

Power cuts help Syrian tradition of public bathhouses pick up steam

Author:

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DAMASCUS: At Hammam Bakri in Damascus' Old City, Syrian men wrapped in towels from the waist down lie down on a scalding marble floor. Masseurs vigorously scrub their skin with a soap-soaked loofah and wash them down with hot water.

Around a hexagonal fountain outside – traditionally found in old Damascene houses – patrons sip an infusion of herbs and dried flowers known as zhourat. The soothing smell fills the air around the domed roof.

After having fallen victim to modernization, Syria's ancient public bathhouses, known as Hammamat, are picking up steam again, largely due to prolonged electricity cuts during a particularly cold winter in this war-scarred country.

With soaring fuel prices and barely enough power to heat water at home, many are turning to the few remaining Hammams in cities like Damascus, Homs and Aleppo more to the north.

Damascus, along with major Arab cities like Baghdad, Mosul and Cairo, is home to some of the country's oldest and best bathhouses, some of them over a thousand years old. Many of them have closed due to modernization, lack of business and the war that left much of the country in ruins, crippled the economy and shrunk wages.

Now, officials at Damascus' remaining public baths say they are doing brisk business again but it's mostly due to residents who come for the hot water – a luxury they no longer find at home. Power outages often run for more than 20 hours a day in Damascus. Few can afford to have a private generator or pay the price of fuel.

The difficult times, say owners of public bathhouses, are in a way helping keep the tradition alive.

For 10,000 lira (less than \$3), the customers at Hammam Bakri located within the old city are given towels, a loofah and a piece of traditional olive oil soap. They are then scrubbed in a steamy room, often with Arabic music in the background. "Having a hot shower is very different than having cold showers especially in these temperatures," said Husam Hamami, the manager.

"We are now going through a difficult time. There is little electricity and the water is little so people are not even getting a chance to heat their water so we are finding that many people are coming in once a week."

Bakri is one of the oldest bathhouses in Damascus, established in 1069. Instead of tourists, it is now residents who come in more frequently. On a recent day, a group of men sauntered in elevated clogs made from wood, known

as qabqab, as they patted themselves dry with towels, emerging from a fog.



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Aleppo bathhouse boom as Syria crisis turns showers cold
Syrian fighters search for Daesh sleeper cells near prison

[Opposition says Iran created mercenary naval unit for attacks](#)

Author:

Wed, 2022-02-02 23:22

PARIS: Iran has created a new naval militia made up of mercenaries from around the region to attack enemies in its neighborhood and particularly off Yemen, the exiled opposition alleged on Wednesday.

The National Council of Resistance of Iran said the unit had been created as part of the Quds Force, the arm of the Revolutionary Guards responsible for extra-territorial operations.

“The Quds Force has been recruiting mercenaries for newly created, armed and

trained terrorist units to attack ships and maritime targets in the region," it said in a report based on information received from Iran.

The NCRI, which is outlawed in Iran and is the political wing of the People's Mujahedin, said the mercenaries were being hired from Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, Yemen and Africa.

The fighters are brought to Iran for training and then sent back to their home countries to conduct the operations, it said.

"The strategy affords the politically weakened and vulnerable Iranian regime a veneer of plausible deniability for its proxy war in the region, as it seeks to augment the export of terrorism on which it depends," the group added.

It said the primary location for naval commando training is at a naval academy in Ziba Kenar on the Caspian Sea in Gilan Province.

The militia troops are then organized in naval commando battalions, which are deployed in the Arabian Sea, the Bab Al-Mandab Strait between Yemen and the Horn of Africa and the Red Sea.

The aim is to "disrupt maritime navigation of commercial ships, to attack ports, conduct ship hijackings and plant mines."

It detailed examples where such operations had already been carried out including suicide and bomb attacks using small boats off Yemen's Red Sea port of Hodeidah.

Iran is deeply implicated in Yemen's seven-year war, where it backs Houthi rebels in their fight against the government. Tensions have soared after the rebels launched missile attacks on UAE.

"No rockets are fired, no attacks on ships take place, and no suicide speed boats target the shores, unless the order has come from Tehran," said Soona Samsami, the NCRI's representative in the US.



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Iranian teachers in new day of protests over payUS officials say negotiations on Iran nuclear program at crossroads

[Tourists in UAE shrug off Houthi missile attacks](#)

Author:

Wed, 2022-02-02 22:59

DUBAI: Tourists who flock to the UAE in search of winter sun appear undeterred by recent missile attacks on the Gulf State by Yemen's Houthi group.

Data suggests the tourism industry, centered in Dubai, is booming, with hoteliers and reservation agents reporting high demand despite the renewal of COVID-19 travel restrictions in many countries late last year.

Beaches are thronged and restaurants thriving, with the Expo world fair bringing more visitors to the Middle East's trade, finance and tourism hub.

