

# At Raqqa 'roundabout of hell,' Syrian lovers find new meeting spot

Fri, 2021-11-12 00:19

RAQQA: RAQQA: Only a few years ago, Al-Naim square was the grim stage for Raqqa's public executions. Today, Nader Al-Hussein sits in its new arched design, waiting for his date to arrive.

"This is the best meeting point for lovers, families and friends," the 25-year-old says, sitting on one of the rare public benches in the bustling, war-ravaged north Syria city.

"Before, we used to avoid passing near it so that we wouldn't see blood and horror," Hussein says.

The Al-Naim (Paradise) traffic circle was anything but heavenly when Daesh reigned over Raqqa, its former de facto Syrian capital, between 2014 and 2017.

Residents dubbed it the "roundabout of hell."

Extremists flaunted their implementation of Shariah law in the square, carrying out flagellations, crucifixions and even decapitations on those deemed apostates or criminals.

Their marauding morality police made it impossible for lovers to meet, even in private, without risking death.

"I never dared to meet with my girlfriend in person; we used to speak only over the phone, out of fear that we may be stoned as punishment," Hussein says.

Two years after Daesh was declared defeated in Syria, the revamped square is a far cry from the barren dirt mound that hosted some of the jihadist group's most repulsive acts.

Arched columns have been built around a new central fountain, replacing the metal fence on whose spikes a Daesh executioner once impaled the heads he had just severed before posing for a picture.

Benches have been placed near elliptical side pools.

At night, multicolored laser lights turn the square into a rare attraction amid the drab and ghostly concrete jumble of the city, four years after Daesh left.

The roundabout is central and ringed by cafes and restaurants, making it a popular spot for families and couples alike.

"Al-Naim square has turned from hell into paradise ... even lovers come here now," says 24-year-old Manaf, declining to provide his surname and adding that he visited it often.

Around him, children dash between benches while men and women chat and snap photos. Laughter rises from a picnic spot as street vendors selling red heart-shaped balloons mill about.

In a scene unimaginable just four years ago, Mohammad Al-Ali, 37, and his wife sit side-by-side, looking out for their three children as they play around one of the empty pools.

"We never brought the kids here so that they wouldn't see decapitated heads hanging," he said.

"But today, the square is a space for families and children."

Life is slowly picking up in Raqqa, where leveled buildings and traces of Daesh insignia provide stark reminders of the dark era of jihadist rule. It was here that Daesh stoned people to death and auctioned off women from the Yazidi minority as slaves.

A few kilometers away from Al-Naim square, another infamous yet smaller roundabout used by Daesh for executions has also regained its bustle, largely owing to its location near a popular market.

For some, however, a shadow still hangs over the place known as “clock-tower square.”

“This roundabout reminds us of the tragedy we lived ... it reminds us of death and suffering,” says Ahmad Al-Hamad, who was passing the square on his wheelchair on the way to the grocer’s.

“We used to see the severing of heads and hands, and executions carried out using swords,” he says.

Several of Hamad’s own relatives were beheaded in the square.

“We used to be scared of even passing near it,” he says.

The situation is similar at the nearby Al-Dallah roundabout, named after a large-scale reproduction of a traditional Arabic coffee pot that adorns its centre.

Also a former Daesh punishing ground, Raqqa residents have since dubbed Al-Dallah as “the workers’ square,” in reference to the day laborers who usually dot its sidewalks in the hope of being picked up for odd jobs.

Abdel Majid Abdallah, one of the workers, says he could never forget how Daesh used to display prisoners in cages at the roundabout.

“But today it’s a place where we come to earn a living,” the 35-year-old says.



Main category:

[Middle-East](#)

Tags:

[Raqqa](#)

[Roundabouts](#)

[Syria](#)

Syria's Raqqa still finding the dead, 2 years after Daesh fall 200 corpses found in mass grave in Syria's Raqqa: official

---

## [US calls on Houthis to 'immediately release' Sanaa embassy staff](#)

Author:

Thu, 2021-11-11 23:40

LONDON: The US on Thursday called for the Houthi militia in Yemen to immediately release American embassy staff recently detained in Sanaa.

