

Two-decade court battle over West Bank area nears end

Author:

Sat, 2020-10-24 01:12

KHIRBET AL-MAJAZ, PALESTINE: Khirbet Al-Majaz, a patch of desert at the end of a long, dusty trail in the West Bank, may not look like an area at the center of a two-decade court battle.

But after years of legal wrangling, the Palestinian Bedouins perched there on a rocky hill may be facing final expulsion if Israel's High Court accepts army efforts to declare the area a training site.

Israel's army, which has occupied the West Bank since the 1967 Six-Day War, has no base in Khirbet Al-Majaz, but herds of goats were seen grazing there during a visit by diplomats earlier this week.

In the early 1980s, the army declared the 3,000-hectare territory known as Masafer Yatta at the southern end of the West Bank a restricted military area – calling it “Firing Zone 918” – and claiming it was uninhabited.

The roughly 1,000 Bedouins who live there say Masafer Yatta was their people's home long before Israeli soldiers set foot in the West Bank.

The head of the Israeli anti-occupation NGO B'Tselem, Hagai El-Ad, said: “Declaring the area a firing zone was the excuse. Cleansing the territory of Palestinians is the goal.”

The Bedouin residents of Masafer Yatta, who live across 12 isolated hamlets including Khirbet Al-Majaz, were first kicked out in 1999.

The following year, the Association for Civil Rights in Israel helped some 200 families challenge their expulsion in court.

They secured a temporary reprieve that remains in force, which allowed the Palestinians to stay on the land until a final resolution of the case.

Israel's High Court is set to make a final ruling in the coming months.

The Bedouins, barred from building permanent structures in the area, live in makeshift shelters and are in “constant fear of being uprooted,” said Nidal Younes, head of the local community council.

HIGHLIGHT

The roughly 1,000 Bedouins who live there say Masafer Yatta was their people's home long before Israeli soldiers set foot in the West Bank.

Since the last court hearing in August, “the army has come more often, threatening to tear down our shelters and remove the residents,” he said.

Across much of the occupied West Bank, Palestinians are prevented from building structures without Israeli military permits.

Permits are typically refused and structures without authorization are often demolished.

On a hill opposite Khirbet Al-Majaz lies the community's school, a four-

building campus made mostly of corrugated iron.

The head of the school, Jad Nawajah, said it was “facing serious difficulties.”

He said the Israeli army had blocked the installation of “electricity and water networks and the maintenance of the road” that leads to the school.

The army has issued demolition orders for its cistern and toilets.

The EU representative in Jerusalem, Sven Kuhn Von Burgsdorff, who led the diplomatic visit, said the bloc “will continue to help this community, out of moral responsibility and humanitarian imperative.”

Israel’s army told AFP that Firing Zone 918 is a “central training area.”

Live fire drills are prevented so long as the High Court’s temporary injunction of 2000 remains in force, but the army said other exercises take place.

“Over the years, the closure order was violated by Palestinian residents, who began building illegally in this area, which significantly impaired the IDF’s ability to conduct training,” an army spokesman further said.

But the Israeli organization Kerem Navot, which researches West Bank land seizures, said 18 percent of the occupied territory has been classified as a “shooting zone,” but only 20 percent of that designated land is actually used for military training.

Earlier this year, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict research institute Akevot unveiled a document from 1981 in which then agriculture minister and future prime minister, Ariel Sharon, proposed to set up the firing zone.

Sharon, in the document, is quoted as saying he wanted to give the army “extra training zones,” describing these sectors as “vital” to Israel.

Resident Oum Awad, who wore a parchment skin and walked with a hobble, insisted to visitors that Masafer Yatta was her home, regardless of Israeli army classifications

Even if Israel deprives her of “the most basic things ... we don’t want to leave our land,” she said.



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Israel 'will not oppose' advanced US arms sales to UAE

[UNWTO's Basmah Al-Mayman is helping open up the Middle East to the world](#)

Fri, 2020-10-23 23:13

RIYADH: With almost 19 years' experience in the tourism industry, Basmah Al-Mayman is a pioneer in her field. The first Gulf Arab national to represent the UN World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) at a regional level looks to the sector's future in the Middle East with optimism.

The UNWTO's plan to open a regional office in Riyadh – the first outside its global headquarters in Spain – shows there is growing recognition of the MENA region's potential in this lucrative sector, Al-Mayman told Arab News in an exclusive interview.

“Choosing Saudi Arabia for the regional office was a good decision – right beside the largest tourism projects in the world, which are coming up in Saudi Arabia,” she said, referring no doubt to AlUla, Diriyah, Qiddiya, Amaala, the Red Sea Project and NEOM smart city among other developments.

