

# US accepts Assad staying in Syria – but will not give aid

Author:

Tue, 2018-12-18 20:35

WASHINGTON: The US said Monday it was no longer seeking to topple Syrian President Bashar Assad but renewed warnings it would not fund reconstruction unless the regime is “fundamentally different.”

James Jeffrey, the US special representative in Syria, said that Assad needed to compromise as he had not yet won the brutal seven-year civil war, estimating that some 100,000 armed opposition fighters remained in Syria.

“We want to see a regime that is fundamentally different. It’s not regime change – we’re not trying to get rid of Assad,” Jeffrey said at the Atlantic Council, a Washington think tank.

Estimating that Syria would need \$300-400 billion to rebuild, Jeffrey warned that Western powers and international financial institutions would not commit funds without a change of course.

“There is a strong readiness on the part of Western nations not to ante up money for that disaster unless we have some kind of idea that the government is ready to compromise and thus not create yet another horror in the years ahead,” he said.

Former President Barack Obama had called for Assad to go, although he doubted the wisdom of a robust US intervention in the complex Syrian war. and kept a narrow military goal of defeating the Daesh extremist group.

President Donald Trump’s administration has acknowledged, if rarely so explicitly, that Assad is likely to stay.

But Secretary of State Mike Pompeo warned in October that the US would not provide “one single dollar” for Syria’s reconstruction if Iran stays.

Jeffrey also called for the ouster of Iranian forces, whose presence is strongly opposed by neighboring Israel, although he said the US accepted that Tehran would maintain some diplomatic role in the country.

Jeffrey also said that the US wanted a Syria that does not wage chemical weapons attacks or torture its own citizens.

He acknowledged, however, that the US may not find an ally anytime soon in Syria, saying: “It doesn’t have to be a regime that we Americans would embrace as, say, qualifying to join the European Union if the European Union would take Middle Eastern countries.”



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UN Syria envoy to host top envoys from Russia, Turkey, Iran  
Turkey may work with Syria's Assad if elected fairly

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## [Iraq parliament approves ministers but deadlock over security posts](#)

Author:

Tue, 2018-12-18 18:01

BAGHDAD: Iraq's parliament approved three new ministers Tuesday but broke up before voting on the five remaining posts.

Prime Minister Adel Abdul Mahdi has now filled 17 posts in his cabinet of 22 ministers.

But deadlock remains over the five empty posts including the key ministers of defense and interior.

The other 14 were approved by parliament in late October.



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## [Russia, Iran, Turkey agree on convening committee to draw up new Syria constitution](#)

Author:

Reuters

ID:

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Tue, 2018-12-18 13:26

GENEVA: Russia's foreign minister Sergey Lavrov said on Tuesday the foreign

ministers of Russia, Iran and Turkey have agreed to facilitate convening the first session of a committee to draft a new Syrian constitution early next year.

Lavrov spoke in Geneva following consultations with the foreign ministers of Iran and Turkey.

He says the three leaders hope the steps will lead to the launch of a "viable and lasting Syrian-led, Syrian-owned and UN-facilitated political process."

The 150-member committee is intended to represent the government, the opposition and civil society and is seen by the UN as key to holding free elections and ending the seven-year civil war.

The .. Syria envoy was authorized to put together such a committee at a Russian-hosted peace conference in Sochi on Jan. 30.

Staffan de Mistura, UN Special Envoy for Syria who steps down on Dec. 31, has tried since January to clinch agreement on the identity of 150 members of a new constitutional committee to revitalize a stalled peace process.

President Bashar Assad's government and the opposition fighting to topple him have each submitted a list of 50 names. But Russia, Iran and Turkey have haggled over the final 50 members from civil society and "independent" backgrounds, diplomats say.

"The three countries are coming with a proposal for the third list, which has been the heart of the problem," one diplomat following the negotiations closely told Reuters.

Turkey and other nations would consider working with Assad if he won a democratic election, Cavusoglu said on Sunday.

Turkey supports rebels who control part of northwest Syria. A year ago, Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan described Assad as a terrorist and said it was impossible for Syrian peacemaking efforts to continue with him.

Assad, whose forces have reclaimed most of Syria with Russian and Iranian support apart from Idlib, a northwestern province, has clung to power throughout the conflict and is widely seen as being loath to yield power after it ends.

The Damascus government has previously brushed off UN-led efforts to set up a constitutional committee.

Syrian Foreign Minister Walid Al-Moualem, in comments reported by state media on Monday, said it was "early to talk about" the constitutional committee starting work. He blamed attempts at "interference" by Western states for the hold-up in its formation, in addition to "obstacles" laid by Turkey.

