fight against Daesh sleeper cells.”

Despite the expected defeat on the ground, activists and residents say Daesh still has sleeper cells in Syria and Iraq and is laying the groundwork for an insurgency. The group has claimed responsibility in recent months for deadly attacks, mostly in Iraq, more than a year after the Iraqi government said the extremists have been defeated after losing the northern city of Mosul in 2017, the largest they held.



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Civilians prompt delay in assault on last Daesh enclave: Kurd-led forcesUS says 'committed' to defeating Daesh; allies skeptical

[Tunisian workers kidnapped in Libya](#)

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TUNIS: Militiamen have kidnapped a group of Tunisian workers near the Libyan capital Tripoli, demanding Tunis release a comrade, the foreign ministry and a rights activist said.

"The foreign ministry is following the case of the Tunisian citizens... kidnapped by armed Libyan elements near Zawiya", the ministry said on its Facebook page late Friday.

Rights activist Mustapha Abdelkebir said the armed group behind Thursday's kidnappings was demanding the release of one of its members held in Tunisia. The kidnap victims were workers at Zawiya oil refinery, Tunisian media said. A diplomatic source told AFP that 14 workers had been taken hostage. "The minister has spoken to his Libyan counterpart to insist on the protection of the detainees, accelerate their release and ensure that they return safe and sound", the ministry said in a statement. Tunisia reopened a consulate in Libya in 2018, after shutting it three years earlier due to the kidnapping of 10 Tunisian diplomats. The Libyan militia which carried out the 2015 kidnapping had demanded the release of one of its leaders, Walid Glib, detained in Tunisia as part of a counter-terrorism investigation. The diplomats were released after several days and Walid Glib was later deported to Tripoli. Libya's Tripoli-based Government of National Accord said it had no information on Thursday's abduction and that it was looking into the matter. The country has been mired in chaos since the fall of dictator Muammar Qaddafi in a 2011 NATO-backed uprising, as two rival administrations and numerous militias grapple for power.



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