“This is definitely an indicator of how high Saudi Arabia's profile has risen in the UNWTO, besides reflecting the development of tourism as part of the Kingdom's economic diversification plan.

“Tourism's presence in the Vision 2030 agenda and the economic transformation plans reflects the Kingdom's growing presence in world tourism.”

Investments worth \$810 billion are expected to transform Saudi Arabia over the next decade into one of the biggest leisure tourism markets in the world, with the Kingdom's Public Investment Fund and Saudi Commission for Tourism and National Heritage (SCTH) leading the charge.



Basmah Al-Mayman with the Saudi ambassador to Spain in Madrid on Saudi National Day in 2019. (Supplied)

Religious tourism will also continue to attract millions of pilgrims to Saudi Arabia each year for the Hajj and Umrah – which together add an estimated \$12 billion to the Kingdom's GDP per year.

The sector's potential was aptly demonstrated by a surge in domestic tourism during the summer months of 2020, when coronavirus measures caused a steep decline in foreign travel. Domestic travel increased 31 percent this year compared with the previous 12 months, and local flights had to be augmented to cope with the demand.

As a result, the Kingdom's hidden gems, like the island-dotted Umluj coast, the southern mountains of Abha and the scenic province of Asir, known for its breathtaking scenery and its year-round cool climate, are now squarely back on the tourist map.



Basma Al-Mayman with the UNWTO Secretary General during his last visit to Aseer. (Supplied)

From her base in the Spanish capital Madrid, where she has served as Middle East regional director since 2018, Al-Mayman has devoted her entire career to developing the tourism industry – long before Saudi Arabia began opening up to the world.

“Saudi tourism and I both started out together,” she said. “I was very young when I joined the Saudi Commission for Tourism (SCTH) when it first started. There wasn’t an official structure for the organization nor was there an industry.” Given that there were very few women in the Saudi tourism industry back then (“actually less than five”), Al-Mayman says she is pleased with the turn it has since taken.

During her time at the SCTH, where she served on the board of directors, Al-Mayman fought hard to get Saudi Arabia’s precious historical architecture, including the awe-inspiring ruins of AlUla and Diriyah, registered as UNESCO World Heritage sites. She recalled these early struggles during a recent meeting of the G20 tourism ministers.

“Having these sites on the G20 table, for me personally, made me realize how far we have come and what we have been through in this industry,” she said.

Al-Mayman embodies much of the spirit that is driving the social changes sweeping Saudi society, including the empowerment of women. She is especially grateful to her mother for supporting her education and helping her realize her full potential.

THENUMBER

\$12 billion

Religious tourism's contribution to KSA GDP per year.

"Ever since I was a child my mom encouraged me to read and she was – God bless her soul – a very good reader and she encouraged me to be my best," she said. "I am the only daughter in the family, but I was not raised as a girl. I was raised the same way my brothers were."

Alluding to the oft-quoted words of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman at the Future Investment Initiative conference in Oct. 2018. – "The Middle East will be the new Europe" – Al-Mayman said: "This is a regional ambition. I am just quoting the leader behind it. It is true. We can see it happening. Even now, during the COVID-19 pandemic, our region is less affected and vulnerable for many reasons."

Al-Mayman's success saw her ranked 13th in Forbes Middle East's 2020 "power list" of 100 businesswomen who are at the top of their game. She was also the only woman included representing tourism in the Arab world. But, as she pointed out, strong women are nothing new in the region.

"If we are speaking of this land, which is today known as Saudi Arabia, in Makkah we have Sayidah Khadijah (the prophet's wife), who had a major role in her society and local economy in Makkah," she said.

"If we go to modern history, when the Kingdom started, Princess Nourah bint Abdulrahman, the founder's sister, played a major role in national relations. She represented the founder in many situations, where she would receive international women's delegations coming for Hajj or other reasons.

"Also, we have so many great women in the fields of education and medicine. Saudi women never stopped working, never stopped contributing to their society, and never stopped contributing to their economy. I am just wondering why some countries think the role of Saudi women only started now."



Basmah Al-Mayman with the King of Spain during the last edition of FITUR in Madrid in January 2020. (Supplied)

As for the Middle East's tourism industry, Al-Mayman is confident even better days lie ahead. "I am very optimistic about the region," she said. "Many of its countries are moving forward in tourism, moving forward in creating more decent job opportunities for both men and women and for the youth in general."

