

Pope Francis and Al-Azhar's Sheikh Ahmed Al-Tayeb sign declaration of fraternity in Abu Dhabi

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ABU DHABI: The first day of the historic visit by Pope Francis to the Arabian Peninsula ended with the signing of a "Human Fraternity Document" by the leader of the Roman Catholic Church and one of the highest authorities in Islam, Sheikh Ahmed Al-Tayeb, grand imam of Al-Azhar Mosque.

The declaration of fraternity – which pledges the religious leaders to work together in perpetuity and to reject violence and radicalism – was also signed by Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al-Maktoum, prime minister of the UAE, which hosted the ceremony in its capital Abu Dhabi.

The pope told an audience: "Fraternity is established here at the roots of our common humanity, as a vocation contained in God's plan of creation." His address centered on the themes of fraternity, education, justice, and human development built on inclusion.

"There is no alternative," he added. "We either build the future together, or there will not be a future. Religions, in particular, cannot renounce the urgent task of building bridges between peoples and cultures." The speech was delivered in Italian translated into Arabic for most in the audience.

Al-Tayeb said: "The document is historic, and it calls for policymakers to stop bloodshed and conflict. Muslims must protect their Christian brothers. I will work with my brother and friend Pope Francis to protect all communities."

The grand imam added: "It is encouraging to see the UAE investing in human resources, and especially the youth. Far-sightedness and wisdom transformed the UAE into a bright country that hosts such a meeting."

He said: "Muslims in Western countries must follow and respect the rules and regulations of the countries in which they reside."

The Western media "exploited" the 9/11 attacks in the US "to show Islam negatively as a bloodthirsty religion, and to show Muslims as savage barbarians who pose a danger and threat to modern societies," he added, quoting numerous Qur'anic verses about the value of life.

The pope aimed a slanted barb at modern economic inequality, saying: "The world's religions also have the task of reminding us that greed for profit renders the heart lifeless, and that the laws of the current market, demanding everything immediately, do not benefit encounter, dialogue and family ... Religions should be the voice of the least, who are not statistics but brothers and sisters."

The route of [#PopeFrancis](#) through the [#UAE](#)'s capital [#AbuDhabi](#) on

the first full day of his trip. <https://t.co/VU0o20qDSv>
[#PopeFrancisinUAE](#) [#PopeinUAE](#) pic.twitter.com/xnJ5SYeazP

– Arab News (@arabnews) [February 4, 2019](#)

He added: “Here, in the desert, a way of fruitful development has been opened which, beginning from the creation of jobs, offers hope to many persons from a variety of nations, cultures and beliefs.”

He continued: “Religious freedom is not limited to freedom of worship, but to others as brothers in humanity ... We must have the courage to accept and recognize freedom of the other.”

The pope also held out the promise of further visits to Islamic countries, saying: “It is in this spirit that I look forward to concrete opportunities for meeting, not only here but in the entire beloved region, a focal point of the Middle East.”

Al-Maktoum offered a deed for the plot of land on which the first church in the UAE was built. There are an estimated 76 churches and other non-Muslim places of worship in the country.







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[Pope Francis visits the UAE](#)

Pope Francis meets Muslim leaders in Abu Dhabi on historic UAE visit
Pope's visit generating hope for a new era of tolerance in the Gulf

[Jordan to host new talks on Yemen prisoner swap](#)

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AMMAN: Yemeni government delegates and Houthi militia leaders will reconvene in Jordan from Tuesday for a new round of talks to thrash out a deal on a prisoner exchange, the UN said.

The swap, which could involve up to 15,000 detainees from each side, was

agreed in principle as a confidence-building measure ahead of peace talks in Sweden in December.

In mid-January, representatives of Yemen's warring parties held two days of talks in Amman during which they submitted lists of prisoners they wanted to see released to UN mediators.

Those talks were also attended by representatives of the United Nations, which brokered the swap agreement, and the International Committee of the Red Cross, which will supervise its implementation.

On Wednesday government and rebel representatives would meet again in Amman for "technical" talks to "discuss the steps taken... (by both sides) to finalize the list of prisoners," a UN statement said.

UN envoy Martin Griffiths and ICRC president Peter Maurer "are scheduled to take part in the first day" of the talks, the statement said without specifying how many days the meetings would last.

It also described the Jordan talks as "important," and thanked the government in Amman for hosting them.

At the end of January, the Iran-linked Houthis released a Saudi soldier under the deal while the Arab coalition supporting the internationally recognized government set free seven Houthi prisoners.

That prisoner swap was the first to take place since Yemen's warring sides agreed in Sweden a deal that involved a cease-fire in the lifeline port city of Hodeida.

For nearly four years, the Houthis have been locked in a war with the regional pro-government military coalition, which includes Saudi Arabia.

Some 10,000 people have been killed, according to the World Health Organization.



