

[Spain's royal couple kicks off two-day visit in Morocco](#)

Author:

Associated Press

ID:

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Wed, 2019-02-13 19:46

PARIS: King Felipe VI and Queen Letizia of Spain have started a two-day official visit in Morocco.

The couple, guests of King Mohammed VI, arrived late Wednesday afternoon at Rabat airport, where they have been greeted by the Moroccan royal family before heading to the royal palace for an official ceremony.

Moroccan authorities said the two kings would use the visit to sign bilateral agreements.

Felipe and Letizia had postponed a planned trip to Morocco several times since they last visited the North African country in July 2014.

Spain is Morocco's top trade partner and the two countries share close diplomatic ties.



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Stars, royals gather for British Academy Film Awards

[Egypt's presidential term set to be extended](#)

Author:

Wed, 2019-02-13 22:45

CAIRO: Egypt's Parliament began deliberations Wednesday over constitutional amendments that could allow President Abdel-Fattah El-Sisi to stay in office till 2034 – 12 more years after his current, second term expires in 2022.

Lawmakers are set to vote on Thursday, after which the text of the amendments would be finalized by a special legislative committee and sent back to the assembly for a final decision within two months.

The 596-seat assembly, which is packed with El-Sisi's supporters, has already given its preliminary approval to the changes last week. The amendments are almost certain to be overwhelmingly approved by the legislature, but will also need to be put to a national referendum to become law.

The referendum is likely to take place before the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, which is expected to start in early May this year.

Parliament Speaker Ali Abdel-Al opened Wednesday's session, telling lawmakers in the packed chamber that there will be a "national dialogue" and that "all opinions and trends will be included in the discussions."

The vote had initially been scheduled for next week, but was moved up. A coalition of nearly a dozen opposition parties has come out against the amendments, but on their own they will not be able to block them.

El-Sisi, who previously held the office of military chief, led the military's 2013 overthrow of the freely elected but divisive Islamist president, Muhammad Mursi, after protests against his rule. El-Sisi was elected president the following year and has since presided over an unprecedented crackdown on dissent.

He was re-elected last year after all potentially serious challengers were jailed or pressured to exit the race.

Along with extending a president's term in office from four to six years, the amendments include a special article that applies only to El-Sisi and allows him to run for two more six-year terms after his current term expires in 2022.

The amendments also envisage the office of one or two vice presidents, a revived Senate, and a 25 percent quota for women in Parliament. They call for "adequate" representation for workers, farmers, young people and people with special needs in the legislature.

The president would have the power to appoint top judges and bypass judiciary oversight in vetting draft legislation before it is voted into law. The amendments declare the country's military "guardian and protector" of the Egyptian state, democracy and the constitution, while also granting military courts wider jurisdiction in trying civilians.

In the last three years, over 15,000 civilians, including children, have been referred to military prosecution in Egypt, according to New York-based Human Rights Watch.



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Egypt parliament to vote this week to extend El-Sisi's rule

[Baghdad to repatriate Iraqi Daesh militants held in Syria](#)

Author:

Wed, 2019-02-13 22:21

BAGHDAD: Iraq will repatriate Iraqi members of Daesh held by US-backed fighters in Syria as well as thousands of their family members, Prime Minister Adel Abdul Mahdi said.

Abdul Mahdi told reporters late Tuesday that families of those militants will also be brought back and that tent settlements will be prepared to host them.

Abdul Mahdi's comments came after a meeting he held in Baghdad with acting US Defense Secretary Patrick Shanahan.

A senior Iraqi intelligence official said up to 20,000 Iraqis, including Daesh militants, their families and refugees will be brought back home by April where many of them will live in a tent settlement in western Anbar province.

The official, who spoke to The Associated Press on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to speak to the media, said Daesh members will be interrogated by Iraqi security agencies.

Abdul Mahdi's announcement came a week after the US called on other nations to repatriate and prosecute their citizens who traveled to Syria to fight with Daesh and who are now being held by Washington's local partners.