Saudi Arabia introduced its new e-visa program in Sept. 2019 to help attract foreign tourists, but was forced to suspend the service with the onset of the pandemic. It will resume issuing tourist visas as early as Jan. 2021, Ahmed Al-Khateeb, the Saudi tourism minister, told Bloomberg last month – maybe

even sooner if a vaccine for COVID-19 is found.

Al-Mayman is convinced tourism will bounce back much faster from the blow of coronavirus in the Gulf than in European and other advanced economies. “We are taking this pandemic seriously,” she said. “Therefore, the damage and loss are lower compared to bigger regions because we have much smaller populations and most of the countries in the region also have strong economies.”

Al-Mayman believes it is the responsibility of these wealthier Gulf nations to contribute their skills and knowhow to promote international development. “I am very ambitious and want to see more Arabs and GCC officials have more leading positions within the UN specialized agencies. We are one world, and we serve and help each other,” she said.

“It’s not enough to be a financial contributor. We also have people with talents and good skills who can also help the other regions in this world to make the planet a better place.”

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UNWTO honors Prince Sultan for developing Saudi tourism, national heritage
UNWTO praises KSA for attaining tourism gains

[Turkey on alert after US warns of potential terror strikes](#)

Author:

Fri, 2020-10-23 23:08

ANKARA: Turkey is facing the spectre of a growing terror threat after the US Embassy in Ankara suspended its visa services on Friday and issued a security alert to foreign citizens in the country.

The US mission cited "credible reports" of potential attacks and kidnappings of foreign nationals, and urged US citizens to "exercise heightened caution" in public places, including offices and shopping malls.

Staff at US missions in Ankara, Istanbul, Izmir and Adana were told to stay alert and keep a low profile, while foreigners were advised to avoid crowds.

"The US mission in Turkey has received credible reports of potential terrorist attacks and kidnappings against US citizens and foreign nationals in Istanbul, including against the US Consulate General, as well as potentially other locations in Turkey," the embassy said.

Arab News has asked the US Embassy in Ankara for additional details on the security threat.

The terror threat comes as the US focuses on the forthcoming presidential elections and Turkey begins its withdrawal from some key observation points in Syria's rebel-held Idlib province.

Syrians linked to Daesh were recently released from Al-Hol camp in Syria, posing another security threat because of the porous border between the two countries.

Experts believe the latest terror threat is probably linked to Daesh.

"Foreign missions in Turkey sometimes coordinate with Turkish officials by releasing similar statements about the terror threats they perceive," Mete Sohtaoglu, a security analyst, told Arab News.

"These tactics are designed to detect terror groups because the alerts can activate dormant cells preparing an attack," he added.

Security at US missions in Turkey has been tightened recently with many Americans visiting the consulate and embassy buildings to post their ballots.

Erol Bural, a former military officer and head of Ankara-based Countering Terrorism and Radicalization Research Center, said the threat to the US diplomatic missions in Turkey is likely to come from the extreme left-wing Revolutionary People's Liberation Party/Front (DHKP-C) or Daesh.

The DHKP-C has been operating in Turkey for decades and has carried out several lethal bomb attacks – one against the US Embassy in Ankara in 2013 that killed a Turkish security guard.

In the past, coordination between US and Turkish security officials has led to several DHKP-C cells being uncovered.

“Terror alerts are an integral part of counter-terrorism efforts in Turkey,” Bural said.

“The timing of this alert raises questions about why the terror threat is increasing when Turkey has increased its counter-terrorism efforts against Daesh cells around the country.”

In Turkey's deadliest terror attack, twin suicide bombings carried out by Daesh at a rally in Ankara in October, 2015 claimed 103 lives and injured more than 400 people.

Police recently arrested dozens of people in Istanbul over their links to the DHKP-C, which is listed as a terrorist organization by Turkey, the US and EU.



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US suspending visa services in Turkey Journalist rights watchdog urges Turkey to 'stop harassing journalists'

[Turkey irked over joint declaration by Cyprus, Greece and Egypt](#)

Author:

Fri, 2020-10-23 02:08

ISTANBUL: Turkey's Foreign Ministry on Thursday slammed a joint statement by Greece, Cyprus and Egypt that condemns Turkish energy exploration in the eastern Mediterranean and numerous "provocations" that they maintain are threatening regional peace.

The Foreign Ministry said in a statement that it "fully rejected the declaration containing baseless accusations and allegations."

During a trilateral regional summit on Wednesday in Nicosia, Cypriot President Nicos Anastasiades, Egyptian President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi and Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis urged Ankara to end its "aggressive" actions.

