

Egypt, Russia to intensify joint efforts to settle Libya crisis

Sat, 2021-12-25 22:11

LONDON: Egyptian President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi made a phone call on Saturday to his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin to discuss the current situation in Libya.

The two sides agreed to intensify joint efforts and coordination to settle the crisis in Libya, achieve the desired aspirations of the Libyan people, combat armed militias and terrorist organizations, and end illegal foreign interference in Libya's affairs, the Egyptian presidency said in a statement. El-Sisi told Putin that Egypt is continuing its efforts to facilitate "the current transitional phase and activate the free will of the Libyan people in choosing their leaders and representatives," presidency spokesman Bassam Radi said.

On Egyptian-Russian relations, Radi said El-Sisi affirmed Cairo's desire to deepen ties with Moscow at all levels, to build on the current projects that they cooperate in implementing in Egypt, foremost of which are the El Dabaa Nuclear Power Plant and the Russian industrial zone in the Suez Canal Axis. "Putin stressed the importance his country attaches to developing bilateral relations with Egypt in the coming period, within the framework of the partnership and strategic cooperation agreement between the two countries," Radi added.



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[Morocco to restore diplomatic ties with Germany](#)

Sat, 2021-12-25 23:13

RABAT: Morocco says it is ready to restore diplomatic cooperation with Germany, apparently thanks to a perceived shift in position toward the disputed Western Sahara.

The announcement came as Morocco celebrates the anniversary of a landmark US move to recognize Moroccan sovereignty over the territory, in exchange for Morocco establishing formal relations with Israel.

Morocco annexed Western Sahara from Spain in 1975 and the Polisario Front independence movement fought Morocco for years before a 1991 UN-brokered ceasefire.

Morocco halted diplomatic cooperation with Germany earlier this year and recalled its ambassador over Germany's stance on the Sahara question, notably in the aftermath of the US decision.

Morocco's Foreign Ministry said in a statement Wednesday that it was ready to revive the fractured ties.

The kingdom "appreciates the positive announcements and constructive positions recently made by the new federal government of Germany," the ministry said.

"These announcements make it possible to envisage a revival of bilateral cooperation and a return to normalcy of the diplomatic representations of the two countries."

The statement appeared to be referring to language posted on the German Foreign Ministry website last week, five days after the new German government took office.

The language on the German website calls Morocco "a central partner of the EU and Germany in North Africa" and states that the German position on Western Sahara has been unchanged for decades – Germany supports UN efforts to bring about "a fair, durable political solution that is acceptable for all sides." It adds that Morocco made an "important contribution for such an agreement

with an autonomy plan” in 2007.



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[Few pilgrims to bring cheer to Bethlehem as tourism takes a hit](#)

Sat, 2021-12-25 23:07

BETHLEHEM: The bells of Bethlehem rang out under grey skies on Christmas morning across streets whose closed pastel or green shutters were like an Advent calendar that nobody had turned up to open.

Shopkeepers and hotel owners in the Palestinian city reported far lower business than the years before coronavirus closures halted the arrival of wealthy foreign tourists, devastating the economy of the traditional birthplace of Jesus.

In Manger Square, hundreds of Christians – mostly those who live, work or study in Israel and the occupied West Bank – gathered near the tree and crib

to sing carols and bring some cheer to the scene outside the Church of the Nativity.

But Joseph Giacaman, whose family has sold souvenirs around the square for a century, said business was around 2 percent of pre-pandemic years. "We were closed until three weeks ago. I have sold maybe two or three olive wood cribs. In normal years, we'd sell three or four each day throughout the year," he said.

The back streets were virtually empty. Star Street had been renovated in recent years in the aim of drawing crowds, but here as elsewhere the omicron variant dashed those hopes in November when Israel began closing its borders. Earlier in December, Bethlehem mayor Anton Salman had sought to bolster morale by walking along the cobbled street at night, shaking hands of those selling mulled wine and olive wood carvings. But the market's opening could not continue its momentum with no foreign coach parties to sell to. Across town, Bethlehem's grandest hotel, the Jacir Palace, lay closed and padlocked.

