

Russia, Iran, Turkey agree on convening committee to draw up new Syria constitution

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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

Morocco arrests suspect after two Scandinavian tourists murdered

Author:

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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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Tension as Israel rolls out barbed wire on Lebanon border
Israeli military finds 4th Hezbollah tunnel from Lebanon

[Speaking up for the mother tongue: How Arabic is being retooled for the 21st century](#)

Mon, 2018-12-17 23:11

DUBAI: Far from being in decline, the Arabic language could surge in popularity if governments bring teaching techniques into the 21st century, experts believe.

According to leading linguists and scholars, headlines in recent years warning of the “death” of Arabic ignore the true picture.

Their comments come as the world marks UN Arabic Language Day on Dec. 18. Each year UNESCO collaborates with the Saudi Arabian delegation – with the support of the Sultan bin Abdulaziz Al-Saud Foundation – to recognize

Arabic's immense contribution to science and culture, including philosophy and the arts.

Fabio d'Emilio, of the education group Pearson, said that Arabic could be used increasingly across the world if institutions modernized teaching approaches in the classroom.

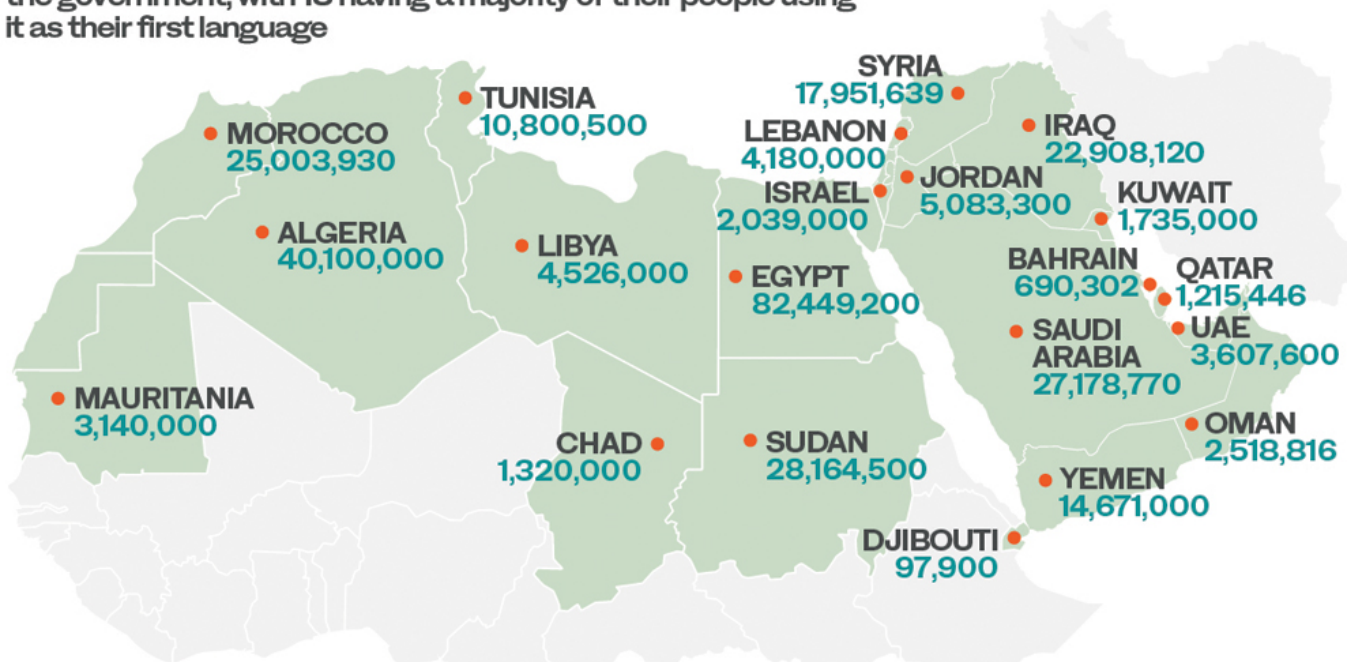
"Just look at the hundreds of millions of Arabic speakers worldwide. There are 26 countries where Arabic is officially recognized by the government, with 18 having most people using it as their first language," he said.

"Globally, there are 1.8 billion Muslims in the world who read the Qur'an and understand the phonetics of the Arabic language. Arabic is a fundamental language worldwide, not just in Arabic countries."

After Mandarin Chinese, English, Hindustani and Spanish, Arabic is the fifth most widely spoken language in the world, with an estimated 422 million speakers.

ARABIC SPEAKING COUNTRIES

There are 26 countries where Arabic is officially recognized by the government, with 18 having a majority of their people using it as their first language



"If Arabic was taught in a slightly different way, it would actually be a growing, not a declining, language," said d'Emilio. "It is having access to learning Arabic – and learning the language in the right way – that is a problem worldwide."

Many education institutions continue to teach Arabic in its classical form, and often in an antiquated way, he said.

"From our experience, the language is still being taught as it was 20 years ago. We need to make it more engaging and relevant."

D'Emilio said that changes at government level were needed across the Middle

Eastern to modernize Arabic teaching. He cited Saudi Arabia, the UAE and, more recently, Lebanon as countries looking to transform teaching methods.

“Saudi Arabia is thinking about reform when it comes to teaching Arabic. The country is home to 34 million people, so its reforms could be hugely influential in the wider Arab world.”

