

Catholics in UAE await arrival of Pope Francis

Sat, 2019-02-02 15:48

DUBAI: Catholics in the UAE and around the Gulf are waiting expectantly for the touchdown of Pope Francis in Abu Dhabi on Sunday night – the first time a pontiff from the Church of Rome has set foot on the Arabian peninsula.

The visit coincides with a trip to the UAE by Sheikh Ahmed El-Tayeb, grand imam of Al-Azhar in Cairo. It will be the first time two such senior leaders of Islam and Catholicism have met.

The historic papal visit is the first in a series of events to mark 2019 as the “year of tolerance” in the UAE. Francis will take part in the Human Fraternity Meeting in Abu Dhabi, where he will meet other leaders of the world’s great religions, “reflecting the values of brotherhood, love and peaceful dialogue,” the organizers said.

The highlight of the visit will be an open-air service in Abu Dhabi, where the pope will celebrate mass before a crowd estimated at 140,000 watching in the Zayed Sports City Stadium and outside on giant TV screens.

Hundreds of coaches will leave Dubai on Monday evening with worshippers hoping to catch a glimpse of the Pope in Abu Dhabi, in what one observer described as a “Christian pilgrimage” in Arabia.

Leaders of other religions in Abu Dhabi include a representative of the Jewish community, and many Catholic expatriates living in Saudi Arabia are also expected to fly to the UAE for the historic event.

Raad Jabouri Al-Sheikh, an Iraqi Catholic who has lived in the UAE for 17 years, told Arab News: “It is an amazing thing. I never expected to see this. He has visited other parts of the world where there are many more Catholics, so it is an honor he is coming to see us.”



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Catholics in the UAE: 'Pope's visit a testament to peace and tolerance' We've got a ticket to the pope... and a day off

[US Consulate employee charged with espionage](#)

Author:

Fri, 2019-02-01 23:28

ANKARA: A Turkish court on Friday accepted an indictment charging a local employee of the US Consulate in Istanbul with espionage and attempting to overthrow the government, state media reported.

Metin Topuz, who liaised with the US Drug Enforcement Agency for the American

mission, is accused of having links to US-based Turkish preacher Fethullah Gulen.

Ankara alleges that Gulen ordered a failed coup in 2016, but he denies the claims.

The Istanbul court, which accepted the prosecutor's indictment issued last month, ordered Topuz to remain in jail, state news agency Anadolu said. He has been in custody since September 2017.

Topuz's trial will begin on March 26 and the first hearing will last three days. He faces life in jail if found guilty.

The consulate employee is suspected of having contacts with former police officers and a prosecutor on the run accused of links with the Gulen movement, Anadolu reported.

The agency added that the indictment claimed Topuz had "very intense contacts" with former police chiefs involved in a 2013 probe into corruption allegations that affected government officials at the time.

Ankara has dismissed that investigation as an attempted "judicial coup" against the government by the Gulen movement.

Topuz had been at the center of a visa row between Ankara and Washington in late 2017 after his arrest.

Turkey-US relations have been strained in recent years over multiple issues including the US refusing to extradite Gulen.

There was also a bitter row last summer over the detention of an American pastor, but tensions eased after his release in October.

The court's decision comes a day after a judge in the southeastern city of Mardin convicted a former local employee of the US consulate in Adana, southern Turkey.

Hamza Ulucay was found guilty of helping outlawed Kurdish militants, and sentenced to four years and six months in jail.

But the Mardin court ruled he be released because of the time he had already served in jail since March 2017.



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Turkish US consulate worker faces charges over Gulen links: DHATurkey orders arrest of nearly 200 people over suspected Gulen ties

[Venezuelan gold trade strains ties between Turkey, US](#)

Author:

Fri, 2019-02-01 22:56

ANKARA: Washington will monitor trade between its NATO ally Turkey and Venezuela in case gold sanctions on Caracas are violated.

Reuters quoted a senior US official on Thursday, who called the issue a “hot potato” which was raised during a meeting of the US Treasury’s assistant secretary for terrorist financing, Marshall Billingslea, and Turkish officials in Ankara on Friday.

The head of the Turkey-Venezuela Parliamentary Friendship Group, Serkan Bayram, said that Turkish trade with Venezuela would continue despite US sanctions.

"Our businesspeople will continue to develop trade relations. Such a decision falls under our sovereignty, and it is in our national interest to do business with Venezuela," Bayram told Arab News.

"Turkish trade with Caracas is in line with international norms and regulations. All our transactions with a democratically elected country are conducted openly, under the international community's eyes," he added.

According to official figures, Turkey imported precious metals worth in excess of \$900 million from Venezuela in 2018 – having imported none in 2017 – and Ankara now ranks among the largest importers of Venezuelan gold.

However, in November, Washington imposed sanctions on gold sales from the South American country, following accusations of government corruption and human rights violations.

In the face of international pressure, Caracas is now shifting toward Turkey, desperate for new trading partners to help prop up the country's deteriorating economy.

In a visit to Caracas in December last year, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, an ally of Venezuela's incumbent leader, Nicolas Maduro, criticized the sanctions on Venezuela. "Political problems cannot be resolved by punishing an entire nation. We don't approve of such measures that ignore global trade rules," he said.

On a visit to Turkey two weeks ago, Venezuela's minister of industries and national production, Tareck El Aissami, toured the Anatolian town of Corum, where Turkey refines most of its imported Venezuelan gold.

