

Once-bustling Baghdad boulevard dallies in disrepair

Author:

Tue, 2019-03-05 22:36

BAGHDAD: Behind the dilapidated storefronts and collapsing colonnades of Rasheed Street lie the treasures of the Iraqi capital's cultural boom years: Old cinemas, artisan shops and smoky cafes playing classic ballads.

But with young Iraqis listening to modern music and spending hours in hipster-style coffee shops, the boulevard that bustled non-stop in the 1970s is at risk of being passed over.

Authorities have tried to revive the street in recent weeks by removing the security checkpoints and concrete blast walls that lined Rasheed for years.

Announcing the move, Prime Minister Adel Abdel Mahdi extolled: "Rasheed Street is the memory of Baghdad."

Despite his government's best efforts though, it may be reduced to only that.

Decades ago, the street's Umm Kulthum Cafe was packed with wistful young men listening to the sultry voice of its namesake, the Egyptian "queen" of Arabic music.

"Coming here was a daily tradition for us. We used to have a lovely time," reminisced Abu Haidar, a retired army serviceman in his 70s.

It was so busy that customers – writers, men on their way to or from work, and those seeking solace in the music – struggled to call over harried waiters to order muddy coffee and sweet Iraqi tea.

Now, it only fills up on Saturdays, the traditional day for meeting up with friends in cafes, when older men chain-smoke and sip hot drinks on wooden benches under framed portraits of Iraq's unseated king, Faisal II.

"After all these years, this coffee shop is the only place we can go to remember," said Abu Haidar. "We hope it can escape extinction."

Some date the street's deterioration back to the 2003 US-led invasion that toppled dictator Saddam Hussein.

"I started coming here in 1971, but after 2003, it was ignored," said Tareq Jamila, 70, another cafe customer. "You wouldn't find the old pioneers, who used to sit in the coffee shop and actually understand Umm Kulthum's songs."

The invasion and sectarian violence that followed saw several bombs planted near Rasheed Street, with the last explosion in 2016 killing more than two dozen people.

Other historic areas of the capital similarly fell into disrepair during the years of bloodshed, with Baghdadis often filled with nostalgia for the past. The floor of the abandoned Mekki Awwad theater, further south in the capital along the winding Tigris River, is blanketed in dust and litter.

It once hosted boisterous nighttime shows, but the rows of numbered seats have not been occupied in years.

Art galleries dotting the neighborhoods between the theater and Rasheed Street have shuttered their doors one after the other. As one of Baghdad's first cinemas, Al-Zawra had long been a legendary stop along Rasheed – but it too lies unused now.

Last year, young Iraqi artists organized a walking tour through their capital in an effort to revive some of its historic districts with their own art installations.

Along the tired two-story buildings of Rasheed Street, one photographer hung new versions of decades-old pictures of Baghdad's heralded past.

But instead of looking up at the photographs, most shoppers were more interested in the tables selling watches, shimmering carp and fake Adidas.

Another Umm Kulthum-themed cafe has opened on Rasheed, choosing one of the singer's nicknames – Al-Ustura, or The Legend – as its name.

Although its traditional yellow-brick walls and stained glass windows are "falling into ruin," the original Umm Kulthum is soldiering on, said Said Al-Qaissi, 65.

"No one has considered renovating or preserving this place which celebrates art," said Qaissi.



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[Umm Kulthum](#)

Four decades on, the legacy of Umm Kulthum remains as strong as everThe enduring magic of Umm Kulthum, Star of the Orient

[Thousands on strike in Sudan calling for president to quit](#)

Author:

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Tue, 2019-03-05 12:48

KHARTOUM: A one-day strike shuttered businesses and emptied streets in the Sudanese capital, Khartoum, and other parts of the country on Tuesday, as pressure mounted on longtime autocratic President Omar Al-Bashir to step down following more than two months of deadly protests.

