

Transfer of sphinxes to Cairo square stirs controversy

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CAIRO: In a bustling square of Egypt's capital, four sphinx-like statues stand in wooden crates ahead of a planned unveiling ceremony following their controversial transfer from historical sites.

With the bodies of lions and heads of rams, the statues had for millennia graced Karnak temple in the southern city of Luxor representing the ancient Egyptian god "Amun."

This month, the restored sandstone statues were moved to Cairo's landmark Tahrir Square, the epicenter of a 2011 popular uprising that toppled longtime ruler Hosni Mubarak.

"I am against the moving of Luxor monuments. I was especially saddened by their relocation," legislator Ahmed Idris from the city told AFP.

"Luxor has long been like an open museum which should be developed and its monuments' historical value are tied to the city," said Idris.

The statues will be the square's centerpieces, along with a 19-meter-tall (60-foot-tall) pink granite obelisk of the famed Ramses II.

The 3,000-year-old obelisk – of Ramses II facing an ancient deity as well as inscriptions of his titles – was moved from a Nile Delta archaeological site.

The relocations which came as part of government plans to renovate Tahrir Square have drawn wide criticism from archaeologists and activists.

Some petitioned President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi to stop the transfer.

Others including lawyers from a rights group filed a lawsuit citing a 1964 Venice Charter on the conservation and restoration of monuments, saying the move could "jeopardize the priceless artefacts."

Egypt signed the charter, adopted by UNESCO, in 1974.

A frenetically busy square, Tahrir in downtown Cairo has long been associated with blaring car horns, traffic jams and exhaust fumes.

It stands a short stroll away from the Egyptian Museum, a tourist magnet which holds a vast collection of precious relics.

A staging ground for major protests in Egypt, the square has undergone multiple phases of renovation since the 2011 uprising.

Its renovation plan includes unifying building facades, removing street advertisements and an overhaul of its lighting.

In December, El-Sisi said the transfer of artefacts would add "a touch of civilization" to the site.

But fears have grown over possible damage to the monuments.

"The high pollution in Tahrir Square will ruin the antiquities and accelerate their deterioration," Egyptologist Monica Hanna said in a Facebook post in December.

"A monument's value is diminished when removed from its original historical context and becomes an ornament rather than a monument," she said.

Egyptian architect Ayman Badr has said the square does not need “to be adorned with historical elements” as it “already holds historical value.” Antiquities and Tourism Minister Khaled Al-Anani has dismissed warnings that the monuments could be vandalized or be affected by pollution. Ancient relics in Egyptian museums or public spaces often suffer damage by graffiti, engravings or just being frequently touched. “No-one will be able to touch them. They will be placed on a high pedestal and surrounded by a water fountain,” Anani told a private television channel in March. He said they would undergo regular restoration and maintenance. The statues were not among those lined up on the famed Kebash (rams) avenue linking Karnak and Luxor temples, according to the minister. Mahmoud Zaki, a tour guide from Luxor, also sided with those defending the transfers. “We exhibit artefacts abroad for foreigners to enjoy... and now it’s a great honor that antiquities from Karnak temple adorn Egypt’s most popular square,” he told AFP. An unveiling ceremony is planned but an official date has yet to be announced. “It’s nonsensical that (Egyptian) obelisks could be found in public spaces across the world and none of them stands in Egypt’s most popular square,” said antiquities expert Ali Abu Deshish.



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Egypt sphinxes moved to Tahrir Square
Cleric, archaeologist clash over whether Sphinx represents Prophet Idris

Britain would not support Israeli West Bank annexation, says minister

Author:

Reuters

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Mon, 2020-05-11 14:42

LONDON: Britain would not support an Israeli annexation of parts of the West Bank as it would make a two-state solution with the Palestinians more difficult to achieve, junior Foreign Office minister James Cleverly said on Monday.

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo has said it is up to Israel whether to annex parts of the West Bank.

But Cleverly told parliament: "Our long-standing position is that we do not support the annexation of parts of the West Bank, and ... doing so could make a sustainable two-state solution harder."

Meanwhile, France is urging its European Union partners to consider threatening Israel with a tough response if it goes ahead with a de facto annexation of parts of the occupied West Bank, three EU diplomats said. Belgium, Ireland and Luxembourg also want to discuss the possibility of punitive economic measures during a foreign ministers' meeting on Friday, the diplomats told Reuters, though all member states would have to agree to any collective action.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has said cabinet discussions will start in July over extending Israeli sovereignty to Jewish settlements and the Jordan Valley in the West Bank, as was mooted under US President Donald Trump's Middle East peace plan.

Palestinians have expressed outrage at Israel's plans to cement its hold further on land it seized in the 1967 Middle East war, territory they are seeking for a state.

The EU diplomats did not give details on what punitive measures EU member states might consider to try to dissuade Israel from making the move.

In terms of procedure, EU governments would need to ask the Commission and the EU foreign policy division, the EEAS, to draw up a list of options.

All 27 EU nations would need to agree to any EU response and Israel's closest allies such as Hungary and the Czech Republic could still block even preparatory work.

An EU spokesman on Monday declined to comment on internal discussions but

said: “annexation is contrary to international law and if annexation goes ahead, the EU will act accordingly.”

Israel has long been a part of the EU’s research and innovation program Horizon 2020, which was worth nearly €80 billion between 2014 and 2020, according to the European Commission.