The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) say they detained more than 900 foreign fighters during their US-backed campaign against Daesh in northeastern Syria.

The SDF has warned they may not be able to continue to hold the Daesh militants after the withdrawal of American forces from Syria ordered by President Donald Trump in December.

A US State Department official said last week that if the fighters can't be repatriated, though, the detention center on the US base at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, could be used to hold them "where lawful and appropriate."

A US official said Guantanamo is the "option of last resort." The official, speaking on condition of anonymity, said the US has identified about 50 people among the more than 900 held by Syrian forces as "high value" suspects that could be transported to Guantanamo if they are not repatriated.

Sending Daesh prisoners to Guantanamo would open up new legal challenges, according to experts. Last month, France's Interior Minister Christophe Castaner told French media that a handful of French militants had already returned home and more would follow soon after the departure of American troops.

Britain refuses to take back citizens who joined Daesh and has reportedly stripped them of their citizenship.

Other European countries have remained largely silent about the fate of men and women whom many see as a security threat. More than 20,000 people have left the Daesh-held area and most of them have been moved to Al-Hol camp settlement in Syria's northeastern province of Hassakeh

Since the latest push began on the village of Baghouz and nearby area, 19 SDF fighters and 27 Daesh gunmen, including eight suicide attackers, have been killed, according to the Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights.

More than 20,000 people have left the Daesh-held area and most of them have been moved to Al-Hol camp settlement in Syria's northeastern province of Hassakeh, where human conditions are miserable and more than two dozen children have died in recent weeks.



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Iraqi armed factions hit Daesh targets inside SyriaRussia 'repatriates' 27 Daesh children from Iraq

[Hundreds flee as ferocious battle in Syria's Daesh holdout enters 5th day](#)

Author:

Wed, 2019-02-13 22:15

NEAR BAGHOUZ, SYRIA: The ferocious battle for Daesh's last bastion in eastern Syria entered its fifth day on Wednesday, as exhausted families left the ever-shrinking scrap of land where holdout militants have been boxed in by Kurdish-led forces.

Hundreds fled day and night from Baghouz, near the enclave where diehard Daesh militants are making their last stand, as plumes of grey smoke billowed

into the sky over the flat, desolate town.

After a pause of more than a week to allow out civilians, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) declared a final push to retake the pocket of land from the extremists on Saturday, aided by the warplanes and artillery of a US-led coalition.

SDF spokesman Mustafa Bali said on Tuesday that 600 civilians had fled the combat zone overnight and the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, a Britain-based war monitor, said another 350 made it out that day. The SDF have built up a pair of sand embankments on a scrubby plateau overlooking Baghouz.

Most of the neighborhoods visible along the hazy horizon are under their control, but the southernmost parts of the small town – from which sounds of a firefight can be heard – are still held by Daesh.

Suddenly, black dots appeared on the dirt road that snakes across the plain from the ruins of the town.

The SDF watched them warily at first, but as the group of about 25 people got closer, members of the Free Burma Rangers volunteer medical group scrambled down the hill to meet them.

There are no other NGOs or UN agencies at the site.

Half a dozen among the new arrivals were adult men. The rest were women, panting after their long trudge out of Baghouz, and young children with dirty hair. About half were Ukrainian or Russian women and their children, while most of the others were Syrian.

A 34-year-old woman from Crimea tore pieces of bread to give her three children. She identified herself as Umm Khaled and said she came to Syria five years ago after divorcing her Tatar husband.

Once there, she married an Azeri Daesh member and had two other children. "They are all fatherless now," she told AFP in broken Arabic, her voice shaking.

Coalition spokesman Sean Ryan said US-backed forces were facing a fierce fightback.

"The progress is slow and methodical as the enemy is fully entrenched and" Daesh militants continue to conduct counter attacks, he said. On Monday, the Observatory said a coalition airstrike killed 16 civilians.

