

Syria's Druze minority: walking a war-time tightrope

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BEIRUT: Syria's Druze minority, whose men are being called up for military service by Damascus, is struggling to insulate itself from the conflict that has engulfed the country since 2011.

Here is a summary of the community's profile, its role in Syria's conflict and the attacks it has faced.

The Druze community accounted for around three percent of Syria's pre-war population of 23 million.

They are located mainly in the southern province of Sweida with smaller pockets around Damascus and in the northwest, although some have fled militant-held parts of the latter area.

Druze are monotheistic and considered Muslim, but the sect is otherwise highly secretive, includes mystical elements such as reincarnation, and does not allow new converts.

Some 200,000 Druze are located in neighboring Lebanon and over 100,000 are in Israel, while 18,000 live in the Israeli-occupied Golan.

Syria's Druze have been split by the uprising that erupted in 2011 against President Bashar Assad, who had long portrayed himself as a protector of the country's minorities.

Druze should not be seen "as being neutral in this war – it's more multifaceted and the Druze are not a monolithic bloc," said Tobias Lang, an analyst focused on Druze populations in the Middle East.

One of the first soldiers to defect from Syria's army in protest at its handling of demonstrations was Druze officer Khaldun Zeineddine, who later died in clashes against regime forces.

Others remained firmly loyal, like General Issam Zahreddine, one of the highest-ranking Druze army officers who died last year in a mine blast after battling the Daesh group in Syria's east.

Druze leaders have often tried to maintain a relationship with the regime to keep their areas autonomous and spare them from government attacks.

One symbol of that complex relationship was Wahid Al-Balous, a Druze religious authority who pushed for the sect's soldiers to be deployed near their hometowns, rather than in other provinces.

Balous, who died in a car bomb attack in Sweida in 2015, spoke out against both militants and Assad.

Syria's Druze have protected their heartland in Sweida with their own forces. The most powerful has been the Sheikhs of Dignity, which was headed by Balous and included fighters and other religious figures.

Sheikhs of Dignity has fought fierce battles against the Daesh group and Al-

Qaeda's Syrian affiliate.

Other militias have been closely linked to the regime, including the Dareh Al-Watan (Shield of the Nation), a Druze force founded in April 2015 with 2,000 fighters.

Such groups appear to have protected Sweida's sons from compulsory military service, with authorities turning a blind eye so long as young men fight in units not opposed to the regime.

But with the regime hungry for fresh conscripts, that deal appears to be coming apart at the seams and Assad has now called on young Druze men to serve.

His appeal came after Damascus announced the release this month of Druze women and children who had been kidnapped during a July attack by Daesh.

That onslaught by the militants left more than 260 people dead, mostly civilians. It was the worst attack against the minority so far but not the first.

A car bomb in 2012 ripped through Damascus' Jaramana suburb, which is mostly Druze and Christian.

In 2013 and 2014, fierce fighting between Syrian rebels and pro-regime Druze forces rocked Sweida province and Druze areas closer to Damascus.

Daesh began attacking Sweida province in 2015, first targeting Khalkhalah military airport.

The same year, 20 Druze Syrians were killed in a shoot-out with Al-Qaeda militants in the village of Qalb Lawzah in northwestern Idlib province.

Druze residents of Qalb Lawzah had come out against the regime a year into Syria's uprising.

In 2016, Daesh beheaded four laborers in an area it controlled outside Damascus, accusing them of being Druze.

And in 2017, a car bomb killed nine people in Hader, a regime-held village in the southwestern province of Quneitra mostly populated by Druze.



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Assad calls on Syria's Druze minority to do military service
Syria army frees 19 Druze hostages from Daesh

[UAE court sentences British student to life for spying](#)

Author:

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Wed, 2018-11-21 11:33

DUBAI: A United Arab Emirates court sentenced British student Matthew Hedges to life in jail on Wednesday after convicting him of spying, a family spokesperson said.

"We can confirm that he was sentenced to life in prison," the spokesperson

told AFP.

“The hearing lasted less than five minutes, and his lawyer was not present.”

British Foreign Secretary Jeremy Hunt said he was “deeply shocked and disappointed” by the decision of the UAE court.

“Today’s verdict is not what we expect from a friend and trusted partner of the United Kingdom and runs contrary to earlier assurances,” he said.

Hedges, a 31-year-old PhD student, was researching the UAE’s foreign and internal security policies after the Arab Spring revolutions of 2011 when he was detained at Dubai airport on May 5.

He was granted temporary release on October 29 but constantly monitored until Wednesday’s court hearing, only his third since his arrest.

