

Turkey will inform UNESCO about Hagia Sophia moves – foreign minister

Author:

Reuters

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ISTANBUL: Turkey will inform the United Nation's cultural body UNESCO about changes to Istanbul's ancient Hagia Sophia after Ankara converted the museum back into a mosque, Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu said on Monday.

On Friday, a Turkish court ruled that the building's conversion to a museum in 1934 was unlawful and President Tayyip Erdogan, declaring it a mosque, said the first prayers would be held there within two weeks.

UNESCO said on Friday it would review the status of the monument as a World Heritage Site following Erdogan's enouncement.

Cavusoglu said Ankara was surprised by UNESCO's reaction and would let it know of further steps that will be taken regarding Hagia Sophia, which was a Byzantine church for nine centuries before the Ottomans converted it to a mosque.

Turkey is sensitive about protecting its historical character, he said. "We have to protect our ancestors' heritage. The function can be this way or that way – it does not matter," Cavusoglu told state broadcaster TRT Haber.

Asked about criticism and expressions of concern from Greece, Pope Francis and others, Cavusoglu said the decision to turn Hagia Sophia into a mosque was lawful.

"We respect everyone's view even if we don't agree with it but we strongly reject comments made in a way that infringes on Turkey's sovereign rights," he said.

Greece condemned the decision on Friday, saying it would have repercussions not only on relations between the two countries, but on Turkey's ties with the European Union. Pope Francis said on Sunday he was hurt by the decision.



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Hagia Sophia verdict seen as Erdogan's attempt to 'mask economic failure' Turkish court paves way to turn Hagia Sophia into a mosque, Erdogan signs decree

[Locust invasion in Yemen stokes food insecurity fears](#)

Author:

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AL-MUKALLA: Locust swarms have swept over farms in central, southern and eastern parts of Yemen, ravaging crops and stoking fears of food insecurity.

Residents and farmers in the provinces of Marib, Hadramout, Mahra and Abyan said that billions of locusts had invaded farms, cities and villages, devouring important seasonal crops such as dates and causing heavy losses.

"This is like a storm that razes anything it encounters," Hussein Ben Al-Sheikh Abu Baker, an agricultural official from Hadramout's Sah district, told Arab News on Sunday.

Images and videos posted on social media showed layers of creeping locusts laying waste to lemon farms in Marb, dates and alfalfa farms in Hadramout and flying swarms plunging cities into darkness. "The locusts have eaten all kinds of green trees, including the sesban tree. The losses are huge," Abu Baker added.

Heavy rains and flash floods have hit several Yemeni provinces over the last couple of months, creating fruitful conditions for locusts to reproduce. Farmers complained that locusts had wiped out entire seasonal crops that are grown after rains.

Abu Baker said that he visited several affected farms in Hadramout, where farmers told him that if the government would not compensate them for the damage that it should at least get ready for a second potential locust wave that might occur in 10 days.

"The current swarms laid eggs that are expected to hatch in 10 days. We are bracing for the second wave of the locusts."

Last year, the UN said that the war in Yemen had disrupted vital monitoring and control efforts and several waves of locusts to hit neighboring countries had originated from Yemen.

This is like a storm that razes anything it encounters.

Hussein Ben Al-Sheikh Abu Baker, a Yemeni agricultural official

Yemeni government officials, responsible for battling the spread of locusts, have complained that fighting and a lack of funding have obstructed vital operations for combating the insects.

Ashor Al-Zubairi, the director of the Locust Control Unit at the Ministry of Agriculture in Hadramout's Seiyun city, said that the ministry was carrying out a combat operation funded by the Food and Agriculture Organization in Hadramout and Mahra, but complained that the operation might fall short of its target due to a lack of funding and equipment.

"The spraying campaign will end in a week which is not enough to cover the entire plagued areas," Al-Zubairi told Arab News. "We suggested increasing the number of spraying equipment or extending the campaign."

He said that a large number of villagers had lost their source of income after the locusts ate crops and sheep food, predicting that the outbreak would likely last for at least two weeks if urgent control operations were not intensified and fighting continued. "Combating teams could not cross into some areas in Marib due to fighting."