The joint statement also asked Turkey to accept Cyprus' invitation to enter negotiations for an agreement on maritime delimitations. Greece and Cyprus have signed maritime border agreements with Egypt while dismissing a similar deal that Ankara signed with Libya's Tripoli-based government as "legally invalid."

The Turkish Foreign Ministry said the declaration attacked Ankara rather than supporting peace and stability in the region. It repeated Turkey's position that cooperation could only take place with the inclusion of Turkish Cypriots in governing and sharing the resources of the ethnically divided island nation.

"We will continue with determination to protect our rights and the rights of Turkish Cypriots in the eastern Mediterranean," the ministry statement said. The trilateral summit took place amid high tensions between nominal NATO allies Greece and Turkey over maritime borders and energy rights.

In late summer, Turkey dispatched a research vessel escorted by warships to conduct seismic research in a part of the Mediterranean Sea that Greece claims as its territory, which prompted the Greek government to deploy its own warships.

Turkey pulled the research ship back to shore for several weeks for maintenance and to allow time for diplomacy but redeployed the Oruc Reis on a new energy exploration mission. A maritime announcement by Turkey says the Oruc Reis and two other ships would continue working in the area until Oct. 27.

Turkey also has had ships prospecting for oil and gas reserves in waters that Cyprus claims as its exclusive economic zone.



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Egyptian-Cypriot-Greece summit discusses Turkey's provocations
Greece accuses Turkey of 'imperialist fantasies'

[US slams Iran for 'smuggling' envoy into Yemen](#)

Thu, 2020-10-22 21:44

AL-MUKALLA: The US on Wednesday slammed the Iranian regime for installing a new ambassador to the Houthi militia in Yemen – a move that the State Department spokesperson said shows the extent of Iran's influence in the war-torn country.

Morgan Ortagus said the new ambassador is a member of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), who has links to Hezbollah in Lebanon.

"The Iranian regime smuggled Hassan Irloo (Eyrlou), an IRGC member tied to Lebanese Hezbollah, into Yemen under the guise of 'ambassador' to the Houthi militia," Ortagus said on Twitter, urging Yemenis to denounce Iran and its ambassador. "Iran's intent to use the Houthis to expand its malign influence

is clear. The Yemeni people should say no to Irloo and Iran.”

On Saturday, Iran’s Foreign Ministry said Hassan Eyrlou, the country’s new ambassador to Yemen, had arrived in Houthi-controlled Sanaa, a move that triggered uproar among the Yemeni public and officials.

Yemen’s Foreign Ministry on Monday sent a letter to the UN Security Council to complain about Iran’s announcement, accusing the Iranians of violating “international law and Security Council resolutions, including Resolution 2216.”

Opinion

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

Iran’s announcement came as the Houthis and the internationally recognized government were swapping hundreds of prisoners.

Protesting against Iran’s continuing military and financial support to the Houthis, Yemen’s government severed ties with Iran in late 2015, expelling Iran’s ambassador to Yemen and withdrawing the Yemeni envoy in Tehran.

Despite this, Iranian diplomats have remained in Sanaa, while Houthi officials have held numerous meetings with senior Iranian officials in Tehran.

Reacting to US criticism of Iran’s move, Yemen’s government said that it backs US efforts to restrict Iran’s interference in Yemen. “We highly commend the firm stance of the US administration in curbing Iran’s expansionist ambitions. Yemen’s government and people have been struggling for five years to end the coup that was plotted by Iran’s Revolutionary Guard,” Information Minister Muammar Al-Aryani said on Twitter on Thursday.

Yemeni military and political experts say the Iranian regime is seeking to shore up the Houthis politically and militarily because the rebels are becoming increasingly politically isolated as their forces fail to make gains on the ground.

Brig. Gen. Abdu Abdullah Majili, a Yemeni army spokesman, said Iran’s new ambassador would command military activities against government forces and would facilitate the arrival of arms shipments to the Houthis.

“He is a military ruler from Iran who will govern this militia,” Majili told state media.

Political analysts also argue that by sending a new ambassador to Yemen, the Iranian regime sends a message to the world that it recognizes the Houthis as a legitimate authority in Yemen and confirms its support for the group.

“Iran wants to say that the Houthis are part of its camp and anyone wants to

end the war in Yemen should come to Tehran,” Najeeb Ghallab, undersecretary at Yemen’s Information Ministry and a political analyst, told Arab News, adding that Iran’s move would prolong the war in Yemen rather than leading to peace.

“The Houthi decision has become dependent on Iran and its agenda. This Iranian behavior will lead to prolonging the war in Yemen,” Ghallab said.



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