

UNESCO lists Iraq's Babylon as World Heritage Site

Fri, 2019-07-05 16:57

BAGHDAD: UNESCO's World Heritage Committee voted on Friday to list the sprawling Mesopotamian metropolis of Babylon as a World Heritage Site after three decades of lobbying efforts by Iraq.

Iraq had been trying since 1983 to have the site – a massive 10-square-kilometer complex of which just 18 percent has been excavated thus far – recognized by UNESCO.

Straddling Iraq's Euphrates River about 100 kilometers (60 miles) south of Baghdad, the city was the center of the ancient Babylonian empire more than 4,000 years ago.

"What is the world heritage list without Babylon? How to tell the history of humanity without the earliest of old chapters, Babylon?" said Iraq's representative to UNESCO's World Heritage Committee ahead of the vote.

The committee met in Azerbaijan's capital of Baku to consider Babylon and another 34 sites, including in Brazil and Burkina Faso, for the World Heritage List.

It opted not to designate Babylon as the World Heritage in Danger after objections from Iraq.

"Babylon is the largest populated city in ancient history," said Qahtan Al-Abeed, who heads the Basra Antiquities Department and led efforts to get the site listed.

"The Babylonians were the civilization of writing, administration and science," he told AFP.

Putting Babylon on the World Heritage List "will encourage research and development of the site," and would "be free publicity for tourists," he added excitedly.

Babylon occupies a special place in religion, appearing in the Bible, Hebrew scripture, and even mythical prophecies.

It developed as a walled city of temples and towers made of mudbrick and known internationally for its hanging gardens, the Tower of Babel, and the Ishtar Gate.









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[Tunisia bans niqab face covering in public institutions](#)

Fri, 2019-07-05 14:36

TUNIS: Tunisia's premier on Friday banned the niqab face covering for women in government offices, citing security concerns after attacks in the North African country.

Prime Minister Youssef Chahed signed a government circular "banning access to public administrations and institutions to anyone with their face covered... for security reasons," his office said.

The ban on the niqab, which covers the entire face apart from the eyes, comes at a time of heightened security following a June 27 double suicide bombing

in Tunis that left two dead and seven wounded.

The interior minister instructed police in February 2014 to step up supervision of the wearing of the niqab as part of anti-terrorism measures, to prevent its use as a disguise or to escape justice.

Reactions to the ban were mixed in the Tunisian capital.

“They have the right to prohibit (the niqab) given the events we are currently witnessing,” said Ilhem, a young Tunisian woman.

“But in the end, it remains an individual freedom,” she added.

Lina questioned “why the woman must make sacrifices every time there are security measures to be taken”.

The Tunisian League for the Defence of Human Rights urged that the measure be only temporary.

“We are for the freedom to dress (as one pleases), but today with the current situation and the terrorist threats in Tunisia and across the region we find justifications for this decision,” the league’s president Jamel Msallem told AFP.

He said that the ban should be repealed as soon as “a normal security situation returns in Tunisia”.

The niqab and other outward shows of Islamic devotion were not tolerated under the regime of longtime autocrat Zine El Abidine Ben Ali but have made a comeback since he was toppled in Tunisia’s 2011 revolution.

After bloody attacks in 2015 that targeted security forces and tourists, there were calls in Tunisia to re-impose the ban.



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[Palestinians welcome Japan offer to mediate in Palestine-Israeli conflict](#)

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Thu, 2019-07-04 21:49

AMMAN: Palestinians welcomed the initiative made by Japan's Foreign Minister Taro Kono in the exclusive interview he gave to Arab News about his country's interest playing the role of an "honest broker" in helping to resolve the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

Saeb Erekat, the secretary of the executive committee of the PLO, told Arab News that Japan is a country that has shown a 'tremendous commitment' to peace and the two-state solution.

"They have invested in the development of institutions in Palestine and have kept a position against Israeli settlements," Erekat said. "We welcome their position which is consistent with the peace plan presented by President Abbas before the Security Council in February 2018, calling for a group of countries to facilitate the peace process as we are not going to accept the United States to play this role."

Ibrahim Milhem, spokesman of the Palestinian Prime Minister Mohammad Shtayyeh, noted that the premier met a Japanese delegation that included the Middle East peace envoy Masahiro Kono and Japan's head of diplomatic mission in Ramallah Takeshi Okubo. In a statement after the meeting on Wednesday the Palestinian prime minister noted his appreciation of the bilateral relations between both sides. "Shtayyeh praised the continuous political and economic support from Japan, especially their support in the building of the institutions of the state of Palestine," the statement concluded.