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[Hezbollah claims it would not use Lebanon ministry funds for own benefit](#)

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Mon, 2019-02-04 16:56

BEIRUT: The leader of Lebanon's Hezbollah said on Monday that it would never use state funds for its benefit and that the new health minister was close to the Iran-backed movement but not a member.

"This is a ministry for all the Lebanese people," Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah said in a televised speech.

The US State Department urged the new Lebanese cabinet last week to ensure resources do not go to Hezbollah, after the group assumed three seats,

including naming the health minister.



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[Trapped in shrinking Syria holdout, Daesh turns to human shields](#)

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Sun, 2019-02-03 14:24

BAGHOUZ: On a rooftop near the front line with the Daesh group's collapsing caliphate in eastern Syria, a US-backed fighter and his comrades sip tea as they await orders to restart the battle.

The Syrian Democratic Forces halted their ground assault on Daesh's final shreds of territory last week, saying the militants are increasingly using civilians as human shields to block the advance.

In the desert hamlet of Baghouz, held mostly by the SDF, 22-year-old Mohammed Ibrahim Mohammed points toward a dirt mound separating areas under their control and the militants.

"Since we arrived to this point almost six days ago we haven't moved forward," explained the young fatigue-clad man from the nearby town of Hajjin, who joined the SDF just five months ago.

"The fighting has stopped as we wait for the remaining civilians to leave," he said.

Just a few dozen meters away, on the other side of the dirt berm, trucks, motorcycles and cars driven by Daesh fighters zip along the front line and out toward white tents further away, surrounded by women wearing long black robes.

"These are all Daesh houses," said Mohammed, using an Arabic acronym for Daesh.

"Sometimes we see women coming to take wood" from nearby palm trees, he said. The streets of Baghouz, which the SDF entered two weeks ago, are lined with the burnt-out skeletons of cars and bullet-pocked buildings, some of them completely destroyed.

SDF fighters group in clusters around some of the structures, tending small fires and exchanging small talk and cigarettes.

Others perch on balconies and roofs with a view over the other side.

On one terrace, a fighter uses binoculars to get a closer look at militants just a stone's throw away.

As the SDF, with air support from the US-led coalition, ramped up its offensive in recent weeks, thousands of civilians have poured out of the beleaguered extremist-held pocket.

More than 36,000 people, mostly women and children from militant families, have fled since December via humanitarian corridors opened up by the SDF, according to the Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights.

That figure also includes some 3,100 extremists, the war monitor added.

But while hundreds of people a day reached SDF-held territory early last month, the flow has slowed to a trickle.

Recent arrivals say there are still many civilians and foreign fighters in the besieged pocket of territory.

With the final push paused, the eerie quiet is only broken by intermittent gunfire and the occasional roar of a coalition airstrike or artillery fire targeting extremist positions.

In the neighboring village of Al-Shaafa, the SDF's spokesman for the Deir Ezzor region said the assault has been put on hold to protect civilians.

"The jihadists are using the civilians as human shields to block our advance," Adnan Afrin told AFP.

That has forced women and children, including members of fighters' families, to remain close to the battle.

"They are putting the civilians on the front lines," he said, adding that airstrikes and artillery continued to target positions further back, "where the jihadists are concentrated."

IS has shown a pattern of trapping civilians among its fighters in order to slow offensives as its cross-border "caliphate," proclaimed in 2014, has

withered under multiple offensives.

As the extremists withdraw, they leave minefields and booby traps to slow their attackers and prevent civilians from escaping.

To help protect those that remain cornered, the SDF is pushing to open new "safe corridors" to help civilians escape before the US-backed force delivers the final blow, said Afrin.

And while SDF leaders prefer not to speculate on when the battle against the militants will finish, they are clear it will end by military means.

"We do not negotiate with terrorists," Afrin said.



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[Palestinian wounded by Israeli fire dies: Gaza ministry](#)

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Sun, 2019-02-03 16:58

GAZA CITY: A Palestinian died Sunday from gunshot wounds inflicted by Israeli soldiers during violent protests along the Gaza Strip's border, the enclave's health ministry said.

Ahmed Abu Jamal, 30, was wounded during clashes in Beit Lahiya in the north of Gaza on January 29, said ministry spokesman Ashraf Al-Qudra.

Unrest has shaken the frontier between Gaza and Israel since March as residents of the blockaded enclave have staged mass protests.

More than 30 Palestinians were wounded by Israeli fire on Friday as the weekly demonstrations again turned violent.

At least 247 Palestinians have been killed by Israeli fire in Gaza since March 30, the majority during border protests but also by tank fire and air strikes.

Two Israeli soldiers have been killed during the same period.

Israel says its actions are necessary to defend the border and stop mass incursions into its territory.

It accuses Gaza's Islamist ruler Hamas, with whom it has fought three wars since 2008, of seeking to use the protests as cover to carry out violence.



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