

Tunisian eco-pioneers battle to save Sahara oasis life

Author:

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NEFTA, Tunisia: A remote oasis in Tunisia's desert was exhausted by decades of wasteful water use for agriculture – but now pioneers around an eco-lodge are reviving the spot with innovative projects.

They hope their back-to-basics approach can keep alive the ancient Saharan caravan stop and its traditions as a sustainable alternative to the region's high-irrigation date plantations.

"Among the palm trees, everything can grow," said Mohammed Bougaa, 63, a farmer in the remote Nefta oasis, a seven-hour drive from the coastal capital Tunis.

"There's everything you need here: Vegetables, fruit. We can plant peppers, tomatoes, carrots – everything grows when there's sun and water."

The problem has been that the Nefta spring – which once delivered some 700 liters of water per second – has been exhausted to irrigate the region's famous dates, called "deglet nour."

"The Nefta springs dried up 20 years ago," said Bougaa.

As underground water sources have failed and summer temperatures peaked at a scorching 55 degrees Celsius (131 degrees Fahrenheit) last August, the season's crop has been disappointing.

Patrick Ali El-Ouarghi, who runs an eco-tourism lodge in the oasis, said date palm plantations, at the right scale, can be run sustainably.

He called them an ideal demonstration of permaculture, a system for producing food organically by mimicking natural ecosystems.

"The palm trees protect the fruit trees, and the fruit trees protect the vegetable patches, it's natural in an oasis," El Ouarghi said.

The French-Tunisian set up his Dar Hi lodge 11 years ago – including the so-called "Palm Lab" where engineers, architects and artists discuss how to conserve the oasis.

The ecology project aims "to make investors and farmers want to reinvest in the oasis, because it's decaying a bit," he said.

A key theme is tackling the severe water shortages by experimenting with technology such as drip irrigation.

The current system of flooding orchards with water, pumped from 100 meters

below ground, is wasteful, he said.

Not far from Dar Hi, others are trying different ways of creating value in the oasis.

American Kevin Klay, 35, a former resident of Sousse in northern Tunisia, says he fell in love with dates during a visit to the south.

"We realized that many dates, up to 20 to 30 percent, were thrown out and not used because of a small visual blemish," he said.

So he bought a few kilos, removed their seeds, dried them and then put them through a coffee grinder.

The result, he said, was a sweetener "with a fifth of the calories of white sugar" that is full of fiber and contains "more potassium than bananas."

Armed with this knowledge, Klay in 2018 launched "Dateible," selling his "date sugar" produced from the organic-certified desert fruits for export.

He now employs nine people, seven of them women.

"We've seen huge demand, particularly in the US where our main market is," he said.

The firm is exporting dates in bulk and also starting to sell on online retail site Amazon.

Several firms are producing other date derivatives such as a coffee substitute made of date pips and a form of molasses for use in pastries.

Back at the lodge, the restaurant is reviving traditional desert cuisine.

"It's very simple and dates from the arrival of nomads," when Nefta, today regarded as a spiritual home of Sufism, was a key stop on Saharan desert routes, El Ouarghi said.

They brought "unknown flavors and spices that have remained here as a tradition," he said.

Chef Najah Ameur says residents create their own unique spice mixes.

"It's not the same as buying them at the market: Cleaning the leaves, the smell, the flavor, you have to know exactly how to do it," the 40-year-old said.

She cooks a menu of dishes she learned from her mother and from French celebrity chef Frederick Asser Herme, the recipes collated in a recently published book on oasis cuisine.

"Many ingredients come from the palm groves: parsley, celery, chard, green beans, peas," she said.

Some recipes are also adapted to use Moringa, an Indian tree famed for its

nutritional and medicinal qualities and its ability to thrive in arid conditions.

The tree species may be new to the oasis, but residents are hoping that a mix of old and new can keep both their community and their ecosystem in good health.



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Tunisian union warns over rights after journalist detained
Tunisians snub poll on reforms as economic crisis bites

[Sudanese seek relief from declining living conditions](#)

Author:

Sun, 2022-03-20 23:14

KHARTOUM: Sudanese schoolteacher Babiker Mohamed barely covers his family's needs with his meager income, but since last year's military coup he no longer knows if he can even keep afloat.