The widespread locust invasion comes as the World Food Programme (WFP) on July 10 sent an appeal for urgent funds for its programs in Yemen, warning that people would face starvation otherwise.

"There are 10 million people who are facing (an) acute food shortage, and we are ringing the alarm bell for these people, because their situation is deteriorating because of escalation and because of the lockdowns, the constraints and the social-economic impact of the coronavirus," WFP spokeswoman Elisabeth Byrs told reporters in Geneva.



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US ambassador to Yemen says ready to solve Safer tanker crisis

[Tunisian families battle to repatriate children of militants](#)

Author:

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KAIROUAN, TUNISIA: Over WhatsApp from Tunisia, Taheyya has watched her grandchildren grow up in Syria, where her son joined a militant group. She hopes one day to be able to hold the three surviving siblings in her arms, but for now they are stuck in a displacement camp in the war-torn country.

“These are our grandchildren. All we are asking is to be able to take care of them, for them to live somewhere other than in war, poverty and ignorance,” Taheyya said.

Like others AFP spoke to, she preferred not to provide her surname for fear of reprisals against the children.

For three years, Taheyya has done the rounds of ministries and NGOs to try to repatriate her three-year-old granddaughter and two grandsons, aged five and six.

Their father left for Syria in 2012, where he joined Daesh group and was killed.

She said the eldest grandchild needed treatment for a head injury, and two other siblings have already died because of a lack of medical care.

In a folder, Taheyya carefully keeps a bundle of documents that sums up their torturous lives: Pixelated photos, identity papers issued by the fleeting IS caliphate.

The children now live in a camp on the Turkish-Syrian border with their mother, a young Syrian who was married when she was not yet 14.

Tunisians have constituted one of the largest groups of foreign militants in Syria, Iraq and Libya since 2011, with almost 3,000 departures, according to the Tunisian authorities.

Like Taheyya, dozens of other families are trying to repatriate at least 140 Tunisian children stuck in conflict zones, where their parents are suspected of joining jihadist groups.

FASTFACT

The Observatory of Rights and Freedoms of Tunis, which is in contact with the families, counts 104 children in Syria, almost all of them in camps. Three quarters were born there and are under the age of six.

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Another 36 are in Libya, either detained by militias or being looked after by the Red Crescent.

While public opinion at home is hostile toward the return of militants, President Kais Saied raised families' hopes in January by bringing back six orphans from Libya and promising to "speed up the repatriation" of the others. But since then, there have been no further returns.

From a middle-class family in central Kairouan, Taheyya's son was one of the first in his neighbourhood to leave for Syria.

A cook in the merchant navy, he survived a hostage-taking by Somali pirates and later joined groups fighting the regime in Syria.

He opened a restaurant in the city of Raqqa, once the de-facto capital of Daesh in Syria, and was killed in late 2018 while trying to flee, according to his family.

"He had asked me to take care of his children," his younger brother said, adding that he himself had travelled to Turkey twice but had failed to obtain their return.

"We talk to them every two or three days, when the network allows, but we have gone for several months without news," Taheyya said.

"I have never been able to hug them."

Officials at the Tunisian Foreign Ministry said that "the will exists" for repatriations, pointing the finger at foreign authorities and the novel coronavirus pandemic that has slowed down discussions.

The Foreign Affairs Bureau of the Kurdish administration in northeastern Syria denied the Tunisian government had contacted them about repatriations.

AFP correspondents in Syria said they saw many Tunisians leaving the former Daesh bastion of Baghouz during the final battle of 2019. People there were taken to the Kurdish-run Al-Hol camp, now home to thousands of Daesh wives and their children. No specific figures were available for the number of Tunisians currently at Al-Hol.



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New Tunisia protests over unemployment
Tunisian parliament forms panel to investigate allegations against prime minister

[Beirut's most famous antiques market hit by dollar crisis](#)

Author:

Mon, 2020-07-13 02:15

BEIRUT: Lebanon's markets are slowly dying due to the severe economic turmoil, which reached its peak during the last three months. The antiques market thrived for decades, even surviving the civil war and its horrors, but it has faltered in the face of the country's dollar crisis.

