

Algeria's ancient pyramid tombs still shrouded in mystery

Mon, 2019-01-14 22:13

TIARET, Algeria: Dating back centuries, Algeria's pyramid tombs are unique relics of an ancient era but a dearth of research has left the Jeddars shrouded in mystery.

The 13 monuments, whose square stone bases are topped with angular mounds, are perched on a pair of hills near the city of Tiaret, some 250 km southwest of the capital Algiers.

Constructed between the 4th and 7th centuries, the tombs are believed by some scholars to have been built as final resting places for Berber royalty – although nobody knows who truly laid within.

But Algerian authorities and archaeologists are now pushing to get the Jeddars listed as a UNESCO World Heritage site, in the hope of assuring their preservation and study. Gaining such status is a lengthy process and the Culture Ministry said Algeria's application to the UN body "will be filed during the first quarter of 2020."

Experts from the National Center for Prehistoric, Anthropological and Historical Research have for more than a year been preparing their case for the Jeddars.

The goal is to "preserve this heritage, which is of immeasurable value and an ancestral legacy," said Mustapha Dorbane, a professor at Algiers 2 University's Archaeology Institute. When the Jeddars were built, Berber kings ruled the area in small fiefdoms whose history is poorly known and of which few traces were left.

It was a period of great unrest for the former Roman province of Numidia, as Rome's western empire collapsed, Vandal and Byzantine troops invaded, and Arab forces stormed across North Africa.

For centuries these far-flung monuments sat largely ignored, delivered to the ravages of time and looters. But more recently a group of around 20 archaeology students and their teachers has been working at the monuments.

Moving slowly, they noted vandalized spots and used water and brushes to gently clean stone-engraved symbols before measuring them. A meticulous task, each entry may take upward of two hours.

Algerian archaeologist Rachid Mahouz, who has spent five years on a doctoral thesis about the tombs, deplores the lack of research devoted to the country's "wonders."

"The French archives on the Jeddars are not available and the objects and bones found during the colonial era were taken to France," said Mahouz, who

was born and raised nearby.

Archaeology was not taught at Algerian universities until the early 1980s, and until now, no speciality on funerary monuments is offered.

The research team has been working on Jeddar A, which sits on Mount Lakhdar along with monuments B and C. The remaining Jeddars are on a hilltop some 6 km away, Mount Arouri, and are known by the letters D through M.

Each contains at least one room, with the largest mound giving way to a labyrinth of 20 compartments, including funerary chambers.

Some rooms are equipped with benches, areas researchers believe may have been used for worship. Inside the tombs, traditional Christian symbols as well as hunting scenes and animal figures are carved above the doors.

Traces of inscriptions believed to be Latin mark the walls, but time has rendered them unreadable.

Among the layers of history, researchers say they have also found Greek letters – although others dispute this.

The Jeddars were built several centuries after other imposing pre-Islamic funerary monuments, which are found in present day northern Algeria, making them the last of their kind to be erected before the arrival of Islam.

“The most distinctive feature of the Jeddars is by far the date of their construction,” said Mahouz, the archaeologist.

The monuments show the evolution of burial practices in the area. From simple mounds of earth and stone, known as tumuli, to stone-walled tombs called bazinas.

But with some reaching heights of 18 meters, some researchers say the size of the Jeddars put them in a category of their own.

The earliest known written description of the Jeddars was made by historian Ibn Rakik in the 11th century, according to famed Arab thinker Ibn Khaldoun.

It was not until the mid-19th century and the first modern archaeological explorations in Algeria, brought on by French colonialism, that the Jeddars began to draw attention.

French troops and colonial authorities began explorations in 1865 of nine of the tombs.

Understanding of the Jeddars was boosted in the late 1960s by Algerian archaeologist Fatima Kadra’s three-year study of Jeddars A, B and C – the oldest of the 13 and the only ones to be explored since Algeria’s independence.

But several of the structures have never been entered, as gravity and time have brought mounds of dirt and stone crashing down on the tombs within.

Looting and deterioration have worsened an already difficult task for modern-day researchers with little backing.



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Archaeologists in Egypt unearth 3000-year-old tombs

[Egypt's top cleric urges rethink over student expelled for hug](#)

Author:

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Mon, 2019-01-14 17:01

CAIRO: Egypt's top Muslim cleric Ahmed Al-Tayeb urged Al-Azhar university on Monday to reconsider the expulsion of a female student who was filmed hugging

a male colleague.