"I feel super-safe," said Daniel Rivlin, 22, speaking at Expo hours after the UAE said on Monday it had intercepted a ballistic missile fired by the Houthis on the same day Israeli President Isaac Herzog was visiting.

"I feel safe as an Israeli being in Dubai. I feel safe being a foreigner in Dubai," he added.

October to March, when many Europeans swap freezing winters for the sunny Arabian Peninsula, is the peak season for the tourist industry, which according to ratings agency S&P accounted for 13 percent of Dubai's gross domestic product in 2020.

According to Hopper, a travel search engine that uses historical data to predict and analyze flight prices, searches for the UAE were stable in the first half of January and trended up 22 percent later in the month.

Hospitality data company STR said in December that Dubai's hotel industry was reporting room occupancy of 78.2 percent.

Monday's attack followed a Jan. 17 strike on a fuel depot in Abu Dhabi, that killed three people. It marked a dangerous new phase in the conflict for the UAE as previous cross-border strikes had mostly targeted Saudi Arabia.

The Houthis have said they also launched drones at Dubai, home to the world's tallest building and Ferris wheel, whose glitzy shopping malls are a magnet for tourists.

At Habtoor Grand Resort, popular among British, Russians, Kazakhs, Ukrainians, Germans and French, guests were relaxed, lying in the sun by the pool or playing tennis.

General manager Karolina Paliszewska said there had been no cancellations due to the Houthi attacks, instead forecasting a bumper end to a season she said had already been better than in years just before the pandemic.

"It's looking much better than last year. The first quarter is far beyond last year, so we are very positive and obviously the Expo is still going on so it brings additional attention," she said.

Vinayak Mahtani, CEO of bnbme holiday homes, said he expected strong demand until the blistering summer months start.

"The UAE thanks to its leadership is such a safe place that it's not even mentioning what may have been. There is zero sense of insecurity or fear among us or tourists," he said, adding that the attacks have had "no impact whatsoever."

Anastasia Nikitina, who studies in Moscow, was enjoying the sunshine. "The weather is so nice compared to Russia," she said. "We feel really safe here and nothing bothers us at all."



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Most popular US horse set for Dubai World Cup Carnival run
Louis Vuitton brings its traveling exhibition SEE LV to Dubai

[Israeli treatment of Palestinians termed study in the mechanics of apartheid](#)

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LONDON: Israel's treatment of the Palestinian people is a study in the mechanisms and policies by which apartheid systems operate and reproduce oppression, according to a new report by Amnesty International. In its report, published on Tuesday, the human rights monitor says there is a growing body of evidence to suggest these legal, technical and militaristic

mechanisms are crimes worthy of prosecution in the International Criminal Court.

An apartheid regime by definition systematically empowers, enriches and emboldens one ethnic group to the direct detriment of another. In South Africa, from 1948 until the early 1990s, it was white people advancing at the cost of black people. In Israel and Palestine, according to Amnesty, it is Jewish Israelis benefitting from the systemic oppression of Arabs.



Amnesty's 280-page report features a slew of allegations against Israel. (AFP)

Amnesty's report found that "massive seizures of Palestinian land and property, unlawful killings, forcible transfer, drastic movement restrictions, and the denial of nationality and citizenship to Palestinians are all components of a system which amounts to apartheid under international law."

As a legal term, the word apartheid is defined as "an institutionalized regime of oppression and domination by one racial group over another." It was deemed a crime against humanity under the 1973 International Convention on the Suppression and Punishment of the Crime of Apartheid – the "Apartheid Convention" – and then later the 1998 Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court.

Despite Israel signing up to the 1998 Rome Statute – though never ratifying it – Amnesty has documented extensive evidence that the Israeli state now engages in apartheid in the legal sense, potentially opening the door to prosecution in the ICC.

Amnesty's 280-page report features a slew of allegations against Israel. One of the most egregious and widespread is the forcible displacement of the

Palestinian people, whether through home demolitions, intimidation, legal mechanisms or by the creation of adverse living conditions.

Opinion

This section contains relevant reference points, placed in (Opinion field)

“Across Israel and the OPT (Occupied Palestinian Territories), Israel’s destruction of Palestinian homes, agricultural land and other property is intricately linked with Israel’s long-standing policy of land appropriation for the benefit of its Jewish population,” the report said.

“Since 1948, Israel has demolished tens of thousands of Palestinian homes and other properties across all areas under its jurisdiction and effective control.”

These demolitions separate the Palestinians from their ancestral homes, opening the door to further Israeli demographic domination over the native Palestinians.