In Beirut's Hawd Al-Wilaya District, narrow streets criss-cross and stores

display antiques, furnishings, paintings and carpets at their entrance. The market, which for decades has been known to Lebanese and foreign customers, stands empty with no customers or even passersby.

Mohammed Mahmoud Hammoud, nicknamed the Pasha, is the oldest shop owner in the market. His grandfather had the title "Pasha" during the Ottoman rule of Lebanon. He inherited the antiques trade from his father and opened his own store in 1957.

He sits at the entrance of the market on a wooden chest inlaid with copper. The market is empty. "It is true that we sell luxuries, but these goods attracted people from Marrakech and the Arabian Gulf states as well as foreign ambassadors, Lebanese political figures, and intellectuals, all of whom wanted to own masterpieces," he told Arab News. "But now nobody comes here because \$100, the price of an old lamp, for example, has become equivalent to LBP800,000, which is more than the salary of an ordinary employee, and tourists have not returned to Lebanon."

SPEEDREAD

Eighty shops faced the threat of closure, according to Faraj Ammar, who has an antiques shop in the market.

Faraj Ammar, who has an antiques shop in the market, said about 80 shops faced the threat of closure. "The owners of these shops inherited the profession from their grandparents," he told Arab News. "During the Ottoman rule, the Wali (ruler) of Beirut lived in this locality, which attracted foreigners and high officials, who visited the surrounding shops to buy souvenirs for their home countries."

The market developed as a result of the Palestinian displacement to Lebanon in 1948, internal migration to Beirut from other parts of Lebanon, and people selling the old furniture they owned or inherited, he said. There were also ancient families who loved antiques and old furnishings to decorate their palaces in Beirut.

"The antiques trade developed, and traders started buying these pieces from India, Iran, Turkey, and European countries to sell them in Lebanon. Princes from the Arabian Gulf states used to visit these shops to buy pieces to decorate their palaces in summer regions in Lebanon or in their home countries. They haven't been visiting Lebanon for 7 or 8 years. Among the items we sold were ones worth \$50,000 and over 400 years old."

Ammar said that the profession had been affected during the war, but it had not been devastated. "We maintained our solidarity and disassociated the market from what was happening around it, despite that we were close to the lines of contact created by the war. We survived, and the market flourished in the 1990s following the war and the appointment of the late Prime Minister Rafik Hariri. Today, due to economic conditions and lack of tourism, we have a feeling that the market is breathing its last."

Eyad Khabbازه rents a store in the market and sells modern art paintings by Lebanese and Syrian painters. "I closed my store two months ago with the rise of the dollar exchange rate because I could no longer afford to pay the rent nor the electricity and other bills," he told Arab News. "People no longer

buy art because it is considered a luxury in this difficult time.” He went to the market every day and could sell some of his goods from home if he had a customer. “I have given up so many things so that I can continue to live. I canceled my health and car insurance.” He knew of six stores that had closed and their owners, most of whom were tenants, were doing other things like selling vegetables. “The antiques market never closed before 8 p.m. but today, it is closing at around 4 p.m. in light of the blackouts and scarcity of customers.” Youssef Ammar said that goods used to be shipped from Europe but this practice stopped two years ago as purchasing power had declined. “People now cannot absorb what happened,” he told Arab News. “When we say that an item is worth \$50, the customers are convinced, but when they convert it to Lebanese pounds, they find it very pricey and they leave. What was for \$1,500 meant LBP1.5 million before, but now it means LBP8 million. If we sell in pounds, we find ourselves losing the next day as the dollar exchange rate continues to soar in the black market. Now we take life one day at a time, and we do not know for how long we will survive.”



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UN approves aid to Syria's rebel area through 1 crossing
COVID-19 infects Syrians in Lebanon, spreads in refugee camp

UN approves aid to Syria's rebel area through 1 crossing

Mon, 2020-07-13 02:12

NEW YORK: Russia scored a victory for its ally Syria by forcing the Security Council to limit humanitarian aid deliveries to the country's mainly rebel-held northwest to just one crossing point from Turkey, a move that Western nations say will cut a lifeline for 1.3 million people.