In a video widely circulated earlier this month, a man was seen carrying a bouquet of flowers kneeling before a woman and then hugging her in what appeared to be a marriage proposal.

Al-Azhar university had decided on Saturday to expel the young woman. Tayeb, the grand imam of Al-Azhar, Egypt's most prestigious seat of Sunni Islamic learning, called on the university's disciplinary board to "reconsider the punishment."

He cited the student's young age and her educational future, although said her conduct outside campus was "unacceptable" and unbecoming for "religious and oriental traditions."

The video was taken at Mansoura University in the country's north, where the man filmed is a student.

Hany Helal, spokesman for the university, said the disciplinary board "decided to expel the student for two years" although he can appeal the decision.

Egypt, a predominantly Muslim country, is a largely conservative society. Al-Azhar is touted as standing for Islamic moderation, but critics often accuse the institution of failing to modernize its teachings in order to counter extremism.



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Egypt deports another German for alleged Daesh connection

Author:

Mon, 2019-01-14 21:57

BERLIN: Egypt has deported the second of two young German men who were arrested last month as suspected militants, the Foreign Ministry in Berlin said on Monday.

Eighteen-year-old Issa Ibrahim El-Sabagh landed at Frankfurt airport, reported Spiegel Online, following last week's repatriation of Mahmoud Abdel-Aziz, 23.

A ministry spokeswoman confirmed that "the person arrived back in Germany last night."

Both men had vanished in December in Egypt, where the government only reported their arrests following inquiries by Germany.

Their families had raised the alarm and have called the arrests cases of mistaken identity.

El-Sabagh, a German-Egyptian dual citizen and student in the city of Giessen, was arrested in mid-December after landing in the southern city of Luxor.

Egyptian security sources said the two men were suspected of having tried to join the Daesh group's affiliate in the troubled Sinai peninsula.

German prosecutors said last week they were looking into the Egyptian media reports on Abdel-Aziz to investigate whether there were "any indications of criminal offenses."

The 23-year-old has since posted a video on Facebook in which he denied he is an extremist militant who supports violence or has any Daesh links.

The student from the university town of Goettingen also said he had flown to Egypt to visit his grandparents and retracted anything he had said in Egypt "under duress and pressure."

Egypt has been battling insurgency in North Sinai, which spiked following the 2013 military ouster of President Muhammad Mursi.

In February, security forces launched a major Sina operation aimed at wiping out a Daesh affiliate accused of spearheading the insurgency.



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Egypt deports German citizen over alleged terror suspicions
Lebanese security forces arrest three Syrians with links to Daesh in Middle East, Europe

[US reiterates concern about Hezbollah agenda to destabilize region](#)

Author:

Sun, 2019-01-13 23:03

BEIRUT: US officials are in Beirut holding talks with Lebanese officials about the growing threat posed by Hezbollah as US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo continues to tour the Middle East.

During the visit, David Hale, US undersecretary of state for political affairs, will underscore US concerns about Hezbollah's destabilizing activities in Lebanon and the region, which include the recent discovery of Hezbollah's cross-border tunnels.

The tunnels "defy UN Security Council Resolution 1701, jeopardize the

security of the Lebanese people and undermine the legitimacy of Lebanon's state institutions," the US Embassy in Lebanon said in a statement issued ahead of the meeting.

Hale's visit came ahead of the global summit that will take place in Poland on Feb. 13 and 14 "to counter Tehran's regional influence," according to a statement made by Pompeo two days ago.

Pompeo announced on Twitter before embarking on his Middle East tour that he would send a clear message to US friends and partners that "the US is committed to the region, committed to defeat Daesh and committed to countering Iran's destabilizing activities."

Lebanon is not included in Pompeo's visit, which covers eight Arab countries and concludes on Tuesday.

The US Embassy also said in its statement that Hale "will meet with senior Lebanese officials to discuss the full range of bilateral and regional issues."

The embassy also added that he "has enduring ties with Lebanon and the Lebanese people after serving at the US Embassy in Beirut as a political officer, deputy chief of mission and ambassador over the span of 27 years."

"He is returning to Lebanon in his new role to reaffirm strong US support for the Lebanese state, including its legitimate security institutions, as it continues to cope with significant challenges," the US Embassy added.