At least 25 local employees for the embassy and the US Agency for International Development were detained in recent weeks by the Iran-backed group, Bloomberg reported on Tuesday.

The embassy was shuttered in 2015 shortly after the Houthis seized the capital and much of northern Yemen, sparking the conflict.

The Houthis recently raided the embassy compound and removed some of the property.

A State Department spokesperson said most of the staff had been released but some remained detained.

"We are concerned that Yemeni staff of the US Embassy in Sanaa continue to be detained without explanation and we call for their immediate release," the spokesperson said.

The Houthis must "immediately vacate" the embassy and "return all seized property," they added. "The US government will continue its diplomatic efforts to secure the release of our staff and the vacating of our compound, including through our international partners."

On Tuesday, State Department Spokesman Ned Price said he did not have details on why the staff had been detained at this time.

"We are extremely concerned by reports of detentions of some of our local Yemeni employees in Sanaa, and we call for their immediate release," he said during a press briefing.

The detentions emerged as Cathy Westley, the top American diplomat at the Yemen embassy, which is now based in Saudi Arabia, visited government held Aden on Monday.

She traveled with the US special envoy to Yemen Tim Lenderking, who was on his first trip to the country.

They met Prime Minister Maeen Abdulmalek Saeed and several other officials for talks on the conflict.

Lenderking has been tasked with finding a resolution to the war between the Iran-backed Houthis and government troops supported by an Arab coalition.



Main category:

[Middle-East](#)

Tags:

[Yemen](#)

[Tim Lenderking](#)

[Cathy Westley](#)

[Houthis](#)

Rights watchdog condemns the killing of pregnant Yemeni journalist Prince Khalid reviews Yemen developments with US envoy

---

## [Arab coalition warplanes hit military locations in Houthi-held Sanaa, Saada](#)

Author:

Thu, 2021-11-11 22:48

AL-MUKALLA: Arab coalition warplanes on Wednesday night struck Houthi-controlled military sites in the Yemeni capital and Saada province, as

government forces on the ground fought to push back the militia from Marib province.

Coalition spokesman Brig. Gen. Turki Al-Maliki said military sites were targeted in Sanaa and Saada, where ballistic missiles, weapons and explosive-rigged drones are stored and assembled. He vowed to launch more airstrikes if the Houthis did not halt their cross-border attacks.

“The militia’s cross-border attacks are absurd, and we continue to exercise restraint,” Al-Maliki said.

Sanaa residents said that large explosions rocked the city as the warplanes hit Al- Sawad military base and other locations.

The Houthis have recently escalated missile and drones attacks on government-controlled areas in Yemen and on Saudi Arabia.

On Wednesday, three missiles struck the western Yemeni city of Mocha as local officials were preparing to meet the UN’s Yemen envoy.

Saudi air defenses have shot down explosive-rigged drones and ballistic missiles fired by the Houthis toward the Kingdom.

The coalition’s aerial bombardment of Houthi targets came as troops on Wednesday and Thursday fought in flashpoints outside the strategic central city of Marib.

Yemen’s Defense Ministry said that army troops and allied tribesmen had attacked Houthi military gatherings and reinforcements in contested areas south and west of Marib city such as Al-Kasara.

Dozens of Houthis were reportedly killed or wounded during government counterattacks as coalition warplanes struck the Houthis’ military equipment and locations in Marib province.

In Marib, the government’s Executive Unit for IDP Camps said the number of displaced people from Marib’s southern districts had increased to 90,000 since September, when the Houthis started attacking Abedia, Juba, Rahabah and Hareb.

Last week, the same government body said more than 70,000 people were forced to leave their homes and displacement camps in those districts and take shelter in the city of Marib and Al-Wadi district.

UN Yemen envoy Hans Grundberg said Thursday he had witnessed the impact of the fighting and the Houthi blockade on civilians in the besieged city of Taiz.

