

Gulf Arab embrace of Jewish minority reflected in Bahrain cemetery-restoration project

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DUBAI: For more than a century, a small cemetery in the heart of Manama has served as the final resting place for members of Bahrain's tiny Jewish community, which is the most established of its kind in the Gulf Cooperation Council area.

Located a short distance from The House of Ten Commandments, the oldest synagogue in the Gulf, the cemetery receives fewer visitors these days than the nearby Christian graveyard at St Christopher's Cathedral. But for Jews in Bahrain it remains a cherished part of their heritage.

Thanks to a new donor-funded initiative, efforts have begun to restore the site, which is recognized as the only Jewish cemetery in the Gulf. The project, launched by the Association of Gulf Jewish Communities on Jan. 16 to coincide with the Jewish holiday of Tu B'Shevat, aims to finance renovation and maintenance work at the site. The AGJC was founded in 2021 as a network of communities to develop Jewish life in the GCC area.

"For more than 100 years, our family members have been buried in the Jewish cemetery in Bahrain," Ebrahim Dawood Nonoo – president of the AGJC, chairman of the Board of Trustees of The House of Ten Commandments and head of Bahrain's Jewish community – told Arab News.

"One component of our community planning is ensuring that our cemetery is properly maintained for generations to come. We are very thankful that the AGJC chose this for its Tu B'Shevat project."

As part of the renovation project, weathered headstones are being cleaned and trees planted.

"We are planting trees in the Jewish cemetery of Bahrain, which is akin to bringing life back to those that have lived in the beautiful community in Bahrain for centuries and made their resting place in Bahrain for eternity," Rabbi Elie Abadie, the most senior Jewish cleric in the GCC area, told Arab News.



Located a short distance from The House of Ten Commandments, the oldest synagogue in the Gulf, the cemetery remains for Jews in Bahrain a cherished part of their heritage. (Supplied)

“Trees offer life; they provide shade, oxygen and nutrients. We are planting

trees in the cemetery, the final resting place to the spirits, as a revival to them. Trees take time to grow so we are not growing them for this generation, but for the upcoming one as our forefathers did for us.”

The readiness of Bahrain to embrace its Jewish minority and celebrate its heritage has made it a trailblazer for the region. The island kingdom’s former ambassador to the US, Houda Nonoo, is a prominent member of the Jewish community in the Gulf.

In June 2019, Bahrain hosted the “Peace to Prosperity” workshop in Manama, during which US President Donald Trump’s administration presented the economic aspects of his plan for peace between Israel and Palestine.

In August the following year, Bahrain and the UAE issued a joint declaration with Israel called the Abraham Accords, which led to the normalization of relations between the two Arab countries and Israel. The agreements also paved the way for warmer ties between Israel and Oman, Morocco and Sudan.

Israel considers itself a “Jewish and democratic state,” while Islam is the official religion of the UAE and Bahrain. Abraham Accords was chosen as the name for the agreement to signify the shared origin of belief between Judaism and Islam, both of which are Abrahamic religions that strictly espouse the monotheistic worship of the God of Abraham.

Since the signing of the accords, the UAE and Bahrain have invested a great deal in their bilateral relationships with Israel, and encouraged the celebration of Jewish history and heritage in the region.

FASTFACTS

*** The Association of Gulf Jewish Communities is an umbrella organization for communities of Jews in the GCC area.**

*** Each of the communities is independent but they share a common goal: To see Jewish life flourish in the region.**

*** The AGJC oversees services such as Jewish court the Beth Din of Arabia, the Arabian Kosher Certification Agency and life cycle events.**

At the same time, Gulf leaders have enhanced their political ties with Israel. Late last year, for example, Naftali Bennett, the Israeli prime minister, visited the UAE where he met Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed, Abu Dhabi’s crown prince.

Bennett also met Bahrain’s Crown Prince Salman bin Hamad Al-Khalifa on the sidelines of the COP26 climate summit in Glasgow, Scotland, in November.

The modern Jewish community in Bahrain was established in the 1880s when hundreds of Jews arrived from Iraq and Iran in search of a better life. Many settled in the Al-Hatab neighborhood of Manama, where they initially worked

in the clothing industry.

RELATIONS BETWEEN ISRAEL AND ARAB COUNTRIES



Source: AFP

ARAB NEWS

In 1935, as the community began to thrive, an Iranian immigrant named Shimon Cohen established a synagogue. However, the building was destroyed in 1947 during disturbances linked to the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Until the Abraham Accords were formally signed on Sept. 15, 2020, in Washington, D.C, Bahrain's remaining Jewish community of about 50 people practiced their faith largely behind closed doors. Since then, however, their synagogue has been renovated at a cost of 60,000 Bahraini dinars (\$160,000) and religious services are once again taking place openly.