Syrian authorities have only ever signalled a readiness for "amendments" to the existing constitution and also said these must be put to a referendum. De Mistura said at the weekend that the constitutional committee could be a starting point for political progress.

"It does touch, for instance, on presidential powers, it could and should be touching on how elections are done, on division of power, in other words a big issue," he said.



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[Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov](#)

[UN Syria envoy Staffan de Mistura](#)

Turkey may work with Syria's Assad if elected fairly Turkey says it will not let the US hold it back in Syria

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## [Morocco arrests suspect after two Scandinavian tourists murdered](#)

Author:

AFP

ID:

1545141022392895800

Tue, 2018-12-18 13:45

RABAT: Moroccan authorities on Tuesday arrested a suspect over the murder of two Scandinavian women in the High Atlas mountains, a popular trekking destination for tourists.

Other suspects are being sought over the killings of the Danish and Norwegian hikers who were found dead on Monday with cuts to their necks, the interior ministry said.

The bodies were discovered in an isolated mountainous area 10 kilometers (six miles) from the tourist village of Imlil in the High Atlas range.

Imlil is a starting point for trekking and climbing tours of Mount Toubkal, which at 4,167 meters is the highest summit in North Africa.

The suspect was arrested in the former imperial city of Marrakesh, a tourist hub located at the foot of the mountains about 60 kilometers north of Imlil, and held in custody for questioning, the ministry said.

The Moroccan authorities described it as a "criminal act" but did not give further details about the circumstances of the murders.

The Danish victim, Louisa Vesterager Jespersen, 24, "had her throat cut," her mother Helle Petersen was quoted by the Danish newspaper B.T. as saying. Her family had warned her against going to Morocco "because of the chaotic situation," she added.

According to her Facebook page, Jespersen had studied in Norway to be a guide.

Norwegian media named the other victim as 28-year-old Maren Ueland.

"Her priority was safety. The girls took every precaution before going on this trip," her mother Irene Ueland told Norwegian broadcaster NRK.

The two women studied at a university in southern Norway and had planned to travel together for a month, she said, adding that her last contact with her daughter was on December 9.

A Norwegian policeman from the embassy in Rabat is traveling to Marrakesh to act as a liaison between the authorities.

Security was stepped up in the region and hiking suspended following the discovery of the bodies, Moroccan media said.

"It's very bad for the region. There will undoubtedly be cancelations," a local guide, Hossein, told AFP from Imlil.

Tourism is a cornerstone of Morocco's economy and the kingdom's second-largest employer, after agriculture.

The sector accounts for 10 percent of national income and is one of the country's main sources of foreign currency.

After several years of near-stagnation, Morocco welcomed a record 11.35 million visitors in 2017, exceeding the 11-million mark for the first time.



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## [Lebanon seen closer to new government, minister says could be within days](#)

Author:

Reuters

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Tue, 2018-12-18 07:46

BEIRUT: Lebanon appeared to be edging toward clinching a deal to form a new national unity government after more than seven months of wrangling over cabinet posts, as the finance minister was quoted as saying there could be a new administration within days.

Efforts to form a new government led by Prime Minister-designate Saad Al-Hariri have been obstructed by rival groups' conflicting demands for seats in a cabinet that must be formed in line with a finely balanced sectarian political system.

Heavily indebted and suffering from a stagnant economy, Lebanon is in dire need of an administration that can set about long-stalled economic reforms to put public debt on a sustainable footing.

"Matters in the government file are moving in a positive direction. If the situation continues with this positivity we will have a new government within a few days," Finance Minister Ali Hassan Khalil was cited as saying by Al-

Manar TV, which is run by Hezbollah.

The Hariri-owned Al-Mustaqbal newspaper reported a “positive atmosphere” which indicated the government formation effort “was close to reaching its hoped-for conclusion.” “The road to the government has become open to a very large degree,” it reported.

The final logjam has been over Sunni Muslim representation, with a group of Hezbollah-allied Sunni MPs demanding a cabinet seat to reflect gains in the May election in which Hariri lost more than a third of his lawmakers.

Hariri, who remains Lebanon’s leading Sunni despite his losses, had ruled out ceding one of his cabinet seats to any of the six Hezbollah-allied Sunnis, who are also known for their ties to the Syrian government of President Bashar Assad.

Under a compromise taking shape, the Hezbollah-allied Sunnis are expected to put forward names of ministerial candidates acceptable to them for inclusion in the government rather than insisting that they themselves should get the seat.

This Sunni minister is expected to be named among a group of ministers allotted to President Michel Aoun, representing a compromise on the part of his Free Patriotic Movement which had been trying to secure control of 11 ministerial portfolios – more than one third of the new cabinet.



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