“Israel has pursued an explicit policy of establishing and maintaining a Jewish demographic hegemony and maximizing its control over land to benefit Jewish Israelis while minimizing the number of Palestinians,” Amnesty said. And this dominant demographic – Jewish Israelis – are “unified by a privileged legal status embedded in Israeli law, which extends to them through state services and protections regardless of where they reside in the territories under Israel’s effective control.”



Movement restrictions described as “draconian” by Amnesty also provide a

visceral reminder of the oppression that Arabs face daily. (AFP)

These legal mechanisms, the report added, “systemically privilege Jewish citizens in law and in practice through the distribution of land and resources, resulting in their relative wealth and well-being at the expense of Palestinians.”

Movement restrictions described as “draconian” by Amnesty also provide a visceral reminder of the oppression that Arabs face daily.

The internet is awash with images of heavily armed Israeli soldiers and police interrogating and herding huddled masses of Palestinians through checkpoints, many of them hoping only to reach work or school unimpeded and on time.

Israel’s web of checkpoints, roadblocks, fences and other structures control the movement of Palestinians within the occupied territories and restrict their travel into Israel or abroad, Amnesty said, adding that these restrictions serve “as a means of control over land and people.”

And for Palestinians in Gaza, the situation is even worse. For them, “travel abroad is nearly impossible under Israel’s illegal blockade, which Israel imposes on Gaza’s entire population as a form of collective punishment.”

But despite the oppression they face at the hands of the Israeli state, the Palestinian people have “never stopped resisting,” Saleh Higazi, Amnesty International’s head of office in East Jerusalem, told Arab News.

Despite the odds being stacked against them, Palestinians have found new and creative ways to resist apartheid, he said.

Higazi highlighted the solidarity expressed within Palestine and globally when authorities tried to evict Palestinians from their homes in Sheikh Jarrah, East Jerusalem.



Amnesty has documented extensive evidence that the Israeli state now engages in apartheid in the legal sense. (AFP)

Further, a general strike among Palestinians across all territories – intentionally divided from each other by Israel – was convened “to show that they are one people, one group, that stands against the policies and practices of fragmentation that Israel has been imposing on them since its establishment.”

He added: “Palestinians have not stopped resisting. This is why reality has unfortunately become more brutal.”

Amnesty’s report received a furious reaction from Israel. Senior officials obtained the report ahead of its release and leaked it ahead of its scheduled publication date.

The Israeli Embassy in London wrote on Twitter: “Amnesty International’s report is a shameful misrepresentation of Israel’s diverse and dynamic society. As a proud democracy, we looked for nuance but found only falsehood and distortion.

“This antisemitic report recycles lies instead of seeking truth and consolidates bad-faith attacks from those who seek to demonize the state of Israel.

“Our citizens can speak from lived experience about the challenges we face as we try to create a better society, the goal of every democracy. We need to amplify these voices. We should center people who passionately and openly reflect the complexity and nuance of Israeli society, as opposed to focusing on erroneous and damaging reports that attempt to delegitimize Israel.



"Palestinians have not stopped resisting. This is why reality has unfortunately become more brutal." (AFP)

"It's a sad truth that if Israel were not a Jewish state, Amnesty would not employ such vicious smears against us," the statement added. Higazi vehemently rejected the claim that his organization is antisemitic. Accusations like this, he said, are "not new" and have long been "weaponized by Israel."

"They have used such baseless and false accusations to divert attention from what really needs to be the focus: the crime against humanity of apartheid." Higazi continued: "Any state or authority that carries out systematic human rights violations or states that impose systems of oppression amounting to the crime against humanity of apartheid will be worried about the truth, this truth, being exposed."

Israel is "worried and scared," Higazi added. "I hope that they are scared because we will be campaigning along with our partners to dismantle the system, which means holding those responsible accountable."



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Israel demolishes east Jerusalem home of Palestinian gunman Israel to remove two commanders over death of Palestinian-American

[Frenchman jailed in Iran halts hunger strike: family](#)

Author:

AFP

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PARIS: A Frenchman convicted in Iran on spying charges he denies has ended a hunger strike in prison after refusing food for more than a month, his family said Tuesday.

Benjamin Briere, 36, was sentenced by an Iranian court last week to eight

years in jail.

He had begun the hunger strike at Christmas to protest the conditions of his detainment and the lack of any progress in his legal proceedings after he was arrested in 2020.

"He has stopped his hunger strike, I asked him to, given how it was developing. And he knows he needs strength to continue his struggle," his sister Blandine told AFP.

Briere, who is being held at the Vakilabad jail in the eastern city of Mashhad, was arrested in May 2020, after taking pictures in a national park with a recreational drone.

The French foreign ministry has described the verdict as "unacceptable," saying Briere was a "tourist."

Briere's Iranian lawyer Saeid Dehghan wrote on Twitter that his hunger strike had lasted 35 days and that he had lost 13 kilos.