He called on the country’s warring factions to de-escalate and comply with peace efforts.

“These visits have given me a first-hand experience of the impact of the conflict on civilians in Taiz, including the difficulties they face moving

through their daily lives,” Grundberg said, after concluding a visit to government-controlled areas in Taiz province. “It has also given me the opportunity to hear directly from Yemeni men, women and young people on how a UN-led political process can help to address the situation in Taiz as part of a sustainable solution to the conflict in Yemen.”



Main category:

[Middle-East](#)

Tags:

[Arab Coalition](#)

[Houthis](#)

[Sanaa](#)

[saada](#)

Houthi missiles hit Mocha as UN Yemen envoy visits cityArab nations condemn Houthi attacks on Saudi Arabia's southern region

---

## [Palestinian PM hopeful that US Consulate will reopen in Jerusalem](#)

Thu, 2021-11-11 02:43

RAMALLAH: Palestinian Prime Minister Mohammed Shtayyeh on Wednesday said he hopes US President Joe Biden will keep promises his administration has made to the Palestinian people, including a pledge to reopen the American Consulate in Jerusalem.

He also talked about the difficulties the Palestinian Authority is facing, politically and financially. He spoke of his hope for change but presented little in the way of practical evidence that this coming, saying only: "There are promises."

Shtayyeh added: "There are American promises related to reopening the American Consulate in Jerusalem, and we hope that they will be implemented." Former US President Donald Trump's administration closed the consulate, Washington's diplomatic mission to the Palestinians, in 2018 when it moved the US Embassy to Jerusalem from Tel Aviv. When he took office in January this year, Biden said he would reopen the consulate but this has yet to happen.

Shtayyeh rejected Israeli proposals to reopen the consulate in Ramallah instead of Jerusalem, saying: "Ramallah is not the capital of Palestine. Ramallah is not Jerusalem and will not be."

Speaking during a briefing of the foreign press, attended by Arab News, Shtayyeh also denied reports of a US initiative to form a Palestinian unity government.

The Israeli i24 news channel had reported that the Biden administration is planning an initiative to assemble a new government that would include ministers from Hamas and Fatah in an attempt to heal divisions.

The prime minister also criticized a recent announcement by Israeli authorities of plans to build more new settlement units in the West Bank, and called on the US and European nations to help preserve the two-state solution by putting pressure on Israel to halt its plans.

"Israel is waging three wars against us: A war against geography, through land confiscation; a war against the population, which is represented in the Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood; and its war against Palestinian money, through deductions from Palestinian revenues," he said

## **HIGHLIGHT**

**Mohammed Shtayyeh said 'there are American promises' to restore the mission 'and we hope that they will be implemented.'**

Shtayyeh accused Israel of illegally confiscating between 220 million (\$70.6 million) and 250 million shekels a month without any independent financial audit.

"We are bleeding, financially," he added.

He said the Palestinian Authority is facing a financial deficit as a result of the Israeli actions, a decline in international and Arab funding in the past two years, and the decline in the local economy as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. In the meantime, spending requirements remain the same despite the lack of finance, he added.

"We are carrying out our obligations, supporting the Gaza Strip and helping Jerusalem, as well as in different areas where the Palestinians are," said Shtayyeh.

Some press reports have suggested that the Palestinian government might reduce the salaries of public-sector workers in an attempt to address the financial crisis.

“We hope that next year will be better,” Shtayyeh said. “There are Arab promises to resume support from Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Qatar, as well as Algeria.”

Regarding the possibility of resuming the political process for negotiations between the Palestinians and Israelis, he said that there is no practical progress on this front.

“There is a political vacuum,” he added. “There is no political initiative to fill this vacuum and the US administration must abide by its promises that were included in the phone call between President Biden and President Mahmoud Abbas.”

Shtayyeh accused the Israeli government of refusing to engage in efforts to achieve peace, after comments by Prime Minister Naftali Bennett dismissing any possibility of a Palestinian state.