An Italian journalist was also wounded as he covered the clashes and evacuated for treatment, a colleague said on Twitter.

The SDF launched the battle to expel Daesh from the eastern Syrian province of Deir Ezzor in September, slowly tightening the noose around the militants and their families since December.

In the past two months, more than 37,000 people, mostly wives and children of

Daesh militants, have fled into SDF-held areas, the Observatory says.

That figure includes some 3,400 suspected militants detained by the SDF, according to the monitor.

At a gathering point for new arrivals, dozens of men knelt on the ground.

Iraqi and Syrian women and children prepared to make the journey north to a Kurdish-held camp for the displaced, after spending the night in tents.

A very thin child with dark circles around his eyes stumbled onto a truck, as other children screamed out for water and their mothers asked how long the drive would take.

“Six hours? In the cold?” shouted a wrinkled Iraqi woman.

The SDF on Saturday said up to 600 militants could still be inside the pocket, adding their leader Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi was likely not there.

At the height of their proto-state, Baghdadi’s followers implemented their brutal implementation of Islamic law in an area the size of Britain.

Once the “caliphate” is declared over, the fight will continue to tackle Daesh sleeper cells, the SDF and their allies have said.

US President Donald Trump on Monday said the coalition may declare victory over Daesh in the region within days.

During an unannounced visit to Baghdad on Tuesday, acting Pentagon chief Patrick Shanahan met Iraqi Prime Minister Adel Abdel Mahdi but the possibility of US troops in Iraq deploying into Syria for operations against Daesh “just did not come up” during their talks, Shanahan told reporters.

Separately on Tuesday, the Syrian government and rebels exchanged prisoners in the country’s north as part of a peace process brokered by Russia, Iran and Turkey, the Turkish government said.



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Hundreds flee US-backed Syria battle for last Daesh holdout SDF fighters close in on last Daesh-held village in Syria

[World powers gather for Warsaw Middle East summit expected to pile pressure on Iran](#)

Wed, 2019-02-13 20:37

WARSAW: US, Arab and Israeli leaders gathered Wednesday in Warsaw for a conference expected to pile pressure on Iran.

The event is attended by about 60 countries and the agenda also covers the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the fight against Daesh, Syria and Yemen.

But the bulk of the focus will be on Iran, and how to curtail the regime's aggressive foreign policy in the region.

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and Polish Foreign Minister Jacek Czaputowicz greeted the attendees at the opening ceremony, including Saudi Arabia's Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Adel Al-Jubeir.

We join the [#WarsawSummit](#) to take a firm stand against forces that threaten the future of peace&security in the region, especially the world's leading sponsor of terrorism: the Iranian regime that continues to destabilize our region and launch ballistic missiles against civilians

– Khalid bin Salman خالد بن سلمان (@kbsalsaud) [February 13, 2019](#)

The Kingdom's ambassador to the US, Prince Khalid bin Salman, said Saudi Arabia joined the conference "to take a firm stand against forces that threaten the future of peace and security in the region."

"Especially the world's leading sponsor of terrorism: the Iranian regime that continues to destabilize our region and launch ballistic missiles against civilians," Prince Khalid said.

Ahead of the two-day meeting, hundreds of people took part in an Iranian opposition demonstration in Warsaw on Wednesday. Speakers at the event included the former New York mayor, Rudy Giuliani.

"The Iranian regime has been facing a popular uprising in Iran for a year and has not been able, despite using all kinds of repression, to control or quell this uprising, so it has once again started to export terrorism to the world and plan terrorist operations," Sanabargh Zahedi, Chairman of the Judicial Committee of the National Council of Resistance of Iran, told Arab News.

"We now want to confront this phenomenon and call upon the international community to take firmer steps against this regime."

Pressure has been growing on Iran since Donald Trump last year withdrew the US from a deal designed to curb Tehran's nuclear ambitions.

European powers stuck with the accord and their unhappiness at Trump's move was reflected by a reduced presence in Warsaw.