And in the nearby Nativity Hotel, receptionist Victor Zeidan said he was doing a 12-hour shift at lower pay to get a rare day's work checking in Palestinian Christian and Filipino care workers who briefly boosted occupancy. "I haven't even celebrated this year, I didn't get much work before so now I am taking the chance," he said.

Jerise Qumsieh, of the Palestinian Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities, told Reuters that this year was better than last because there were at least some domestic visitors compared with the tighter restrictions of 2020, but that foreign tourism was "zero."

Nevertheless, in the early hours of Saturday the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem, Pierbattista Pizzaballa, urged a reduced midnight mass congregation to search for hope.

"In this time of health emergency and prolonged political emergency, many different voices are heard in families; Some undermine confidence, take away hope, extinguish love. Others, however, are more encouraging," he said. "We need to seek and find the voice that leads us to Jesus and to salvation, that opens hearts to hope."



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Virus weighs again on Christmas festivities in Bethlehem
Free Lebanon from 'captors and oppressors,' country's top Christian cleric tells president

[Restoration of Bethlehem's Church of the Nativity uncovers long hidden treasures](#)

Author:

Fri, 2021-12-24 23:16

AMMAN: Years of meticulous restoration work at the Church of the Nativity in the West Bank city of Bethlehem have uncovered a precious trove of previously undiscovered artworks, relics and artifacts dating back centuries.

Christians believe Jesus Christ was born at the site where the church now stands – an event that is celebrated every year on Dec. 25. As such, Bethlehem and the church itself are considered places of pilgrimage by Christians the world over.

The COVID-19 pandemic may have reduced the long lines of pilgrims and tourists to a trickle over the past two years, but those fortunate enough to attend will have noticed significant changes at the site since renovations

began.



Christians believe the grotto of the Church of the Nativity to be the place where Jesus Christ was born. (Supplied)

Inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List in 2012, a church was first completed at the site in 339. The edifice that replaced it after a fire in the sixth century retains elaborate floor mosaics from the original building.

Thanks to several years of sensitive restoration work, many hidden details have been revealed for the first time in centuries, including original stonework, detailed ornamentation and precious objects lost to time.

Renovation work began in 2013 after a generous donation from Palestinian philanthropist Said Khoury, who during a visit noticed that rainwater was seeping into the church through its deteriorating roof.

Determined to do something to protect the site, Khoury, then chairman of the Athens-based Consolidated Contractors Company (CCC), met with Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas to discuss the matter and donated half a million dollars to kick-start the restoration.



Restoration work was made possible by donations from around the world.
(Supplied)

The Presidential Committee for the Restoration of the Church of Nativity was established and, before long, donations to support the renovation were flooding in from around the world.

An international tender was made with the help of CCC to ensure the renovation work was carried out to the highest standards in order to protect the church's World Heritage status.

"The Italian firm that won the tender, Piacenti, are expert restorers for three generations and they carried out the work according to the specifications that were dictated by UNESCO," Mazen Karam, CEO of the Bethlehem Development Foundation, told Arab News.

Karam and his foundation colleagues, who raise funds and supervise the

renovation work, are thrilled with the number of new discoveries that have been made over the course of the restoration. These included a beautiful, hand-crafted glass lamp.

The restoration team also discovered a baptismal font hidden under a layer of marble, and uncovered an angel on the northern wall of the basilica, which had been covered with plaster.

“The angel is just one of the many surprise discoveries that we have seen in the church once the renovation process began,” said Karam.

Another big surprise was the discovery of the building’s original door, now faithfully restored, which is believed to have been gifted to the church by an Armenian king.

Tour guides encourage visitors to see the church after dark from the direction of Manger Square to experience the full effect of the new lighting installed among its restored walls.

On entering the church, visitors pass through the Door of Humility – a stone entrance that was deliberately built with a low ceiling that forces worshippers to bow in reverence.

Once inside, visitors can fully appreciate the tireless effort that has gone into restoring the lofty ceilings, pillars, walls and paintings.