Initially sparked by rising prices and shortages, the unrest quickly turned to calls for Al-Bashir to resign after two decades in power. A heavy security crackdown has killed scores since the current wave of demonstrations began in

December, the most serious protests against Al-Bashir.

Many students, doctors, markets, public transportation and other professionals took part in the strike Tuesday in support of Al-Bashir's ouster, according to photos and videos provided by activists and posted by the Sudanese Professionals Association. The association is an umbrella group of independent professional unions that has been spearheading the recent wave of protests.

Sarah Abdel-Jaleel, a spokeswoman for the group, said in a video posted late Monday that the strike is part of their "peaceful resistance" against the government.

Media workers at the privately owned newspaper Al-Tayar joined the strike. "We've faced daily abuses since protests first broke out," said Shamayel El-Nour, a journalist. "We cannot do our work. Security agencies censor and confiscate our newspaper and others."

The opposition Sudanese Congress Party said its leader, Omer El-Digair, was released Monday after two months in detention. El-Digair tweeted Tuesday that he would "resume the path with our people ... to freedom. We will not come back halfway."

The country's intelligence and security officials, along with Al-Bashir, insist that the rallies are the work of what they describe as "evil" foreign powers, and have vowed to stop them.

Al-Bashir has banned unauthorized public gatherings and granted sweeping powers to the police since imposing a state of emergency last month, and security forces have used tear gas, rubber bullets, live ammunition and batons against demonstrators.

Activists say at least 57 people have been killed in the current wave of protests, but the government total stands at 30, including police. The figures have not been updated in weeks.

Opposition leaders, doctors, journalists, lawyers and students have been arrested, along with some 800 protesters. Emergency laws and night-time curfews have been imposed in some cities.

Al-Bashir's current term ends in 2020, and he would not be able to seek another term without amending the constitution.

Though he has repeatedly promised not to run again, a parliamentary committee was tasked with amending the constitution to scrap presidential term limits. In February, the committee canceled its meetings in what appeared to be the only political concession by Al-Bashir so far.



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Sudan's Al-Bashir hands party leadership to new deputy
Protesters challenge emergency courts in Sudan, police fire tear gas

[Army chief of staff vows to secure Algeria, prevent bloodshed](#)

Author:

Reuters

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1551791556488799400

Tue, 2019-03-05 13:02

TUNIS: Algeria's army will guarantee security and not allow a return to an

era of bloodshed, its chief of staff said on Tuesday.

Gaed Salah said there were some parties he did not name which wanted Algeria to return to the "years of pain," referring civil war in the 90s.

Thousands of Algerian students, meanwhile, marched in protest at ailing President Abdelaziz Bouteflika's determination to stand for re-election, brushing aside his pledge not to serve a full fifth term.

Following mass demonstrations, the veteran leader promised that if he wins the April poll he will organize a "national conference" to set a date for further elections which he would not contest.

But his pledge, made in a letter read out late on Sunday on state television, has been angrily dismissed as an insult by Algerians weary of his two-decade-old rule.

Rallies demanding the 82-year-old resign have rocked Algeria since Feb. 22, with protesters mobilized by calls on social media, in a country where half the population is under 30 and many young people struggle to find jobs.

On Tuesday thousands of university students from campuses across Algiers marched in the capital, many carrying their country's flag.

Abderahman, a 21-year-old student, said Bouteflika "wants an extra year" in power. "We don't want him to stay even an extra second. He should leave now," he said.

Police deployed across the centre of the capital where protests have been banned since 2001.

The TSA news website reported similar protests in Algeria's second and third cities, Oran and Constantine, as well as in other towns and cities.

"Hey Bouteflika, there won't be a fifth term," the students chanted in central Algiers, a reporter said.

Onlookers applauded them and motorists honked their horns in a show of support.

And in a sign they will not back down from protests calling on the president to resign, the students chanted "bring on the army commandos and the BRI (police rapid response squad)."

"Game over" read one poster. "System – go away", said another.