The Kingdom has introduced wide-ranging initiatives to promote Arabic. The Prince Sultan Program for Arabic Language, in cooperation with UNESCO, was launched in 2007 by the late Prince Sultan bin Abdulaziz to support and promote Arabic language and culture within the UN framework. A \$3 million, five-year plan was launched in 2016.

This year, the foundation will celebrate Arabic Language Day at UNESCO’s headquarters in Paris. Saleh bin Ibrahim Al-Khulaifi, the foundation’s director general, as well as Saudi representative to UNESCO Ibrahim Al-Balawi and Nada Al-Nashif, assistant director, will take part in the event.



“The board of trustees ... is keen to build bridges of cooperation with international and regional bodies concerned with dialogue and communication, thus enhancing the true image of Arabs and Muslims,” Al-Khulaifi said.

“The Sultan bin Abdulaziz Al-Saud Foundation has been a strategic partner of UNESCO for about 20 years (promoting) Arabic as a channel to bridge the gap between different cultures,” he said.

“The foundation has adopted an integrated program that ensures cooperation agreements with US, European, and Asian universities, and international cultural and humanitarian organizations.”

Other countries, such as the UAE through the Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Knowledge Foundation, have also rolled out initiatives to preserve Arabic and promote its use across social media channels.

Pearson is working with the Kingdom and the UAE on its “bilArabi” initiative – a new Arabic language program for schools that incorporates digital and interactive approaches. It focuses on classical Arabic, but also uses more commonly used, accessible Arabic words to encourage students to engage with the language.

“The complication with (learning) Arabic now is you have classical Arabic that doesn’t reflect the present-day use of the language,” said d’Emilio. “What is important ... is to teach Arabic in a 21st-century way.”

As countries in the Middle East, such as Saudi Arabia and the UAE, become home to increasingly diversified populations, the importance of keeping Arabic alive becomes more relevant, he said.

FASTFACTS

422m

An estimated 422 million people worldwide speak Arabic, with the language used daily by more than 290 million people.

5th

Arabic is the world's fifth most popular language, after Mandarin Chinese, English, Hindustani and Spanish.

30

About 30 dialects of Arabic are used worldwide.

26

Arabic is officially recognized by the governments of 26 nations, with most people using it as their first language in 18 countries.

Dec.18

Arabic Language Day is held every year on Dec. 18.

“In the UAE, for example, more Emiratis are going to private schools and learning in English. Unfortunately, for the young generation, they see opportunities in life coming from English. Slowly they are starting to lose a little of the Arabic language and then, in turn, the Arabic culture.

“But it is integral for people to have proper access to Arabic to stay relevant in their own countries. Language is a fundamental pillar of cultural identity – you cannot maintain a cultural identity without maintaining the language.”

UN Arabic Language Day coincides with the day in 1973 when the UN General Assembly adopted Arabic as its sixth official language.

Audrey Azoulay, director-general of UNESCO, said: “Arabic Language Day is a chance to celebrate the language’s great contribution to human civilization, notably through its unique arts, architecture, calligraphy and literature. The language has also been a conduit, channeling knowledge in science, medicine, astronomy, mathematics, philosophy and history.”

Shireen Sinno, director of the Arabic Language Center in the Middle East, believes there is a growing desire among non-native speakers to embrace the language.

“Many expats living in the Middle East realize that Arabic can help expand their social networks and help communication with Arabic-speaking business colleagues and partners,” she said. “Learners also regard the language as a way of delving deeper into Arabic culture in order to enhance their experience of living among Arabs.”

Like d’Emilio, Sinno believes Arabic teaching needs to be modernized to ensure it remains one of the most widely used languages across the globe.

“Many young learners, unfortunately, do not develop into fluent speakers of Arabic, despite years of Arabic tuition. Efforts should be made to make both the methods and materials more engaging.

“There may be a benefit in exposing students to colloquial Arabic, in addition to the usually taught classical Arabic. This is one way to bring the language used by Arabic speakers closer to the classrooms, and minimize the difference between the classroom and the real world.”



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Why Brexit means Brits should learn ArabicArabic Kindle: authors allowed to publish eBooks in Arabic

[Netanyahu’s son blocked on Facebook for anti-Muslim posts](#)

Author:

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Mon, 2018-12-17 21:14

JERUSALEM: Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's eldest, Yair, tweeted on Sunday that Facebook blocked his page for 24 hours over apparent anti-Muslim posts and called the leading social network a "dictatorship."

In a message posted Thursday on his Facebook page after deadly Palestinian attacks, Yair Netanyahu had called for "all Muslims (to) leave" Israel.

"Do you know where there are no attacks? In Iceland and in Japan where coincidentally there are no Muslims," the prime minister's son wrote.

In another post he wrote that there were only two possible solutions for peace, either "all Jews leave (Israel) or all Muslims leave."

"I prefer the second option," he added.

His comments came after two soldiers were shot dead on Thursday at a central West Bank bus station near a settlement.

On the same day, a baby prematurely delivered after his mother was shot and wounded in a separate attack nearby on December 9 also died.

Facebook deleted Yair Netanyahu's posts, prompting him to take to Twitter to criticize the social networking giant, calling it a "dictatorship of thought."

Critics of the prime minister have often attacked Yair as a grown man living in the premier's residence despite having no official role and benefitting from a bodyguard, a driver and other perks.

They say the parents of the 27-year-old are grooming him for future political power in an attempt to establish a ruling dynasty.



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[Yair Netanyahu](#)

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Netanyahu's adviser accused of sexual assault resigns Israel police recommend indicting Netanyahu in third graft probe