Like many in Sudan, Mohammed has been grappling with shortages in basic goods, as well as new taxes and steep price hikes on fuel, electricity and food since an October military coup led by army chief Gen. Abdel Fattah Al-Burhan.

"I used to buy 20 loaves of bread at 100 Sudanese pounds before the coup," said Mohammed, who provides for a family of six.

"Bread alone now costs me around 27,000 pounds a month which is like 90 percent of my salary" of about 30,000 pounds (or \$50), he said.

"I don't know if I can afford to send my children to school anymore."

Mohammed joined teachers who went on strike this week against the worsening living conditions.

Sudan's latest coup upended a transition painstakingly negotiated between civilian and military leaders following the 2019 ouster of former President Omar Bashir, whose rule was marked by crippling US sanctions and international isolation.

It also triggered international condemnation and punitive measures, with the US, World Bank and International Monetary Fund suspending badly needed aid to the impoverished country.

Sudanese exports have sharply declined, foreign currency shortages have been reported, and efforts by local banks to re-establish ties with international counterparts in the US and the West came to a screeching halt.

"It's like the embargo was back since Oct. 25," said economist Sumaya Sayed.

Protesters staged several rallies this week against the decline in living conditions.

Sudanese citizens have for decades endured severe economic hardship due to government mismanagement, internal conflicts and the 2011 secession of the oil-rich south.

Bashir himself was ousted in April 2019 following months of street protests initially triggered by the tripling of bread prices.

Essameddine Okasha, spokesman for the association of bakery owners in Khartoum, said bread prices have surged "beyond people's reach."

He attributed the hikes to increasing operational costs.

Sudan is also especially vulnerable to the impact of global supply shortages in the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Protesters in northern Sudan have in recent weeks blocked a key trade route between Egypt and Sudan following a sharp increase in electricity tariffs.

In January, Sudanese authorities sharply raised electricity prices across

sectors, with households seeing an increase of about 500 percent.

Sudan had already embarked on plans to scrap fuel subsidies under the transition which was derailed by the coup.

Fuel prices have undergone several hikes over the past year.

On Saturday, petrol at the pump cost 672 pounds (\$1.50) per liter, up from some 320 pounds before the coup.

Many local business owners have been forced to suspend operations.

"I have laid off some 300 employees, mostly women who were the breadwinners of their families," said a food factory owner in North Khartoum, speaking on condition of anonymity.

"I could not keep up with electricity and production input price hikes."

Economist Mohammed Al-Nayer says Sudan is in a "state of shock."

"The absence of international aid and loans in the 2022 budget is having a negative effect," he said, pointing out that the fiscal plans rely heavily on tax rises.

"Taxes now constitute 58 percent of the budget, sharply increasing prices and pushing the country into recession."

Sudan has been reeling from triple-digit inflation, which stood at 258 percent in February.

"It will not be possible for the government to bring down inflation ... instead it will likely jump to 500 percent," forecast Nayer.



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Sudan group says 187 wounded in latest anti-coup protests
Egyptian, South Sudanese ministers in talks to enhance ties

[Houthis under fire for ruining peace efforts to end war](#)

Sun, 2022-03-20 18:42

AL-MUKALLA: The Iran-backed Houthis have been strongly criticized for striking civilian facilities in Saudi Arabia and intensifying military operations in Yemen as the UN special envoy for Yemen proposed a humanitarian truce during the holy month of Ramadan.

Yemen's government officials, human rights activists, journalists and the public have slammed the Houthis for torpedoing the current peace efforts by the UN and Gulf Cooperation Council to reach a peaceful settlement to end the war.

Last week, the Gulf bloc invited warring factions in Yemen, including the Houthis, for peace talks under its aegis in Riyadh, a step that revived hopes of finding an end to the country's aggravating humanitarian crisis.

The Houthis quickly turned down the offer, launching deadly cross-border strikes on Saudi Arabia and escalating attacks on government-controlled areas in Yemen.

