

Syria president announces \$9bn budget for 2019

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Thu, 2018-12-06 17:51

DAMASCUS: Syria's president on Thursday announced a budget for 2019 of almost \$9 billion, of which around a third has been allocated to investment projects including in areas ravaged by the war.

Seven years into Syria's grinding civil war, the Damascus government has expelled rebels and extremists from large parts of the country with Russian military backing.

President Bashar Assad issued the budget after parliament passed the bill on Monday.

Next year's budget would amount to 3,882 billion Syrian pounds (\$8.9 billion, according to the official exchange rate), state news agency SANA said.

From that, 1,100 billion pounds (\$2.5 billion) would be allocated to "investment," SANA said.

Finance Minister Mamun Hamdan said 443 billion pounds (\$1 billion) would go to "investment projects in liberated areas or to which the Syrian army brings back stability," SANA quoted him as saying.

The minister also said that 700 billion Syrian pounds (\$1.6 billion) would be spent on electricity projects, without mentioning in which areas, according to state television.

Hamdan told newspaper Al-Watan that the projected deficit for next year was 946 billion pounds (almost \$2.2 billion).

The regime this year expelled rebels and extremists from the capital's surroundings and the south of the country, bringing these areas back under its control.

It has also threatened to retake the northwestern region of Idlib on the Turkish border, but the area is for now protected by a shaky buffer zone deal struck in September between Russia and rebel backer Turkey.

The 2018 budget was of 3,187 billion pounds (\$7.3 billion).

Syria's war has killed 360,000 people and displaced millions since starting in 2011 with the brutal repression of anti-regime protests.



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Syria coalition kills Daesh leader linked to hostage executions
US-backed forces: Daesh security leader seized in Syria

[**Bahrain FM: Qatar has burned its bridges with GCC**](#)

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Thu, 2018-12-06 17:32

LONDON: Qatar has burned its bridges with the rest of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and aligned itself with “enemies of the region like Iran,” Bahrain’s Foreign Minister Sheikh Khalid Al Khalifa has said.

In an interview with Asharq Al-Awsat, Al Khalifa described the Qatar crisis

as a very deep disagreement that has reached a point not seen before in rifts between GCC countries.

Al Khalifa added that he did not know how Qatar would return from this point, having distanced itself from other GCC countries after aligning itself with Iran.

“These issues do not indicate that Qatar will remain a member of the GCC, but we are dealing with this topic realistically,” he said.

The minister said that Qatar had “burned all ships of return to the Council,” and that a new agreement and system are needed in order to solve the crisis.

He also said that Doha should be scrutinized and put under a “microscope.”

Speaking ahead of the GCC summit set to be held in Riyadh on Sunday,

Al Khalifa said that the hostile policy pursued by Qatar against other GCC states is clear, notably Doha’s hostility toward Saudi Arabia.

He added that the most important topic to be discussed at the upcoming GCC summit is strategic military cooperation between GCC states, and that decisions will be made regarding this.



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UAE says Gulf Arab bloc still strong despite Qatar row
Qatar’s exit from OPEC will have ‘no major impact’ on oil prices

Libya to vote on new constitution before February

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Thu, 2018-12-06 (All day)

BANGHAZI: The chairman of Libya's elections commission said the beleaguered North African nation will hold a referendum on a new constitution before the end of February.

Thursday's announcement by Emad Al-Sayeh in the capital Tripoli signals Libya's first concrete step toward restoring unity and political stability after years of turmoil and violence that followed the 2011 uprising that toppled longtime dictator Muammar Qaddafi.

It followed last month's adoption by a parliament in eastern Libya of an election law that would govern the referendum and future votes.

A 60-member panel drafted the constitution and submitted it to Parliament in August.

Al-Sayeh warned the referendum could be delayed if the election commission did not receive security guarantees and funds.

The commission's Tripoli offices were attacked by extremists in May, killing 14 people.



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Libyans protest against US air strike in southern Libya
Top Libyan leaders in Jordan to strengthen bilateral relations

[UN peacekeepers confirm Israeli report of tunnel at Lebanon border](#)

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Thu, 2018-12-06 13:05

JERUSALEM: UN peacekeepers in Lebanon have confirmed the existence of a tunnel discovered by the Israeli military close to the blue line separating the two countries, it said in a statement on Thursday.

The UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) is “engaged with the parties to pursue urgent follow-up action” and “will communicate its preliminary findings to the appropriate authorities in Lebanon”, it added.

Earlier on Thursday, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu took Israel-based diplomats to the border with Lebanon, showing them the site of a Hezbollah tunnel and calling for sanctions against the Shiite militant group.

“I told the ambassadors that they should condemn this aggression by Iran, Hezbollah and Hamas, unequivocally, and of course also to intensify the sanctions against these elements,” he said in a Hebrew-language statement.

Israel announced on Tuesday that it had discovered Hezbollah tunnels infiltrating its territory from Lebanon and launched an operation to destroy them.

On Wednesday, Netanyahu told UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres that he “expects the UN to strongly condemn the violation of Israel’s sovereignty,” according to his office’s Twitter account.

Netanyahu said Thursday that Hezbollah, like Hamas in the Gaza Strip, was acting on behalf of its patron Iran.

“Anyone who attacks us will have bloodshed on their own heads,” he said.

“Hezbollah knows that and Hamas knows it too.”

The military said it had located one such tunnel dug from a home in the Kfar Kila area of south Lebanon that crossed into Israeli territory and was working to “neutralize” it.



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A rearmed Hezbollah in Lebanon is top concern for Israel
Hezbollah-linked businessman jailed in Paris drug trial

[Pope Francis will visit the UAE in February: Vatican City](#)

Thu, 2018-12-06 14:12

ABU DHABI: Pope Francis will visit Abu Dhabi in the UAE in February, the Vatican said on Thursday, in his seventh trip to a predominantly Muslim nation to call for inter-religious peace.

The trip will take place from Feb. 3-5. The Vatican said the pope had accepted an invitation from Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al-Nahyan, Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi, and the Catholic community there. He will attend an inter-faith meeting.

Crown Prince Mohammed said in a tweet that the pope “is a symbol of peace, tolerance and the promotion of brotherhood. We look forward to a historic visit, through which we will seek dialogue on the peaceful coexistence among peoples.”

The UAE is delighted to welcome His Holiness Pope Francis on the upcoming visit to the UAE. He is a symbol of peace, tolerance and the promotion of brotherhood. We look forward to a historic visit, through which we will seek dialogue on the peaceful coexistence among peoples. pic.twitter.com/xdsmU18Hp0

– محمد بن زايد (@MohamedBinZayed) [December 6, 2018](#)

Pope Francis was quick in the months after his election in 2013 to make overtures to worshippers from other religions, inviting two old friends from Buenos Aires – a Rabbi and a Muslim professor – on a trip to the Middle East where he condemned religious hatred.

Francis has already visited Turkey, Jordan, Egypt, Bangladesh and Azerbaijan, the Palestinian territories and used those trips to call for inter-religious dialogue and to condemn the notion of violence in the name of God.

“The theme of the visit is ‘Make Me a Channel of Your Peace’ – and that’s the Pope’s intention in going to the United Arab Emirates. How all people of goodwill can work for peace will be a major topic on this trip,” Vatican spokesman Greg Burke said.

The theme is taken from the opening words of the Prayer of Peace of Francis of Assisi, the saint whose name the pope took during his election ceremony.

“This visit, like the one to Egypt (in 2017), shows the fundamental importance the Holy Father gives to inter-religious dialogue. Pope Francis visiting the Arab world is a perfect example of the culture of encounter,” Burke said.

Bishop Paul Hinder of the Arabian Vicariate of Southern Arabia (UAE, Oman and Yemen) said: “I express my gratitude to the UAE government, which has made this visit possible. I urge the Christian community and our Catholic faithful that we respect and cooperate with the instructions of a special team, which is being put in place for the visit.

“The team will work closely with the government to ensure this visit goes smoothly and according to plan.

“The generosity of the UAE government has also been extended in making it possible to celebrate a Mass, which will be on February 5 at a public venue in Abu Dhabi. These are warm and kind gestures that we appreciate and acknowledge.”

The pope’s trip to the UAE will come ahead of a visit in March to Morocco.



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Pope lights candle to promote peace in SyriaExclusive: Pope Tawadros II warns against 'emptying' Middle East of Christians, sees hope in Saudi reforms