Asked about a reported sharp decline in the popularity of the Palestinian Authority among Palestinians, he said: “The failure to achieve any political result on the ground as a result of Israeli policies is undoubtedly limiting popularity.

“We know what tickles the sentiments of the general public but we are not looking for popularity; we have a national political vision that we are striving for.”



Main category:



[Middle-East](#)

Tags:

[Palestine](#)

[Israel](#)

Israeli military complicit as settler violence hits record-high, UN experts say  
UK funding cuts push UN Palestine aid agency 'close to collapse'

---

## [‘No magic wand’ to resolve Lebanon’s economic crisis](#)

Thu, 2021-11-11 02:37

BEIRUT: The Lebanese government does not have a “magic wand” to resolve the country’s economic crisis, Prime Minister Najib Mikati said Wednesday, as he expressed sympathy for people’s hardships.

He made the remarks after visiting the Greek Orthodox Metropolitan Bishop of Beirut Elias Audi, also speaking about the problems dogging the probe into last year’s deadly port explosion.

There are demands from Hezbollah and the Amal Movement for Judge Tarek Bitar to be removed from the blast investigation, with both boycotting Cabinet sessions until he is dropped. The prime minister has replaced Cabinet sessions with mini-ministerial meetings to address vital issues.

“We have no magic wand,” Mikati said, answering calls to activate the government’s role in saving Lebanon from the economic crisis. “We feel the citizens’ concerns and we seek to alleviate some burdens, especially the living conditions.”

He added that the Lebanese judiciary needed to assume its role fairly and adopt unified laws so that a result could be reached. “We support keeping Bitar in charge and we do not interfere in the judiciary.”

On Tuesday, a group of female activists stormed the Justice Palace in Beirut and sealed the office of Judge Habib Mezher in protest against his “illegal attempt to remove Bitar from the case and take over the confidential investigations.”

The Lebanese Judges Club urged politicians to stop interfering in the judiciary for the country’s sake, so that the judicial process could take its course without any abuse. “Otherwise, history will not be merciful,” it said. Lebanon is also dealing with the ongoing diplomatic fallout resulting from the information minister’s comments about the war in Yemen.

The Arab League’s attempt to mend fences between Lebanon and Saudi Arabia has failed, after the body’s assistant secretary-general Hossam Zaki tried to mediate.

**We have no magic wand. We feel the citizens’ concerns and we seek to alleviate some burdens, especially the living conditions.**

## Najib Mikati

Hezbollah insists that Information Minister George Kordahi should not resign over the remarks.

Mikati reiterated that the brotherly ties between Lebanon and the Gulf states were a priority and he once again called on the minister to resign, stressing that "supreme national interest, in political affairs and in international relations, must prevail over factional and personal interests."

He met Lebanon's ambassadors to Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, Fawzi Kabbara and Miled Nammour, on Wednesday. They returned to Lebanon after the two Gulf countries ordered them to leave.

The two ambassadors expressed their fear of this crisis affecting the future of bilateral relations with the Gulf states and its repercussions on the interests of Lebanese expat communities.

They told Mikati that, upon their departure, Saudi and Bahraini officials had assured them of their deep concern for the close ties with Lebanon and for the solid friendship that bound them to the Lebanese people.

Both stressed it would be harder to restore ties the more time that passed. Al-Qabas newspaper, quoting a Kuwaiti security source on Wednesday, reported: "The Kuwaiti Ministry of Interior has stopped issuing all kinds of visas to the Lebanese, until further notice, against the backdrop of the recent diplomatic crisis between the Gulf Cooperation Council countries and Lebanon."

The source told the newspaper: "Lebanese with Kuwaiti residency are not included in the decision, and they have the right to return to the country. Visitor visas for families, tourists, businessmen and government officials, as well as work visas, will no longer be granted."



Main category:

[Middle-East](#)

Tags:

[Lebanon](#)

Lebanon dream big, UAE face big freeze: 5 things to look out for in latest World Cup Asian qualifiers  
In a country with no electricity, Miss Internet Lebanon is crowned