The EU is also Israel’s top trading partner and Israel benefits from trade preferences with the world’s largest trading bloc.

EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell said in February Trump’s plan departed from “internationally agreed parameters.” Borrell said that steps to annex Palestinian territory, “if implemented, could not pass unchallenged.”

That is a view taken by France, Belgium, Luxembourg and Ireland, according to EU diplomats.

“There is clearly a need to look at what annexation means in the context of international law and we do need to know our options,” said one senior EU diplomat involved in discussions.

“We also need to say what exactly the consequences of annexation would be, ideally as a way to stop any such move,” the diplomat said.

The Palestinians and many countries regard the West Bank settlements as illegal under the Geneva Conventions that bar settling on land captured in war. Israel disputes this, citing security needs and biblical, historical and political connections to the land.



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Tough conditions and no jobs in West Bank create dilemma for
PalestiniansIsraeli defense minister backs 7,000 new West Bank settlement
units

[Syria's Assad replaces trade minister amid economic crisis](#)

Author:

Associated Press

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Mon, 2020-05-11 14:30

BEIRUT: Syrian President Bashar Assad replaced Monday the internal trade minister as the country's economic crisis worsens with prices of consumer goods increasing and the local currency reaching record lows.

Syria's economy has been ravaged by nine years of war and western sanctions. The presidential decree said Homs provincial governor Talal Barrazi will replace Atef Naddaf as Minister of Internal Trade and Consumer Protection. The decree gave no further details other than saying that Barrazi is no longer governor of Homs, Syria's largest province.

The Syrian pound plummeted to unprecedented levels in recent days reaching 1,485 pounds to the dollar on the black market compared with 47 to the dollar when the conflict began in March 2011.

That sent prices of basic goods soaring and was followed by restrictions imposed to prevent the spread of the coronavirus that limited movement and trade.

Eight out of 10 Syrians live below the poverty line, making less than \$100 a month, according to the United Nations.

On Sunday, Syria's Oil and Mineral Resources Ministry announced a reduction in automobile fuel subsidies in another measure to tackle the deepening economic crisis.



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[Israeli army destroys home of Palestinian bomb suspect](#)

Author:

AFP

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Mon, 2020-05-11 12:39

KUBAR: Israel's army on Monday demolished the West Bank home of a Palestinian charged with involvement in a bomb attack that killed an Israeli teenager, AFP journalists said.

The explosion last August 23 near a spring close to the Jewish settlement of

Dolev in the West Bank killed 17-year-old Rina Shnerb and wounded her father and brother.

Four men were later arrested and charged including Qassam Shibli, who Israel said had made and planted the explosive device.

His family appealed unsuccessfully against the planned home demolition before the Israeli supreme court, arguing it amounted to collective punishment.

Israeli soldiers entered the village of Kobar before dawn Monday and demolished Shibli's second-floor home, an AFP journalist at the scene said. Clashes broke out, with young Palestinians throwing stones at the soldiers, the journalist said.

The Palestinian Red Crescent said one person, wounded in the head by a tear gas canister, was taken to hospital for treatment, while another four were treated at the scene for light injuries.

The homes of two other men convicted over the incident were demolished in March.

Israel routinely demolishes the homes of those accused of carrying out attacks.

It argues that such measures act as a deterrent, but critics say it amounts to collective punishment.

Israeli Defense Minister Naftali Bennett said in a statement they had "held the terrorist to account" for the murder.

"House destruction is an important tool in deterring terrorists," he said.



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[Iraq security forces arrest armed men after protester killed](#)

Author:

AFP

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Mon, 2020-05-11 11:56

BASRA: Iraqi security forces arrested at least five men from a local political party's headquarters in the southern city of Basra Monday after a protester was shot dead outside the building.

It was the first death since modest anti-government protests resumed on Sunday, ending months of relative calm just as new Prime Minister Mustafa Kadhemi was sworn in.

Kadhemi has extended a hand to demonstrators and promised accountability for the more than 550 people killed in violence at anti-government rallies that first erupted in October.

Late Sunday, protesters had massed around the office of a local party in Basra, once more demanding the ouster of the Iraqi ruling class they see as corrupt and beholden to Iran.

A 20-year-old protester was shot in the head and later died in hospital, a medical source told AFP.

Hours later, security forces stormed the party office located around one kilometer (less than a mile) from Basra's main protest camp.

"We arrested five men who shot at protesters from the headquarters," Bassem Al-Maliky, the press officer for Basra's security forces, told AFP.

They also seized rifles and ammunition from the base.

The arrests marked a rare incident of a swift official response to protest-related deaths, for which only a handful of security forces have been held to account.

Demonstrations meanwhile continued in Baghdad and different parts of Iraq. In the town of Kut on Monday morning, protesters surrounded the home of the local governor, AFP's correspondents there said.

There were also rallies overnight in Diwaniyah, with hundreds gathering despite advice from authorities to maintain social distancing to curb the spread of COVID-19.

Hassan Al-Mayahi, a protester there, said that "despite the dangers of the coronavirus, the political deals of the parties and their neglect of our past demands have forced us to return to the street again to pressure them to give us our rights."



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Death of Iraq's last princess closes tumultuous chapter in Middle East history
Iraqi PM Al-Kadhimi calls on govt to meet peoples' demands