Yemen's Foreign Ministry criticized the Houthis' "aggressive and terrorist behavior" and their continuing resistance to all efforts to stop hostilities in Yemen, calling the latest attacks as the militia's "response" to the GCC offer.

"[The ministry] renews the firm and supportive position of the Republic of Yemen for the sisterly Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and its solidarity in all measures it takes to confront these cowardly terrorist acts, preserve the safety of its citizens and residents and protect its vital facilities," the Foreign Ministry said in a statement carried by the official news agency SABA.

Other Yemenis argued that the escalating military operations and the cross-border attacks show that the militia is not serious about peace and is determined to thwart initiatives to end the war.

Hamdan Al-Alaly said that the Houthis refused to take part in the coming conference since they would have to face the Yemeni forces that opposed their project.

"They will find themselves small and despicable in front of all the Yemeni components that reject them," Al-Alaly said, adding that the Houthis demanded direct talks with Saudi Arabia so as to legitimize their military takeover of power.

"They are looking for regional countries' recognition of their rule by asking for talks with the coalition, not with the Yemenis."

Yemen's Minister of State Gen. Abdul Ghani Jamil said that the Houthis would do everything at their disposal to foil the peace talks in Riyadh since those talks would bring together Yemenis against their oppressive rule.

"I think the message of the Houthis tonight is crystal clear. They do not want an invitation that seeks to unify the ranks [of their opponents] under the umbrella of the older sister, Saudi Arabia," Jamil said.

Meanwhile, on the ground, fighting between the Houthis and the government flared in flashpoint sites outside the central city of Marib as the Houthis push to break months of military stalemate.

A local military official told Arab News on Sunday that the Houthis amassed huge military forces and intensified their drone and missile strikes on government-controlled areas outside the city.

"We shot down two explosives-rigged drones. They also fired a ballistic missile at a camp for displaced people in Marib city. The Houthis are preparing for a major assault," said the official, who requested anonymity, adding that army troops and allied tribal fighters pushed back the latest Houthi attacks as the coalition's warplanes hit the militia's locations and

military equipment.

Fighting outside Marib and in the city of Taiz has escalated since the beginning of the year as the UN Special Envoy for Yemen Hans Grundberg engaged in extensive direct talks with Yemeni parties aimed at finding a breakthrough that could end the war.

On Sunday, Grundberg said that he discussed with the Houthi chief negotiator Mohammed Abdul Salam and Omani officials in Muscat arranging for a humanitarian truce during the holy month of Ramadan, which begins early next month.



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Fighting rages outside Yemen's Marib as UN envoy meets leaders Fighting erupts in Taiz as Yemeni troops target Houthi positions

Egyptian minister of planning discusses ways to enhance future cooperation with Saudi Arabia

Sun, 2022-03-20 18:23

CAIRO: Dr. Hala Al-Saeed, Egypt's minister of planning and economic development, discussed ways to enhance future cooperation between her country and Saudi Arabia with Dr. Majid bin Abdullah Al-Qasabi, Saudi minister of trade, on the sidelines of the meetings of the Governance Council of the Arab-Africa Trade Bridges Program.

Al-Saeed stressed her keenness to consolidate relations between the Egyptian and Saudi business communities, and to strengthen economic relations between the two countries in various fields, especially the commercial, industrial and investment fields.

During the meeting, she referred to the recent signing of a draft agreement between the two countries regarding the Saudi Public Investment Fund investing in Egypt. She stressed the importance of that agreement in supporting relations between the two countries, and expediting the completion of procedures related to investment in Egypt through the PIF.

Al-Saeed reviewed the most prominent opportunities and areas for developing relations, and mechanisms for converting obstacles into investment opportunities in light of the COVID-19 pandemic and its economic repercussions.

She pointed to what has been done in recent years to issue a package of laws and institutional reforms in Egypt to simplify the procedures for setting up projects and encouraging the private sector and local and foreign investment.

Al-Qasabi said that Egypt and Saudi Arabia have historical relations and are united by brotherhood, proximity and Arabism, adding that during his visit to Egypt he witnessed an unprecedented development movement, saying that this approach reflects a culture of interaction and hope for investors.