Bahrain is not the only regional state that hosts a Jewish minority. About 1,000 Jews, all of them expatriates, are thought to live in the UAE. As trade ties with Israel are enhanced and Israeli tourists continue to flock to the Emirates, that number is expected to increase, in parallel with economic, technological, cultural and security cooperation.

"I went to Dubai twice last year and I would like to go to Bahrain," said Yossi Levy, 41, an Israeli who lives in Jerusalem. "We felt safe and so did all my friends. I'm interested in the heritage aspect – and the shopping is out of this world."



Ebrahim Dawood Nonoo, president of the AGJC and head of the Jewish Community in Bahrain, speaking to an AFP reporter at the House of Ten Commandments Synagogue in the capital Manama last year. (AFP/File Photo)

Israeli tour groups have become more common in Dubai in the past two years. And until COVID-19 restrictions put the brakes on international travel, the city's hotels were serving a growing Israeli clientele.

According to the Israel's foreign ministry, about 200,000 Israelis have visited the UAE since relations between the two countries were normalized in 2020.

"There will be many more when COVID-19 finally disappears," said Levy. "I hope we can develop the heritage links. It's important."

In most parts of the Arab world, however, Jewish populations are on the brink of vanishing. Iraq, once home to one of the world's oldest Jewish communities, now hosts only four members of the faith. Last year, their patriarch, Dhafer Eliyahu, died.

Baghdad has one a semi-functional synagogue but it does not have a rabbi and no services have been held there since before the 2003 US-led invasion. An estimated 220,000 Jews of Iraqi descent now live in Israel.

Both Turkey and Iran have small Jewish communities, while Lebanon, Syria and Egypt are thought to have only a few dozen Jewish residents between them. It is estimated that Yemeni Jews number in the low hundreds, at most.

Against this bleak backdrop, Bahrain is seen by many in the Jewish community

as a particularly successful example of peaceful interfaith coexistence.



Rabbi Elie Abadie speaks during an event commemorating the Jewish Holocaust on May 26, 2021, at the Crossroad of Civilizations private museum in the Gulf city of Dubai. (AFP/File Photo)

“The revival of the Jewish community in Bahrain and the development of one in the UAE is just beautiful,” Rabbi Abadie told Arab News. “It is nostalgic, after decades of the absence of Jewish presence.”

Abdullah Issa, a 39-year-old Muslim and Bahraini national, said his country has set a strong example that others should follow.

“Bahrain and other GCC countries have proven to the world that coexistence and the values of human fraternity as a whole can be achieved through will and resolve,” he told Arab News.

“Although changing perceptions and attitudes can be difficult, by the simple gesture of planting a tree both the government and people of Bahrain showcase that coexistence and demonstrate that human fraternity must be achieved.”

AGJC president Ebrahim Nonoo said he is thrilled to welcome Muslim visitors to the House of Ten Commandments, which is helping to advance the goal of cultural dialogue.

“It’s all very heartwarming,” he told Arab News. “You have Muslims coming into the synagogue all the time. They see the Ten Commandments, which are also written in Arabic, and they say it’s like in the Qur’an. The similarities make them comfortable.”

“The situation in Bahrain is unique. It’s something people have a lot to learn from. The coexistence here is just wonderful.”



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[Iran using pandemic to 'further](#)

geopolitical objectives, exert domestic control': Report

Fri, 2022-01-21 21:57

LONDON: Despite being the “epicentre” of COVID-19 infections in the Middle East and North Africa, the Iranian regime “has repeatedly utilised the pandemic to further geopolitical objectives and exert domestic control,” according to a new report by London-based political risk advisory firm Sibylline.

The report said Iranian cases accounts for 40 percent of the region’s 15 million cases, and with an official death toll of 132,000, the country also dominates the region’s 250,000 fatalities.

Despite the toll that the virus has taken on Iran, it lags behind other regional states – such as Saudi Arabia and the UAE – in vaccination rates.

Tehran’s response to the virus has contributed to the sky-high toll it has taken on the Iranian people, the report said.

“Mismanagement and false information have been symbolic of the country’s strategic response to the health crisis, with skewed medical advice and inconsistent figures severely underestimating the true epidemiological landscape of the country,” it added.