Ahmad Deek, political affairs advisor of the Palestinian Foreign Ministry, said that the ministry "welcomes" the calls made by the Japanese foreign minister. In answer to a question by Arab News, Deek said, "we welcome the suggestion made by the foreign minister because we believe that any movement is helpful." Deek noted that Palestinians yearn for peace and welcome support from "our international friends so long as it is not limited to only the Americans."

Hanna Issa, director of Islamic-Christian Commission for Support of Jerusalem, said that Japan's position is the correct one. "Both the Israeli and American positions are constantly changing and therefore it is important to have a country that is neutral like Japan, which supports the two-state solution and has shown its backing on projects in support of Palestinian statehood."

The Japanese delegation to Palestine has met a number of senior Palestinian officials and observed Japanese funded projects. Japan is a major supporter of Palestinian agriculture through its efforts to help agricultural exports, especially from the Jordan valley area. They also attended the first conference on Cooperation among East Asian Countries for Palestinian development (CEAPAD) held in Palestine.

Minister of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates Riyad Malki opened the conference, stressing that CEAPAD is an effective model for building bridges of communication and transferring successful experiences in East Asia to Palestine to support the two-state solution.

Malki said that the initiative of the CEAPAD conference gives hope to the Palestinian people, especially in light of Israel's control over the Palestinian economy. He added that with the help of the countries participating in the conference they hope to move from a state under occupation to a developed country achieving development freely and with dignity.

The first CEAPAD conference was first held in the Japanese capital Tokyo in 2013; the second was in the Indonesian capital Jakarta in 2014, and the third in the Thai capital Bangkok in 2018.

CEAPAD member states include: Japan, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Singapore, Vietnam, the Sultanate of Brunei and Palestine. The observer countries and organizations are: South Korea, Egypt, Jordan, the International Quartet, UNRWA and the Islamic Development Bank.



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[UN envoy on migrants criticizes 'blindness' of EU on Libya](#)

Author:

Thu, 2019-07-04 21:07

PARIS: The UN's special envoy on migration in the Mediterranean, Vincent Cochetel, has accused the EU of "blindness" on the plight of refugees and migrants in Libya and called for a rethink of the policy of returning

migrants intercepted at sea to the war-torn country after Tuesday night's airstrike on a migrant detention center outside Tripoli claimed 44 lives. This is a tragic event which could have been avoided (as) we had passed on to all parties the GPS coordinates of all the detention camps.

This detention center is a former military camp. It is totally inappropriate to place people there in arbitrary detention.

We knew there was this risk of attacks one day with the risk of collateral damage, intentional or unintentional, so we had called for the closure of the center but nobody listened to us.

There is a certain blindness among European countries about the situation of migrants in Libya, which has been deteriorating for months. The recent fighting has created an even worse situation. It cannot be business as usual in terms of this cooperation on returns to Libya.

We have been repeatedly saying that people should not be returned to Libya because people disappear between the points of disembarkation and the detention centers. Some people are taken to the detention centers where they are mistreated and held arbitrarily while others end up being rented out or sold to business people.

Because it has become harder to smuggle people out of Libya by boat since the middle of last summer traffickers are trying to make a return on their 'investment' in other ways. We've received accounts from migrants who've said their families at home had been held to ransom three times to get them out of detention centers.

And now migrants and refugees can also die in these centers because they have become hostages of a political and military situation over which they have no control.

On my last visit I found cases of severe adult malnutrition. You see people who are just skin and bone, like in the camps in Bosnia or under the Khmer Rouge. The Libyan authorities say they don't have the money to feed people in detention centers – the humanitarian people say 'it's not our responsibility because the people are held arbitrarily and we shouldn't encourage this system by feeding people'. They're both talking at cross-purposes.

We're seeing a bit of food arriving in the centers. There are two scenarios: either business people who come looking for free labour in the detention centers bring a bit of food that the detainees can prepare in return, or there are centers where people say that they have to pay for food.

In the detention centers run by the authorities, or by the NLA (the National Liberation Army of General Khalifa Haftar) in the east, there are cases of mistreatment, of beatings and injuries.

Sometimes it's a punishment, other times it's to extort money. Sometimes it's not the guards themselves who carry out acts of violence or torture: they ask detainees to carry out abuses on other detainees, namely in the case of sexual torture. The aim is to humiliate people, subjugate them, create a sense of powerlessness and impose discipline.