Russia on Saturday argued that aid should be delivered from within the country across conflict lines, and says only one crossing point is needed. UN officials and humanitarian groups argued unsuccessfully – along with the vast majority of the UN Security Council – that the two crossing points in operation until their mandate expired Friday were essential for getting help to millions of needy people in Syria's northwest, especially with the first case of COVID-19 recently reported in the region.

The Security Council vote approving a single crossing from Turkey was 12-0, with Russia, China and the Dominican Republic abstaining.

The vote capped a week of high-stakes rivalry pitting Russia and China against the 13 other council members. An overwhelming majority voted twice to maintain the two crossings from Turkey, but Russia and China vetoed both resolutions – the 15th and 16th veto by Russia of a Syria resolution since the conflict began in 2011 and the ninth and 10th by China.

Germany and Belgium, which had sponsored the widely supported resolutions for two crossing points, finally had to back down to the threat of another Russian veto. The resolution they put forward Saturday authorized only a single crossing point from Turkey for a year.

In January, Russia also scored a victory for Syria, using its veto threat to force the Security Council to adopt a resolution reducing the number of crossing points for aid deliveries from four to two, from Turkey to the northwest. It also cut in half the yearlong mandate that had been in place since cross-border deliveries began in 2014 to six months.

Before adopting the resolution on Saturday, the council rejected two amendments proposed by Russia, including one suggesting that US and EU sanctions on Syria were impeding humanitarian aid. That contention was vehemently rejected by the Trump administration and the EU, which noted their sanctions include exemptions for humanitarian deliveries. It also rejected an amendment from China.

Russia's deputy UN ambassador, Dmitry Polyansky, said after the vote that from the beginning Moscow had proposed one crossing – from Bab Al-Hawa to Idlib – and that Saturday's resolution could have been adopted weeks ago. He said Russia abstained in the vote because negotiations over the resolution were marred by "clumsiness, disrespect."

Polyansky accused Western nations on the council of "unprecedented heights" of hypocrisy, saying they were ready to jeopardize cross-border aid over the references to unilateral sanctions.

He said cross-border aid to Syria's northwest doesn't comply with international law because the UN has no presence in the region, which he described as being controlled "by international terrorists and fighters" that

make it impossible to control and monitor who gets aid. German Ambassador Christoph Heusgen retorted that while Russia talks about delivery of aid across conflict lines, “in practice it doesn’t” happen. He said his side fought to maintain multiple crossing points for aid, including the Al-Yaroubiya crossing point from Iraq in the northeast that was closed in January, because that is what is needed for efficient delivery of aid to millions in need – and he asked Polyansky “this is clumsy?” “This is what we tried to do over these past weeks, to get the optimum to the population,” Heusgen said. US Ambassador Kelly Craft told the council: “Today’s outcome leaves us sickened and outraged at the loss of the Bab Al-Salaam and Al Yarubiyah border crossings.” “Behind those locked gates are millions of women, children, and men who believed that the world had heard their pleas. Their health and welfare are now at great risk,” she said. Still, Craft called the authorization of access through Bab Al-Hawa for 12 months “a victory” in light of Russia and China’s “willingness to use their veto to compel a dramatic reduction in humanitarian assistance.” “This solemn victory must not end our struggle to address the mounting human needs in Syria – that fight is far from over,” Craft said. Belgium and Germany said in a joint statement that 1.3 million people, including 800,000 displaced Syrians, live in the Aleppo area, including 500,000 children who received humanitarian aid through the Bab Al-Salam crossing – and now have that aid cut off. “Today is yet another sad day. It is a sad day for this council, but mostly, it is a sad day for the Syrian people of that region.,” they said. “Both Yarubiyah and Bab Al-Salam were vital crossings to deliver, in the most efficient way possible, the humanitarian help, those people deserve.” In a later statement, they added: “One border crossing is not enough, but no border crossings would have left the fate of an entire region in question.”



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COVID-19 infects Syrians in Lebanon, spreads in refugee camp
In a victory for Assad, UNSC approves aid to Syria's rebel area through only one crossing