

Desperate Iranians turn to graverobbing as economy collapses

Author:

Mon, 2021-06-28 19:55

LONDON: Escalating economic pressure combined with multilateral sanctions imposed on Iran have led to a spate of robberies from royal tombs and widespread looting of Iran's historical cultural sites.

"The graves and mausoleums of our kings are openly known and accessible for excavation," said one infamous thief, who has adopted an online persona modelled on Agatha Christie's detective Poirot.

"How a toiling worker became prosperous through digging for gold," reads another of his Instagram posts.

These sentiments are indicative of a wider trend in Iran; desperate individuals looting the country's rich cultural past to sustain them in the present.

The UN's body for world heritage sites, UNESCO, ranks Iran seventh in the world in heritage possession – but the country, facing perennial economic decline, is now plagued by looting and site destruction, according to the UK-based Heritage Management Organization.

"Sanctions on Iran have led to the perfect storm for antiquities looting," said Leila Amineddoleh, a lawyer specializing in art and heritage.

As the sanctions bite and Iran's wider economic system breaks down, Amineddoleh explained that "opportunistic individuals turn to archaeological theft and looting."

She added: "People have treated their cultural heritage as a resource to be extracted."

According to the UN Office for Drugs and Crime, Iran is particularly susceptible to criminal gangs: "Due to its ancient history, large number of cultural sites and geographic location, the country is vulnerable to looting, trafficking, and smuggling of its cultural property, art and antiquities."

In the past four months, 22 illegal digs were discovered at Iran's heritage sites, according to an Iranian state-backed news channel, and last week five men were arrested in the southwest of the country, accused of belonging to a gang of looters.

Officials have pledged to crack down on looting activity, but experts believe that the practice is now so widespread that it is out of their control.

"Any illegal and unauthorized excavation and metal-detecting activities aimed at pillaging our country's heritage will be met with the power of the law,"

said one colonel.

There are now regular reports of people dying in cave-ins as they search for loot and, according to Evangelos Kyriakidis, a senior lecturer in archaeology at the University of Kent and founding director of the Heritage Management Organization, these reports are just a snapshot of the wider issue.

“We receive hundreds of reports every week on illicit excavations around the country, which to my mind means there must be thousands occurring because most of them are not reported,” he said.

Referring to treasure hunters such as “Poirot” who post about their exploits for their online followers, Kyriakidis added: “People in that network are becoming audacious.”



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Basra locals float plan to display Saddam Hussein's luxury yacht

Mon, 2021-06-28 18:24

LONDON: A luxury yacht once owned by former Iraqi President Saddam Hussein could be repurposed as a floating museum in Basra, Iraq.

Built in 1980 by a Danish shipyard, the 82 meter motor-yacht was, at the time, one of the largest of its kind in the world.

After Hussein's fall from grace it was abandoned, before eventually being recovered by the Iraqi government in 2008 and donated to Basra University for use as a maritime research vessel.

But operating it as a research tool became prohibitively expensive, and now senior museum officials are reportedly seeking to feature it as part of a new exhibition.

Qahtan Alabeed, the director of Basra's Museum – housed in Hussein's former palace – wants to feature the yacht in a new project dedicated to Iraq's nautical past.

"We want to reactivate work to rebuild a number of types of boats that sailed in the (Shatt Al-Arab) river and marshes. We already have around 16," he told Boat International, a yachting website, adding that Basra's mayor backed the plan.

The ship was named Qadissiyat Saddam by the disgraced dictator, in reference to a historical battle between Persians and Arabs in which the Arabs are said to have emerged victorious against all odds. Hussein went to great lengths to draw comparisons between that ancient battle and the brutal war that took place between Iran and Iraq in the 1980s.

The vessel passed through many hands before emerging for sale in Nice in 2007. The government of Iraq, working through the French courts, then seized and repatriated it.

Now renamed Basrah Breeze, experts have warned that the museum's plan for a floating exhibit could be prohibitively expensive.

The hull alone could cost as much as \$1.5 million to restore, said one local academic, and others doubt whether anyone in Iraq has a solid and sustainable plan in place to make use of it.

Ali Douabul, the former head of the Marine Science Center where the boat was donated to, told Boat International: "If you ask me, the government has been misled to take this yacht, because they don't have the ability to use it properly or commercially.

"They thought it might be worth \$200 million – I don't know where they got

their figures from.”

The solution, he said, may lie outside of Iraq.

“Perhaps an international organization like the International Maritime Organization should take care of it, because Iraqis will not. Then it becomes world heritage.”



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[Palestinian labor minister quits amid anti-govt protests](#)

Sun, 2021-06-27 22:23

RAMALLAH: The labor minister in the Palestinian Authority resigned Sunday, a

member of his party said, as security forces braced for further protests demanding president Mahmoud Abbas step down.

The decision comes after three days of heavy protests against the Palestinian Authority (PA), triggered by the violent arrest and death in custody of an activist.

Nizar Banat, a 43-year-old known for social media videos denouncing alleged corruption within the PA, died on Thursday shortly after security forces stormed his house and violently arrested him, his family said.

New protests are slated for Sunday evening in the Israeli-occupied West Bank, in both Ramallah – the seat of the PA – and Banat's hometown of Hebron.

The left-wing Palestinian People's Party withdrew from the Fatah-led PA government due to "its lack of respect for laws and public freedoms," party member Issam Abu Bakr said.

Nasri Abu Jaish, the labor minister and the People's Party representative in the government, has therefore resigned, said Abu Bakr.

The PA has announced the opening of an investigation into Banat's death, but it has done little to appease anger on the streets.

According to the autopsy, injuries indicated Banat had been beaten on the head, chest, neck, legs and hands, with less than hour elapsing between his arrest and his death, pathologist Samir Abu Zarzour said.

On Saturday, protesters in Ramallah hurled rocks at Palestinian security forces, who opened fire with a barrage of tear gas canisters, with reports of several injured.

Protesters called for 86-year-old Abbas to quit.

Banat had registered as a candidate in Palestinian parliamentary elections, which had been set for May until Abbas postponed them indefinitely.

The original mandate of Abbas expired in 2009, and he has since governed by decree.

In May, Abbas declared that legislative and presidential polls set for May and June respectively should not be held until Israel guaranteed voting could take place in annexed east Jerusalem.

In addition to holding the presidency, Abbas is also head of Fatah and president of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), recognized internationally as representing the Palestinians.

But Fatah faces a growing challenge from its longtime rivals, the militant Islamist organization Hamas, which rules the Palestinian coastal enclave of Gaza.

The PA exercises limited powers over some 40 percent of the West Bank, occupied by Israel since the Six-Day War of 1967.

Israel, which controls all access to the territory and coordinates with the PA, directly administers the remaining 60 percent.



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[UAE says 70 percent of population vaccinated against COVID-19](#)

Sun, 2021-06-27 19:41

AMMAN: The UAE said on Sunday that 70 percent of the country's population has been vaccinated against COVID-19.

The UAE also said that 16 percent of those who have been vaccinated have tested positive for coronavirus.

The Emirates added that Beta, Delta and Alpha variants of COVID-19 are currently prevalent in the country.

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[Oman reports record number of COVID-19 deaths in 72 hours](#)

Author:

Reuters

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1624793323388995100

Sun, 2021-06-27 11:24

DUBAI: Oman reported a record number of COVID-19 infections and deaths in the past 72 hours, with 119 dying from the disease during this period, the

newspaper Oman News said on Sunday.

A total of 5,517 people were diagnosed with the virus in the same period, it said.



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