Perhaps most importantly, the restoration has halted the scourge of rain damage. The last time the roof underwent major repairs was in 1480 during the Mamluk period. “Now we can say with confidence that the ceiling will be good for another 1,000 years,” Karam said.

During the repairs, the whole roof was covered with 1,625 square meters of new lead sheeting and around 8 percent of its wooden trusses replaced with ancient wood brought from Italy, reinforced with steel connectors to protect the basilica from seismic activity.

FASTFACTS

The church roof last underwent major repairs in 1480 during the Mamluk period.

UNESCO removed the church from its List of World Heritage in Danger in 2019.

Restoration to date has cost around \$15m, but a further \$2.8m is needed.

All 42 of the church’s wooden window frames were replaced and fitted with UV-deflecting double glazing. About 3,365 square meters of internal plastering, 3,076 square meters of external stone facades, and 125 square meters of wall mosaics were renovated, consolidated and cleaned, while 50 stone columns were restored and repainted.

Such was the success and quality of the restoration work that UNESCO removed the Church of the Nativity from the List of World Heritage in Danger in 2019.

The Bethlehem Development Foundation said it was particularly grateful for the “extremely professional and respectful” support of the presidential committee and the Palestinian government, which ensured that resources and expertise were made available.

To date, the restoration work has cost around \$15 million. However, the repairs are not yet complete, and an estimated \$2 million in additional funding will be needed to finish this phase of the project.

Work completed to date includes the restoration of the sixth-century marble tiles for the Bema in front of the Orthodox Iconostasis and transept south.

Projects yet to be funded include the conservation of the front-yard stone tiles, the installation of a firefighting system and microclimate controls, structural consolidation at the north and south corners of the basilica, the consolidation of its external southern wall against seismic activity, and the restoration of the central nave.

Perhaps the most sensitive portion of the church that remains to be refurbished is the Grotto of the Nativity, a subterranean space where Christians believe Jesus was born. The precise spot is marked by a silver star.

The foundation said that the grotto is in urgent need of repairs, which will cost an estimated \$2.8 million, having suffered centuries of earthquakes, fires, and the wear and tear of hosting millions of visitors.

However, the issue is not entirely a question of money. Given its religious significance, any work on the grotto must first be approved by the three churches that guard the site – Orthodox, Catholic and Armenian.

Restoration of the site could also deny pilgrims and tourists access to the grotto for up to eight months.

“The grotto will require a number of things before we can begin working on it,” the foundation told Arab News. “We need the approval of the three churches and we expect that this will require a further \$2.8 million and will require that all works, including the grotto, can be completed by 2023 if the needed funding is secured.”

One solution the churches, Bethlehem municipality and the Palestinian Ministry of Tourism would like to see is a phased restoration that allows for scheduled prayer and some visits to the grotto.

Karam said that this approach will allow the Church of the Nativity to remain both a place of worship and a site of historical curiosity to people of all faiths and denominations while it undergoes repairs.

“Your visit will help keep it alive as a testimony to the living church and will prevent it from turning into a museum,” he said.







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Jingle all the way: How Christmas is becoming more accepted in Saudi Arabia
Pope celebrates Christmas Eve Mass as virus surges in Italy

[Morocco extends flight ban because of virus](#)

Author:

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Fri, 2021-12-24 16:42

RABAT: Morocco on Friday extended a halt on international passenger flights until the end of January as it tries to rein in surging cases of the omicron coronavirus variant.

The National Office of Airports (ONDA) announced that “the suspension of all passenger flights to and from Morocco will be extended until January 31, 2022.”

Rabat imposed the measure to run initially from late November until December 31, although a mechanism had been in place for Moroccan citizens stranded abroad to come home.

But on Thursday Rabat stopped that mechanism, meaning the de facto closure of the country’s borders.

Now the only passenger movements allowed are one-off repatriation flights for foreign citizens in the kingdom, authorized on a case-by-case basis by Rabat. The government has also banned all New Year’s Eve celebrations and reimposed a nighttime curfew.

Festivals and cultural gatherings have been banned since the start of the month.

The restrictions have dealt a punishing blow to the North African country’s vital tourism sector, already on its knees after two lost seasons because of the pandemic.



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