The protests appear to lack leadership and organization in a country still dominated by veterans of the 1954-1962 independence war against France, including Bouteflika.

But the unrest still poses the biggest challenge to the ailing leader and the ruling elite made up of the ruling party, businessmen, the military and security services.

Young Algerians who are at the forefront of the protests want a new generation of leaders and have few attachments to the old guard.

After a decade-long insurgency that Bouteflika crushed early in his rule, Algerians generally tolerated a political system that left little room for dissent as a price to pay for relative peace and stability.

But Algeria's mostly young population are agitating for jobs, better services and an end to rampant corruption in a country that is one of Africa's largest oil producers.

Bouteflika suffered a stroke in 2013 and is rarely seen in public.

He formally submitted his candidacy for the April 18 poll just before a midnight deadline on Sunday. It was handed in by his campaign manager Abdelghani Zaalane as the president has been in Switzerland since Feb. 24 for what the presidency has described as "routine medical tests."

In Sunday's message he said that his pledge not to serve a full term if re-elected "will ensure I am succeeded in undeniable conditions of serenity, freedom and transparency."

He acknowledged the mostly peaceful protests against him.

"I listened and heard the cry from the hearts of protesters and in particular the thousands of young people who questioned me about the future of our homeland."

But his words have failed to end the protests against him which first erupted on Feb. 22 and have continued daily, drawing Algerians from all walks of life, including students, lawyers and journalists.

Tuesday's rallies came in response to calls on social media for students to gather outside the iconic building housing Algiers' main post office.

"No means no! Hasn't he understood the message of the people?" asked Selma, who studies mathematics.

"Today we will make it clear for him, and again on Friday," which has been the main day for protests, she said.

A sign held up by protesters read: "No studies, no teaching until the system (regime) falls," as students were reportedly considering going on strike.

The sprawling Bab Ezzouar campus of the University of Algiers, just outside the capital, was deserted.

"There is a massive strike by students... I've never seen anything like it since the 1980 Berber Spring," a professor said.

She was referring to a weeks-long uprising demanding cultural rights for Algeria's Berber community, who long fought for greater recognition for their customs and ancient language overshadowed by Arabic culture.

University professors were meeting to decide if they too should go on strike

And the bar association of lawyers in the city of Bejaia, 180 km east of Algiers, called on its members to follow in the footsteps of their colleagues in Constantine and go on strike.



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Algeria president's offer to protesters fails to quell anger Amid mounting protests, Algeria's Bouteflika promises to quit early if re-elected

[Hopes for missing Yazidis dim as extremists' defeat looms](#)

Author:

Mon, 2019-03-04 23:20

DAHUK: Baseh Hammo was 38 when she was enslaved by militants of Daesh. Raped

and abused, she was sold 17 times among members of the so-called "caliphate," and moved from city to city across a vast stretch of territory Daesh once controlled in northern Iraq and Syria.

Her ordeal came to an end in January in the Syrian village of Baghouz, when an Daesh member took pity on her as the final battle loomed with US-led Syrian Kurdish forces.

He put her on a truck with his own family and allowed them to leave the village.

She was picked up by Syrian Kurdish forces and reunited with her two daughters in Iraq a few days later.

Yet many Yazidis are still missing, five years after Daesh militants stormed Yazidi towns and villages in Iraq's Sinjar region and abducted women and children. Women were forced into sexual slavery, and boys were taken to be indoctrinated in extremist ideology.

Hopes surged last month during a two-week pause in the US-led coalition's assault on Baghouz that some of the estimated 3,000 Yazidis still unaccounted for would emerge.

But few turned up among the thousands who streamed out of the tiny village.

Hussein Karo, who heads the Yazidi Rescue Bureau in Iraq's regional Kurdish government, said only 47 Yazidis were rescued.

Now, as US-backed forces resume their final assault on Baghouz, Hammo and Farha Farman, another rescued Yazidi woman, said they fear many may never return home and that the offensive endangers Yazidis who are still in the village.