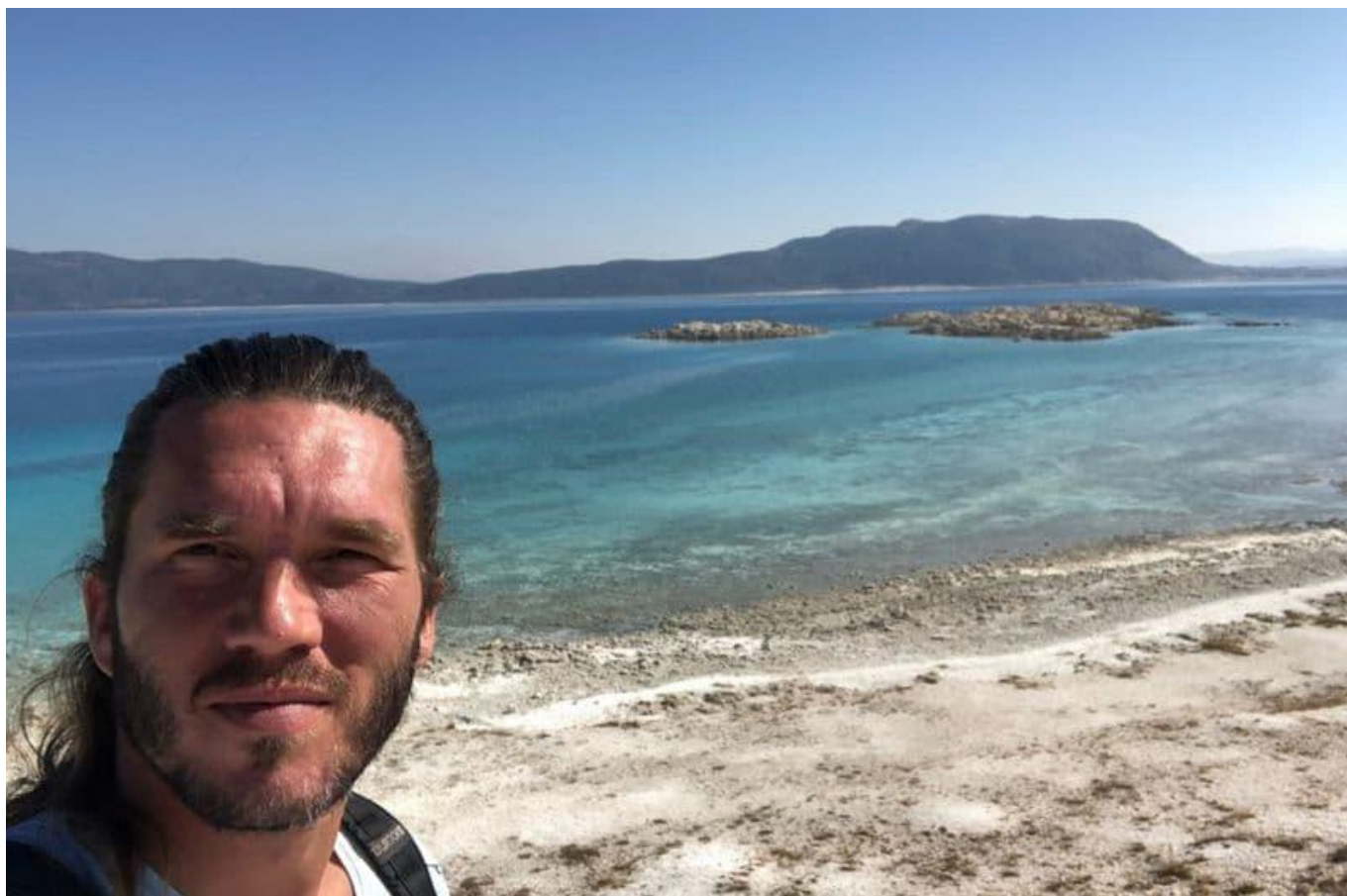
He is one of more than a dozen Western citizens held in Iran described as hostages by activists, who say they are innocent of any crime and detained by the powerful Revolutionary Guards to extract concessions from the West.

The verdict against Briere came as Iran and world powers are seeking to reach an agreement at talks in Vienna on reviving a 2015 deal to curb the Iranian nuclear program in exchange for a lifting of sanctions.

Blandine Briere said her brother was keeping up hope after his situation – along with that of French academic Fariba Adelkhah, who is also detained in Iran – was raised by President Emmanuel Macron in telephone talks with his Iranian counterpart Ebrahim Raisi on Saturday.

Macron urged the "immediate release" of both French citizens, the French presidency said.

"It gives (us) hope, but we will continue to fight until he is on a plane for France," Blandine Briere said.



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Frenchman gets long jail term in Iran; denies spy charges
Frenchman held in Iran begins hunger strike