Cem Barlas Arslan, a legal expert from Kirikkale University, told Arab News: "From the perspective of international law, countries may implement sanctions through customs levies or similar foreign trade instruments, like the US has done to China, Russia, Iran and even Turkey.

"In this tense trade war, Ankara has two options: Either it minimizes all trade relations with Venezuela, or increases the trade in gold," he added.

Close relations between Ankara and Caracas are likely to strain relations between Turkey and the US if the latter insists on enforcing sanctions on Venezuelan gold, as has previously happened between the two over US sanctions on Iran.

However, Karol Wasilewski, an analyst at the Warsaw-based Polish Institute of International Affairs, disagrees that there is a direct comparison.

"Although it may seem that, in Venezuela, Turkey is trying to repeat the 'Iran' approach, for now we lack evidence that it has substantially violated American sanctions," he told Arab News.

"Diplomacy between Turkey and US has been so intense that I think both countries will sort the issue out, especially if the US decides to use the leverage it has over Turkey in terms of its economy and role in Syria."



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Venezuela's Guaido courts Russia; powers divided on Maduro
Venezuela detains Colombian, Spanish, French journalists

[US Senate wants troops to stay in Syria, Afghanistan](#)

Author:

Fri, 2019-02-01 22:52

WASHINGTON: The Republican-led US Senate advanced largely symbolic legislation on Thursday opposing plans for any abrupt withdrawal of troops from Syria and Afghanistan.

The Senate voted 68-23 in favor of a non-binding amendment, drafted by Republican Majority Leader Mitch McConnell saying it was the sense of the Senate that militant groups in both countries continue to pose a "serious threat" to the US.

McConnell said he had introduced an amendment to a broader Middle East

security bill urging a “continued commitment” until Al-Qaeda, Daesh and other groups are defeated.

“We’re not the world’s policemen, but we are the leader of the free world, and it’s incumbent upon the United States to lead, to maintain a global coalition against terror and to stand with our partners,” McConnell said in a speech in the Senate.

The procedural vote to cut off debate meant that the amendment would be added to a broader Middle East security bill likely to come up for a final Senate vote next week.

The amendment acknowledges progress against Daesh and Al-Qaeda in Syria and Afghanistan but warns that “a precipitous withdrawal” without effective efforts to secure gains could destabilize the region and create a vacuum that could be filled by Iran or Russia.

It calls upon the Trump administration to certify conditions have been met for the groups’ “enduring defeat” before any significant withdrawal from Syria or Afghanistan.

Thursday’s Senate action marked the second time in two months that the Republican-led Senate has supported a measure going against Trump’s foreign policy, although legislation to change his policies has yet to become law.

The potential impact of Thursday’s vote was uncertain, since the amendment McConnell offered was non-binding and there has been no indication of when, if ever, the broader Middle East security bill would come up for a House vote.

Trump has decided to withdraw 2,000 US troops from Syria on the grounds that Daesh militants no longer pose a threat, saying on Twitter on Wednesday, “We have beaten them” as he disputed Senate testimony by his director of national intelligence, Dan Coats, on Tuesday that the group still posed a threat.

Trump said earlier on Thursday he would bring American troops home if a peace deal were reached to end 17 years of war in Afghanistan. The US and the Taliban have sketched the outlines for an eventual peace accord, a US special envoy said on Monday, but there was no sign the insurgent group had accepted key US demands.



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Civilians fleeing in eastern Syria need transit site, aid in winter:
UNHCR Kabul control slips in Afghanistan amid US talks with Taliban

[Australia admits 'may have killed' civilians in Mosul raid](#)

Author:

AFP

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Sat, 2019-02-02 00:49

SYDNEY: Australia on Friday acknowledged it may have killed as many as 18 civilians in an air strike on Mosul two years ago, during a massive and ultimately successful campaign to dislodge extremists.

Following an internal investigation, the Australian Defence Force said coalition raids against Daesh positions in the then-occupied northern Iraqi city on June 13, 2017 "may have caused civilian casualties."

"The coalition assesses that between six and 18 civilians may have been killed," during strikes on the Al Shafaar neighborhood.

Air Marshal Mel Hupfeld indicated there was no firm information about the number of deaths or whether they came as a result of the Australian strike, or from other coalition members.

The intense aerial bombardment to retake what had been Iraq's second-largest city has already been the subject of intense scrutiny, with the US-led coalition admitting over 1,100 civilian casualties.

A total of 30,008 strikes against Daesh were carried out between August 2014 and the end of August 2018, with the Mosul campaign being particularly intense.

Critics have alleged the coalition strategy leaned too much on overwhelming air power. While quicker and posing fewer risks for coalition forces, they allege it put civilians at greater risk.

Monitoring group Airwars says the number of civilian deaths acknowledged by the coalition is well below the true toll of the bombing campaign, estimating that at least 7,468 civilians were killed.

Daesh was known to hold civilians as human shields in a deliberate effort to evade detection, deter air strikes and shape Western public opinion against the war.

Hupfeld said the Australian strike was requested by Iraqi security forces and was in "full compliance with the law of armed conflict and applicable rules of engagement."

"The Australian Defence Force takes all feasible precautions to minimize the risk of civilian casualties."

Ahead of the strike, seven extremists were identified in a building and adjacent courtyard, armed with heavy weapons.

They were hit with a "500lb precision guided munition" which "achieved the effect desired."

Australia's defense forces said the civilian casualties were in a nearby building.



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After shedding Daesh, Mosul embraces makeovers
After years of silence, music fills streets of Iraq's Mosul