The worst forms of torture are carried out in the secret detention centers. The people who escaped from Bani Walid, a hub for migrants trying to reach the coast, told us of the existence of around 10 hangars where people were being held – around 500 people per hangar, so about 5,000 altogether. There is a local religious association whom the traffickers ask to remove the bodies. There are about five bodies a week, according to recent accounts. It's appalling.

The EU's new leadership team must renew pressure on Libyan authorities and all the parties to the conflict to come up with an alternative to this system of arbitrary detention. We can help the Libyan authorities manage an alternative system of controls which does not amount to arbitrary detention. We need a very visible and quick disembarkation system for people rescued at sea and for people to be held responsible for the way they are treated. Once the migrants are disembarked those who do not need international protection should be immediately sent back to their country of origin, with the requisite support. For those who do need international protection, there needs to be a more effective distribution mechanism than the boat-by-boat approach currently taken by the EU.

I understand that Italy, France and others have undertaken efforts to boost the capacity of the Libyan coastguard, but it has to be done through certain precise norms, including verifying how the resources are used and how the coastguard behave, etc. Most Libyan coastguard members are sailors who do a good job but there are a certain number of criminal elements involved in the process, who are acting with total impunity.

I understand Europe's strategic interests but we have to move beyond that. Have the conflicts which are spurring people to travel to Libya been resolved? There are currently 19 conflicts on the African continent. We're seeing the situation in Burkina Faso and Mali deteriorate and Sudan is completely unstable. We have these really big crises unfolding all around Libya which are creating movements of people. We have to tackle the issues upstream.



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UN says Libyan guards reportedly shot at migrants fleeing air strikes
African Union condemns air strike on Libyan detention center

Conditions in Syria's Al-Hol camp 'apocalyptic': Red Cross

Author:

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GENEVA: The Red Cross warned Thursday that displaced people in and around Syria's Al-Hol camp were facing an "apocalyptic" conditions, urging countries to quickly repatriate family members of suspected foreign fighters.

The International Committee of the Red Cross warned of the extreme difficulties facing those left behind after the last vestige of the Daesh self-proclaimed caliphate collapsed in northeastern Syria in March.

Around 100,000 people in Al-Hol and surrounding camps, "are kept in a kind of legal limbo in an unstable place, in a disputed area", Fabrizio Carboni, who heads the ICRC's Near and Middle East operations, told reporters in Geneva. "One hundred thousand people who spent the last months, if not years, under the bombs, starved, wounded, sick, traumatised," he said, adding: "It is just apocalyptic."

The Red Cross is one of the main humanitarian organisations providing assistance inside the overfilled Al-Hol camp, which is housing more than 70,000 people, including more than 11,000 family members of suspected Daesh fighters from dozens of countries.

The issue of whether to repatriate nationals who are family members of suspected jihadists has been a thorny one for Western nations, which have experienced attacks by homegrown extremists and have little interest in seeing more return.

Britain has gone so far as stripping Daesh members of citizenship, while France has said it will only repatriate children and evaluate cases individually.

"Our position is to say to states 'take your nationals back'," Carboni said, condemning the stigmatisation of people, especially children, and efforts to create "categories of good victims and bad victims".

"As if kids can be something else than just victims."

Carboni said two thirds of the residents in Al-Hol were children, mainly under 12, insisting it was unconscionable to leave them there.

"You don't leave kids in the middle of nowhere exposed to extreme heat, extreme cold, violence," he said.

He warned that countries needed to recognise that "at one stage there will be

a price to pay,” and that if they put off dealing with this issue, “it is going to be higher”.

ICRC, which runs a field hospital in Al-Hol, provides food, water and builds latrines, is doing its best to address the needs of the people stuck in a desperate situation in and around the camp, Carboni said.

“But nobody should expect the ICRC to deal with 100,000... for the next 25-30 years,” he said. “This is states’ responsibility.”

He acknowledged that for many countries, repatriating family members of suspected jihadists is “politically toxic”, but urged government to take responsibility.

Some of the countries which today are reluctant to bring home children in Al-Hol “have for decades defended (the principle) that kids are victims and cannot be considered as combatants”, he said.

Their foot-dragging on the issue today, he said, “doesn’t look good”.



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UN urges resolving fate of 2,500 foreign children at Syria camp
UN completes food distribution in remote Syria camp near Jordan