“Furthermore, Iran’s hard lined and ultraconservative President Ebrahim Raisi has exploited the health crisis to bolster anti-Western sentiments, spread conspiracy theories and state-sponsored media campaigns.”

Throughout the pandemic, Iran has been rocked by protests in many regions and the capital. In response, Tehran has enhanced domestic repression and cracked down on platforms used to organize protests or spread messages that counter regime narratives.

It “blocked Signal, a messaging app which gained popularity following concerns surrounding the state surveillance of WhatsApp, on 25 January 2021,” said the report.

Rhiannon Phillips, associate analyst for MENA at Sibylline, told Arab News: “Whilst the rest of the Middle Eastern region, and world, are increasingly adopting a strategy which promotes gradually easing measures and ‘learning how to live with COVID-19,’ the Iranian government will almost certainly seek to maintain repressive domestic measures, despite the trajectory of infection rate.”

This trajectory, she added, can be attributed to the country’s “anti-Western ideology.” This is exemplified “by their refusal to import Western vaccines until urged during their fifth wave of the pandemic in late 2021,” she said.

There is little hope that Tehran will change its trajectory to address the

crisis, she added. Instead, “the Iranian population will continue to suffer under worsening socio-economic conditions amid US sanctions and the ongoing health crisis.

“Such conditions will inevitably drive an increase in protest activity which are met with heavy state repression.”



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[Britain's Prince William to visit Dubai next month](#)

Fri, 2022-01-21 20:00

LONDON: Britain's Prince William will visit Dubai next month as part of Expo 2020's UK National Day, Kensington Palace has announced.

The Duke of Cambridge will travel to the UAE on Feb. 10 at the request of the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office.

His trip, which coincides with the UAE marking its 50th year, will be his first to the emirates and his first major overseas visit since a 2019 tour of the Middle East.

"The bond between the UK and the UAE is deep and strong and Prince William's visit will highlight and build upon these links as he has the opportunity to engage with young Emiratis, leaders from government and committed conservationists," the palace statement said.

During the UK National Day at Expo 2020, the Commonwealth Games 2022 baton relay, launched by Queen Elizabeth II from Buckingham Palace last October, will parade through the site while stopping at the national pavilions of Commonwealth nations.



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Prince William 'frustrated' that UK unable to rescue more AfghansFamily photo

from Jordan to feature on Prince William's annual Christmas card

[Palestinian foreign minister says US moving too slow on pushing peace](#)

Author:

Fri, 2022-01-21 00:03

NEW YORK: Palestinian Foreign Minister Riad Malki criticized US President Joe Biden on Thursday for moving too slowly to reverse all of former President Donald Trump administration's adverse policies against the Palestinians and not using Washington's special relationship to pressure Israel to abandon "its rejection of a two-state solution and peace negotiations."

Malki told the UN Security Council there were hopes that the end of Donald Trump's administration and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's government "would be enough to pave the way for renewed momentum for peace."

But while the Biden administration reversed several "unlawful and ill-advised" Trump policies, he said it has been slow to act, especially on the US commitment to reopen the US consulate in east Jerusalem which would restore Washington's main diplomatic mission for the Palestinians in the contested city.

After Biden took office a year ago, the Palestinians thought the US "could try to move the Israeli position toward us," Malki told reporters later.

"But we have seen that the Israeli position has been able to move the American position a little bit toward them – and this is really what troubles us very much."

The US "has yet to ensure the current Israeli government renounces its colonial policies and abandons its rejection of the two-state solution and peace negotiations," Malki said.

"This is an unacceptable stance that should neither be tolerated nor excused and must be reversed."

Malki said he had "a very open, frank discussion" earlier on Wednesday with US Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield, including on US-Palestinian relations, the peace process, Palestinian expectations from the US and "what they are trying to do in the near future in order to see things moving forward in the right direction."

He said the Palestinians are engaging with the US administration about possible ways to eliminate restrictions imposed by Congress on reopening the Palestinian diplomatic mission in Washington.

Tor Wennesland, the UN Mideast envoy, told the council that six Palestinian men were killed by Israeli security forces, another died in unclear circumstances, and 249 Palestinians were injured, including 46 children, in the West Bank in the past month.

He said 15 Israelis were injured in attacks by Palestinians.

Malki called on the Security Council to take urgent action to resolve the decades-old Israeli-Palestinian conflict and save the two-state solution, pointing to Israel's accelerated settlement construction, demolition of Palestinian homes, confiscation of Palestinian land "and even annexing Palestinian land."