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[General: Iran, Israel missile strikes put US troops at risk](#)

Sun, 2022-03-20 00:15

WASHINGTON: The exchange of missile strikes by Iran and Israel in Iraq and Syria puts US forces at risk, the top US commander for the Middle East said, just days after an Iranian missile barrage struck near the US Consulate complex in northern Iraq.

Marine Gen. Frank McKenzie told Pentagon reporters that over the past six months Iran has attacked US forces and facilities a number of times, but "very good action on the part of commanders on the ground" had thwarted any US casualties.

"Had US casualties occurred, I think we might be in a very different place right now," said McKenzie.

McKenzie and other US officials said this week the missile strikes on Sunday that hit close to the consulate were not aimed at the US. And Iran's powerful Revolutionary Guard said on its website that it had attacked what it described as an Israeli spy center in Irbil.

The attack came several days after Iran said it would retaliate for an Israeli strike near Damascus that killed two members of its Revolutionary Guard.

"I think it's obvious that Israel is going to take steps to defend itself when it's confronted with Iranian actions. And of course, Iran is dedicated to the destruction of Israel," McKenzie said.

I think it's obvious that Israel is going to take steps to defend itself when it's confronted with Iranian actions.

Marine Gen. Frank McKenzie, Top US commander for the Middle East

"I do worry about these exchanges between Iran and Israel, because many times our forces are at risk, whether in Iraq or in Syria. So that, in fact, does concern me."

McKenzie, who is retiring after about three years as head of US Central Command, was speaking at what was expected to be his final press briefing. He said that as he prepares to turn over the job to incoming Army Gen. Erik Kurilla, his message to his successor is that Iran continues to be his biggest challenge.

"My central problem in my three years of command was Iran," said McKenzie, who also oversaw the chaotic withdrawal from Afghanistan and commando raids to kill Daesh leaders.

"There were other problems, other huge problems, but the headquarters as a whole ... focused on the Iranian problem and everything attendant to that." The US presence in Iraq has long been a flash point for Tehran, but tensions spiked after a January 2020 US drone strike near the Baghdad airport killed a top Iranian general. In retaliation, Iran launched a barrage of missiles at Al-Asad air base, where US troops were stationed. More than 100 service members suffered traumatic brain injuries in the blasts.

More recently, Iranian proxies are believed responsible for an assassination attempt late last year on Iraq's Prime Minister Mustafa Al-Kadhimi. And officials have said they believe Iran was behind the October drone attack at the military outpost in southern Syria where American troops are based. No US personnel were killed or injured in the attack.

Last year, US forces in Iraq shifted to a non-combat role, but Iran and its proxies still want all American troops to leave the country.

McKenzie said the Iranian leaders believe that they can launch a certain level of attacks against the US without affecting the ongoing negotiations over Tehran's nuclear program.

Diplomats trying to salvage the 2015 Iran nuclear deal appear to be near the cusp of an agreement that would bring the US back into the accord and bring Iran back into compliance with limits on its nuclear program.

Congressional opponents of the deal peppered McKenzie with questions this

week about the impact of an agreement on Iranian aggression and whether sanctions relief will only provide Iran funding for other malign behavior. McKenzie said the US has gotten better at countering potential strikes by Iranian drones and other defensive measures, which contributed to the lack of American casualties. But he and others have noted that the Iranian ballistic missile strikes have gotten more precise.

“We don’t want Iran to have a nuclear weapon, and the best way to get to that is probably through a negotiated solution,” he said, adding that such a deal won’t likely solve other problems, such as Iranian conventional attacks in the region.

“I don’t think anybody in the United States government is blind to that fact, but ... if you can take nuclear weapons off the table, that’s a powerful capability that you don’t have to worry about.”

Once that is done, he said, then the US could move on and deal with other problems, including Iran’s increasing ballistic missile and drone threats.

“What you’d like to do is negotiate that, but if you can negotiate that, that’s where US Central Command comes in. It’s our job to demonstrate to Iran the concept of deterrence – that the things they want to pursue are too painful for them to achieve. We work at that every day.”



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