The two said some are refusing to leave their children behind with their Daesh fathers while others are staying out of conviction, having adopted the extremist ideology. Many are simply too terrified to flee.

Hammo said her days as a slave were consumed with loneliness and violence.

She was sold 17 times. One of her owners, a Swede, would lock her in the home for days without food while he went to fight. Another man, an Albanian, stomped on her hands in his military boots, after she scolded him for buying a nine-year-old slave girl.

In the Syrian town of Raqqa, once the seat of the caliphate, her nephews, 12 and 13 years old, carried guns and served as guards to a German Daesh fighter. When she invited them to eat with her, they refused, saying she was an infidel. She snapped back at them, "You're one of us. You're infidels, too."

Hammo's final months in captivity were especially trying as hunger gripped what was left of the caliphate. Bread grew scarce, and she began making dough for herself out of chicken feed. By the time she was brought to Baghouz, she

was eating grass and leaves.

“I cannot even look at anything the color green anymore,” said a frail Hammo, her face gaunt, and her hands scarred from the abuse.

She had heard there were still 1,000 Yazidis inside Baghouz, including 130 boys training to become terrorists.

Farman, 21, who arrived in Iraq in early February, feared for her sister and nine young male relatives still missing after being abducted five years ago.

Both Farman and Hammo, now staying in bleak camps for the displaced in Iraq, said international airstrikes had killed some Yazidis living as slaves in the caliphate.

Hammo said she had urged a Yazidi woman married to an Uzbek Daesh fighter to leave Baghouz with her, but the woman, who has had two children with the man, refused.

“She said she’d blow herself up first,” said Hammo.

Another Yazidi woman in Bahgouz was forced to give up two of her boys to be trained as Daesh fighters.

“She said she could not leave without them,” Hammo said.

In 2014, when Daesh was at the height of its power and its self-styled caliphate spanned a third of both Syria and Iraq, Daesh militants stormed Yazidi communities in Iraq’s Sinjar region.

The extremists, who consider the Kurdish-speaking religious minority to be heretics, enslaved, raped and killed thousands of Yazidis. Close to 200,000 members of the minority fled their homes.

Farman was 17 when she was abducted by Daesh from Sinjar. She was sold to a Syrian man who went on to carry out a suicide operation for Daesh. His family then sold her to a man who beat her savagely for trying to escape – twice.

The first time she tried to flee, she slipped out with a group of other Yazidi women to the countryside.

“But we couldn’t get anywhere, so we gave ourselves up,” she said, speaking to the AP in a tent she is staying in with her aunt. She said she is haunted by nightmares that keep her from sleeping.

Daesh jailed her for a week after her first escape attempt, then turned her over to her captor who beat her savagely with cables and hoses.

The second time she tried to escape, her parents sent a paid smuggler to bring her to safety, but he was caught and gave up her name under Daesh interrogation. The man again punished Farman.

All the while, the militants were losing territory against advancing Syrian

regime and Syrian Kurdish forces, and she moved from city to city with her abuser along the Euphrates River, until they were finally trapped in Baghouz.

“I got to see half of Syria,” she said, ironically.

Finally, the man asked if she would flee with him to Turkey.

She refused, so he sold her to a smuggler for \$10,000, money arranged by the Yazidi community in exile, to help her leave on her own.

Farman made it out, but the man did not.

He was caught by the US-backed Syrian Kurdish forces outside Baghouz, and has not been heard of since, she said.



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Yazidis bid last farewell to spiritual leader in IraqIraqi Yazidis celebrate restoration of temple destroyed by Daesh

[Closure of American consulate](#)

in Jerusalem rapped as 'political assault'

Author:

Mon, 2019-03-04 21:20

AMMAN: The controversial closure of the US diplomatic mission which has served Jerusalem for more than 175 years was on Monday branded a "political assault" on the Palestinian people.

US Ambassador to Israel David Friedman officially shuttered the consulate by thanking its Consul General Karen Sasahara for her "service and professionalism" and wishing her well representing America in her next posting.