UAE attorney general Hamad Al-Shamsi said earlier this month that Hedges was accused of “spying for a foreign country, jeopardizing the military, political and economic security of the state.”

Hedges has repeatedly denied the charges.



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UK academic released on bail in United Arab EmiratesUAE to try British student on spying charges: reports

[Up to 85,000 children 'dead of starvation or disease in Yemen'](#)

Author:

AFP

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Wed, 2018-11-21 08:36

DUBAI: As many as 85,000 infants under the age of five may have died from starvation or disease since 2015 in war-ravaged Yemen, humanitarian organization Save the Children said Wednesday.

It said the estimate was based on data compiled by the United Nations, which has warned that up to 14 million people are at risk of famine in Yemen.

"Dozens are starving to death and it's entirely preventable," said Tamer Kirolos, Save the Children's country director in Yemen.

"Children who die in this way suffer immensely as their vital organ functions slow down and eventually stop," he said.

"Their immune systems are so weak they are more prone to infections with some too frail to even cry. Parents are having to witness their children wasting away, unable to do anything about it."

Meanwhile, UN envoy Martin Griffiths prepares to hold talks with the Houthis in the capital Sanaa during a visit aimed at laying the groundwork for peace talks in Sweden.



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UN envoy to Yemen arrives in Sanaa Saudi Arabia, UAE announce \$500 million aid program for Yemen

[Egypt celebrates antiquities museum before new institution takes the limelight](#)

Author:

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1542733672101855800

Tue, 2018-11-20 15:43

CAIRO: Bright lights illuminated the Egyptian Museum in Cairo's Tahrir Square on Monday during a celebration that could mark the last time the two-story museum is feted as one of Egypt's main tourist attractions. Located in one of Egypt's most famous squares, the museum has been the

country's principal keeper of antiquities for over a century, but a bigger museum is under construction.

Officials celebrated the 116th anniversary of its founding and insisted it will not become obsolete once the Grand Egyptian Museum opens its doors. Antiquities will be moved to the new museum, which is expected to partially open next year.

"Our ceremony this evening is to tell the world this museum will never die," said Antiquities Minister Khaled Al-Anany.

The old museum will be used to display recent discoveries as well as antiquities from store rooms, the minister said.

Housing the world's biggest collection of pharaonic antiquities has been a challenge for the museum building, which was established in 1902.

Tens of thousands of objects have been sitting in its storerooms and galleries were often said to be too packed.

The Grand Egyptian Museum will be located near the Pyramids and Cairo hopes it will help a tourism industry that has suffered from the turmoil that followed a 2011 uprising.

Highlights of the evening were exhibitions of mummies and the ornamented coffin covers of pharaonic courtier Yuya and his noblewoman wife Thuya.

A 20-meter-long papyrus said to be the longest on display in Egypt was also on show during the ceremony.





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[Top Egyptian travel company sees sector recovering as tourists return](#)

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Tue, 2018-11-20 14:54

CAIRO: One of the biggest Egyptian travel companies, Travco Group, said on Tuesday that hotel bookings are rising as tourists return to the country after years of political turmoil and security concerns.

Tourism is a cornerstone of Egypt's economy, a source of income for millions of citizens and a major source of foreign exchange. But the sector suffered severely in the years following 2011's popular uprising and was further hampered by a spate of militant attacks which targeted visitors.

Egypt's revenues from tourism jumped 77 percent year-on-year in the first half of 2018 to \$4.8 billion, while the number of tourists arriving in the country increased by 41 percent to just over 5 million.

Travco Group, which owns over 40 hotels in Egypt and abroad and is the local agent for Germany's TUI Group, raised its prices by 30-35 percent at the beginning of this winter season, its CEO Hamed El Chiaty told Reuters in an interview.

"The level of tourist bookings during the current winter holiday season in Egypt is promising," Chiaty said, adding that bookings from Germany, Italy, Poland and Ukraine were particularly promising.

In a devastating blow to the already struggling sector, Russia halted all flights to Egypt, and Britain stopped flights to Sinai, after an Islamist militant bomb attack brought down a Russian passenger plane in October 2015, killing everyone on board.

There have not been any major attacks aimed at the tourist sector in well over a year and Russia resumed flights to Cairo in April, although it has yet to authorize its aircraft to land in the Red Sea resort of Sharm Al-Sheikh. Chiaty said that Travco's price increases were the highest in seven years, rising to pre-2011 levels, while occupancy levels at the group's hotels were more than 80 percent, with the exception of Sharm Al-Sheikh.

Travco has market share of between 15 and 20 percent of the Polish, Belgian, English, Italian, Ukrainian and Austrian markets, Chiaty said, adding that it had recently refurbished its hotels.



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