Predictably, Iran also voiced its disapproval at the meeting. Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad said: "It is another attempt by the United States to pursue an obsession with Iran that is not well-founded."

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and US Vice President Mike Pence will headline the conference on Thursday.

Netanyahu is keen to build closer ties with Arab countries which share his concern of the Iranian threat in the region, particularly the presence of Iranian proxy militias in Syria where Israel carried out further strikes on Monday.

"We are operating every day ... against Iran and its attempts to establish its presence in the area," said Netanyahu.

Ahead of the summit he met with Oman's foreign minister Yousuf bin Alawi bin Abdullah, in rare public talks with an Arab leader.

The Omani minister said people in the Middle East have "suffered a lot" because they stick to the past. He said Wednesday's meeting reflects a "new era" for the region.

The US is also hoping to make progress with a peace plan for Israel and Palestine. Trump adviser Jared Kushner will make a rare speaking appearance at the conference, possibly to offer hints of what the deal may include.

Nathan Tek, US State Department spokesman in the Middle East, told Arab News that the broad agenda of the conference, will reinvigorate efforts to address the region's many challenges by "revitalizing our alliances and partnerships."

"From weapons proliferation and humanitarian crises, to terrorism and energy security, these issues and others pose serious threats to stability in the region and to security around the world," he said.

"(The conference) will provide countries an opportunity to share their assessments of the region and offer ideas on how to solve our shared problems."

British Foreign Secretary Jeremy Hunt, who is attending the event, said he wanted to focus on ending the crisis in Yemen, AFP reported.

Hunt met Tuesday evening in Warsaw jointly with US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and senior officials from Saudi Arabia and the UAE, which are both supporting the Yemeni government against the Iran-backed Houthis as part of a regional military coalition.

Hunt said he hoped to expand on a seven-week ceasefire that has largely held in the crucial port city of Hodeida.

"We now have a shortening window of opportunity to turn the ceasefire into a durable path to peace – and stop the world's worst humanitarian crisis," Hunt said.

Day one of the Warsaw Middle East Conference as it happened

All times in GMT

6 p.m.

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and Polish Foreign Minister Jacek Czaputowicz greet the attendees including Saudi Arabia's Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Adel Al-Jubeir.

5.45 p.m

The opening ceremony for the two day conference gets under way in Warsaw.

5.40 p.m.

Saudi Arabia's ambassador to the US, Khalid bin Salman, said Saudi Arabia joins the Warsaw Summit "to take a firm stand against forces that threaten the future of peace and security," in particular Iranian.

We join the [#WarsawSummit](#) to take a firm stand against forces that threaten the future of peace&security in the region, especially the world's leading sponsor of terrorism: the Iranian regime that continues to destabilize our region and launch ballistic missiles against civilians

– Khalid bin Salman خالد بن سلمان (@kbsalsaud) [February 13, 2019](#)

3 p.m.

Hundreds of people attend an anti -Iran demonstration in Warsaw.

Sanabargh Zahedi, Chairman of the Judicial Committee of the National Council of Resistance of Iran, told Arab news:

"The Iranian regime has been facing a popular uprising in Iran for a year and has not been able, despite using all kinds of repression, to control or quell this uprising, so it has once again started to export terrorism to the world and plan terrorist operations.

"We now want to confront this phenomenon and call upon the international community to take firmer steps against this regime."



2.45 p.m.

Israeli [Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu](#) meets [Oman's foreign minister Yousuf bin Alawi](#) bin Abdullah ahead of the Warsaw meeting.

In a video released by Netanyahu's office, the Omani foreign minister, said people in the Middle East have "suffered a lot" because they stick to the past. He said Wednesday's meeting reflects a "new era" for the region.







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Tags:

[Middle East Conference](#)

[Adel Al-Jubeir](#)

[Mike Pompeo](#)

Israel's Netanyahu meets Oman's foreign minister in Warsaw
Palestinian chief

negotiator Erekat says will not attend Warsaw conference