"Absent this sense of urgency, prepare yourself then to attend the funeral of this solution, with all the consequences of such a death for the lives of millions of people, Palestinians and others," Malki warned.

"The Palestinian people will survive, but the two-state solution may not," he said.

"What happens then? Will you convert to advocates of the one-state solution of freedom and equal rights for all between the river and the sea? These would be the only options available then."

Malki urged support for an international peace conference and echoed Russia's call for a ministerial meeting of the Quartet of Mideast mediators – the US, UN, EU and Russia – "as soon as possible to mobilize efforts to get out from the current impasse."

He said the UN, EU and Russia have agreed to a ministerial meeting but "we're still waiting for the approval of the American side."

He said the three other Quartet members should convince the US about the importance of a ministerial meeting to move the Middle East peace process forward.

Thomas-Greenfield, the US ambassador, made no mention of the meeting with Malki or the Quartet in her briefing to the council, but she reaffirmed the Biden administration's "strong support for a two-state solution" and said "this year offers an opportunity to recommit to reaching a political solution to the conflict."

The US envoy, who visited Israel and the West Bank in November, reiterated that Israel and the Palestinians "are locked in a spiral of distrust."

"Israelis don't believe they have a partner for peace, while Palestinians are trapped in despair born of the complete absence of a political horizon," she said.

To make progress, Thomas-Greenfield said both sides must refrain from unilateral steps that increase tensions and undercut efforts toward a two-state solution.

That means Israel should refrain from annexing territory, settlement activity, demolitions and evictions “like what we saw in Sheikh Jarrah,” the Jerusalem neighborhood where Israel on Wednesday evicted Palestinian residents from a disputed property and demolished it, and Palestinians should stop inciting violence and compensating individuals imprisoned “for acts of terrorism,” Thomas-Greenfield said.



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Human rights commission calls for end to Israeli occupation of Palestine

[Israel releases Palestinians held after eviction](#)

Author:

Thu, 2022-01-20 23:54

JERUSALEM: Five members of a Palestinian family arrested after Israeli police demolished their house in East Jerusalem have been released, their lawyer said on Thursday.

The arrest of several members of the Salhiya family came as they were evicted

from their house in the sensitive neighborhood of Sheikh Jarrah by Israeli authorities before dawn on Wednesday. Walid Abu Tayeh, the family's lawyer, confirmed "the release of the five people detained since Wednesday, including Mahmoud Salhiya and his sons."

Police had accused several Salhiya family members of "violating a court order" and public disturbance.

Abu Tayeh said the release of the five on Thursday was conditional on payment of a 1,000 Israeli shekel (\$320) fine, and that the group was forbidden from entering Sheikh Jarrah for one month.

The looming eviction of other Palestinian families from Sheikh Jarrah in May last year partly fueled an 11-day war between Israel and armed Palestinian factions in Gaza.

In those cases, Palestinians risked having to surrender plots of land to Jewish settlers who had mounted legal claims to the land.

But Jerusalem authorities have stressed the Salhiya family eviction is a different case and that the city intends to build a special needs school on the land, benefitting Arab residents of east Jerusalem.

The city has said it purchased the land from previous Arab owners and that the Salhiya's had lived there illegally for years, but failed to agree to a compromise on an eviction order first issued in 2017. The foreign ministries of France, Germany, Italy and Spain urged Israeli authorities to stop the construction of new housing units in East Jerusalem.

In a statement, the European countries said that the hundreds of new buildings would "constitute an additional obstacle to the two-state solution," referring to international peace efforts to create a state for Palestinians.

Israeli authorities recently approved plans for the construction of around 3,500 homes in occupied East Jerusalem, nearly half of which are to be built in the controversial areas of Givat Hamatos and Har Homa.

The foreign ministries said that building in this area would further disconnect the West Bank from East Jerusalem and that these settlements are a violation of international law.

The four countries also expressed concern about the evictions and demolitions in the East Jerusalem neighborhood of Sheikh Jarrah.

The Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

Israel captured East Jerusalem including the Old City in a 1967 war and later annexed it, a move not recognized internationally.

Palestinians want East Jerusalem for the capital of a state they seek in the Israeli-occupied West Bank, which abuts the city, and the Gaza Strip. Israel

views the entire city as its indivisible capital.

Most world powers deem the Israeli settlements illegal for taking in territory where Palestinians seek statehood.



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European countries urge Israel to stop construction in East Jerusalem
Why Israel is waging a shadow war with Iran's IRGC in Syria