Shortly after arriving in Beirut, Hale, accompanied by US Ambassador to Lebanon Elizabeth Richard, met with Walid Jumblatt, the leader of the Progressive Socialist Party.

Hale also met with Joseph Aoun, the commander of the Lebanese Armed Forces, who said that their discussion was focused on "the general situation in Lebanon and the region, as well as cooperation relations between the armies of the two countries, especially the amount of military assistance provided by the US to the Lebanese Army."

During his visit to Lebanon, Hale will also meet with President Michel Aoun, Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri, Prime Minister-designate Saad Hariri, and a number of political leaders with whom he was acquainted when he served as the US ambassador to Lebanon.

Hale's visit comes at a time when Lebanon is going through a very sensitive phase as a result of the eight-month disruption to the government's formation.

Lebanese parties have accused Hezbollah militant group of being behind this disruption for reasons associated with Lebanon's regional stance.



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Lebanon's Hezbollah believes solution to government impasse 'very close' Israel urges UN action over Hezbollah 'attack tunnels' from Lebanon

[Turkey crackdown on Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham network](#)

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Sun, 2019-01-13 22:24

ANKARA: Over the weekend, Turkey carried out counter-terrorism operations against the alleged members of Syria's former Al-Qaeda affiliate Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham (HTS) in cities throughout the country.

With HTS taking control of more strategic towns in Syria's northwestern province of Idlib from Turkish-backed fighters, experts said the group represented an increasing terror threat inside Turkey due to its geographical

proximity and Turkey's involvement in the Syrian conflict.

In Istanbul, in the southern city of Adana and in the capital city Ankara, 13 HTS officials were arrested in the first operation against the terror group, which was carried out by 300 police officials.

In Adana, Turkish police arrested a cell of financial supporters of HTS, including the president of a humanitarian aid NGO named Fukara Der whose financial operations had already attracted the attention of Turkish Financial Crimes Investigation Board (MASAK). The suspects, who also fought during Syrian civil war, are accused of sending money, clothes and providing logistics to HTS members in Syria.

Kyle Orton, a researcher on the Syrian war, thinks that it is difficult to avoid the suspicion that the timing of this anti-HTS raid is political.

"Turkey switched to targeting HTS/AQ cells in the way it did the PKK and Daesh infrastructure some time ago. There is clearly a significant HTS network in Turkey, which is tied into the broader Al-Qaeda network for legacy reasons," he told Arab News.

According to Orton, Turkey's intentions in Idlib remain deeply murky, at least in part because the capture of territory in the east of Syria that allowed for the return of refugees and broke up the PKK cantons would diminish Ankara's interest, in terms of its security, in holding on to Idlib. Therefore the Turks might do a deal that allows the pro-Assad coalition to have Idlib back.

Turkey has listed HTS as a terror group associated with Al-Nusra and Al-Qaeda since last August.

Nihat Ali Ozcan, a security analyst at the Ankara-based think tank TEPAV, said Turkey faces a domestic security risk when intervening in a civil war in its neighbor, and added that this terror threat might increase if the power struggle between HTS and pro-Turkey rebels ever turn into conflict.

"These counter-terrorism operations across the country are therefore of a pre-emptive character," he told Arab News.

According to Ozcan, HTS has a more established support network in Turkey compared to Daesh, and its membership base is more mixed in nationality, making it more open to the recruitment of foreign fighters.

Sertac Canalp Korkmaz, a researcher in security studies at ORSAM, a think tank in Ankara, said the threat posed by HTS in Turkey is as great as that posed by Daesh and Al-Qaeda.

According to Korkmaz, HTS opposed the Sochi de-escalation agreement from the beginning, as it didn't agree on laying down its arms.

Escalating clashes between HTS and the Ankara-backed National Front for Liberation in Idlib have also raised concerns about the sustainability of other clauses of the Sochi agreement, in which Article 5 stipulates that all radical terrorist groups should be removed from the demilitarised zone.

"The prospect of Ankara taking part of a limited operation in Idlib increases the potential of a terror act inside Turkey through its cells," Korkmaz told Arab News.

"Southern city of Adana is geographically close to the conflict zone, while Istanbul and Ankara, as cities, provide opportunities for terror cells to hide themselves and recruit members," he added.



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Turkey vows operation against Kurdish militia, when time is right
Turkey announces counterterror plan in Syria