"This decision was driven by our global efforts to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of our diplomatic engagements and operations," a US State Department spokesman said in a statement.

The three-story Jerusalem mansion, with its arched windows and bougainvillea-covered walls, was where the unofficial US envoy to the Palestinians lived and hosted Palestinian guests for Fourth of July parties.

The estate will now become the domain of the US ambassador to Israel, a move which has been criticized in many quarters.

Hanna Issa, secretary-general of the Islamic-Christian Commission to Support Jerusalem and the Holy Sites, told Arab News that the lowering of American diplomatic representation to Palestine was a continuation of discriminatory US policy.

"The attempts to merge the US consulate with the embassy is a contradiction of international law and specifically UN Security Council resolution 478 (one of several UN resolutions condemning Israel's attempted annexation of East Jerusalem) of 1980," said Issa.

Issa said the real purpose behind the US decision was to obliterate the idea of a Palestinian state alongside Israel.

In a statement issued on behalf of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), executive committee member Hanan Ashrawi said that the merging of the consulate with the embassy "is not an administrative decision. It is an act of political assault on Palestinian rights and identity, and a negation of the consulate's historic status and function, dating back nearly 200 years."

Speaking to National Public Radio former US diplomat Ed Abington, who served in Jerusalem, noted that historically the position of Washington had been that the embassy in Tel Aviv and the consulate in Jerusalem "should not be merged."

Abington said that "the effect on our ability to deal with the Palestinians

is being greatly damaged.”

Jerusalem-based Israeli lawyer Daniel Seidemann told Arab News that the closure of the consulate was no mere merger.

“The consulate will not merge, but it will be subsumed into the embassy to Israel,” Seidemann said. “This is no mere technicality, it precisely reflects current US policies: All things Palestinian are subservient to Israeli interests.”

The US decision has been met with a storm of opposition from a wide spectrum of American diplomats.

Former US Under Secretary of State Nicholas Burns called it “a mistake,” and said that all US presidents prior to Donald Trump had “understood its importance as our bridge to the Palestinian people. I was proud to serve there in the 1980s.”

Dennis Ross, chief US negotiator with both Republican and Democratic administrations, criticized the move as “unfortunate” noting that the Palestinian public would read it “as a sign of indifference to them.”

Ross said that the US administration needed to take steps “to reach out to Palestinians if it is to have any hope for its plan.”

Hady Amr, a US researcher who worked in the Jerusalem consulate, said in a personal tweet that he was pained by the decision. “My heart is heavy. America should be playing the taps. A place I was honored to work out of during many trips in support of Secretary John Kerry (former US Secretary of State).”

Amr and security expert Ilan Goldenberg prepared a study for the Washington-based research group Brookings Institution which concluded that “merging units sounds efficient. But this merger does major harm to the US ability to act as a mediator in the conflict and serves as a severe blow to the prospects of Israeli-Palestinian peace through a two-state solution.”

Jake Waller, a former consul general in Jerusalem, called the closure “a sad end to an important US diplomatic mission.”

Israeli journalist Noa Landau tweeted that shutting the US consulate would have a negative effect on reporting about Jewish settlements.

“Reports about construction in new settlements will now be overseen by Ambassador Friedman, a longtime supporter of the settlement enterprise.”

US President John Tyler was the first consul general in Jerusalem in 1844.

The first physical presence of a US mission there was inside Jaffa Gate in the old city of Jerusalem, a building that is now being used for Christian Swedes.

The mission then moved to Prophet Street outside the old city, and in 1912 it

was moved to its current location on 18 Agron Street in a building that was established in 1868 by the German Lutheran missionary Ferdinand Vester, whose family would later build what became the American Colony.

The US also rented another building in 1951 on Nablus Road and this was kept as a US consular building until September 2010.



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US closes Jerusalem consulate, demoting Palestinian mission
US downgrade of Palestinian mission to take effect Monday: official