

Iraq struggles to make use of Saddam Hussein's crumbling palaces

Author:

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BAGHDAD: Scattered across Iraq lie more than 100 opulent palaces and villas built by former dictator Saddam Hussein – some in use, many in ruins like much of the war-scarred country.

With their marble columns, ornate carvings and gaudy furniture, they reflected the megalomania and delusions of grandeur of Saddam, who visited some of them only once or twice.

In his Babylon residence, the feared strongman's profile is engraved in bas-relief like that of the Mesopotamian emperor he idolized, Chaldean dynasty King Nebuchadnezzar II.

In many places, the initials "S.H." are still visible as reminders of the despot who was toppled by the 2003 US-led invasion, captured later that year and executed in 2006.

Most of his palaces were looted during the chaos of the invasion, when thieves scavenged all they could carry, even ripping electric cables out of walls.

Since then, only a handful of the palatial residences have been given a second lease on life, often as military bases or public administrations, more rarely as museums.

Most lie empty, in part because the cost of renovating them is prohibitive. "We can turn palaces into museums, at least in Baghdad – a tapestry museum, for example, or on the royal family or Islamic art," said Laith Majid Hussein, director of the Iraqi State Board of Antiquities and Heritage.

But he conceded that rehabilitating many of Iraq's "gigantic castles" would require "astronomical sums."

Red tape and entrenched graft spell other hurdles, said a senior government official, speaking on condition of anonymity.

"Bureaucracy and corruption hinder the restoration of these palaces to turn them into tourist complexes or heritage centers," he said.

Saddam, during his more than two decades in power in the oil-rich country, had many monuments and palaces built while cheerfully defying the Western embargo of the 1990s.

In the turmoil of war, many were damaged in fighting or used as bases by US and other foreign forces.

In Baghdad, three palaces now house the presidency and the prime minister's offices.

The sumptuous Al-Faw complex – encircled by an artificial lake – has since 2021 housed the private American University, built by an Iraqi investor.

Al-Faw, situated near the airport for Saddam's VIP guests, once served as an American base. Now its stone and marble buildings house auditoriums, amphitheatres and a food court.

The university's president Michael Mulnix voiced pride about the project which saw "the palace of a former dictator and a fairly ruthless man" become an institution of higher learning.

While the main palace had survived relatively intact, he said, "all of the other buildings ... were really destroyed.

"The windows were all broken out, there were birds flying around, snakes on the floor, literally. So it was very messed up. We had to go in and do substantial renovation."



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Chaos in Iraq over vote for president

Tunisian president to change judicial council: Minister

Author:

Reuters

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Wed, 2022-02-09 20:08

TUNIS: Tunisian President Kais Saied will change the Supreme Judicial Council but not abolish it, the justice minister said after meeting him on Wednesday, days after his stated plan to dissolve the body met intense criticism. Justice Minister Leila Jaffel said on television that Saied would maintain the council as a constitutional institution but change the law regulating it and set up a temporary judicial authority in the meantime. Jaffel gave no details as to how the council's composition or role would change, or about the composition, role or tenure of the temporary authority. Saied's announcement on Sunday that he would dissolve the body prompted immediate criticism from judges, rights groups, opposition parties and Western donors whose help is needed to avert a crisis in public finances. They said abolishing the council would undermine judicial independence and could help Saied cement one-man rule after his suspension of parliament and seizure of broad powers last year, which critics call a coup.



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UN's rights chief: Scrapping of Tunisia's Judicial Council 'a big step in the wrong direction'
Tunisian president dissolves supreme judicial council

[Israel-Dubai aviation security row continues](#)

Author:

Wed, 2022-02-09 23:15

JERUSALEM: Israel extended on Tuesday a deadline that might have halted its airlines' flights to the UAE over an aviation security dispute, but warned of a potential crisis with the Gulf state unless the issue is resolved.

Direct El Al, Israir and Arkia connections from Tel Aviv to Dubai were among the fruits of a landmark 2020 deal establishing ties between Israel and the UAE. Hundreds of thousands of Israelis have visited the UAE commercial hub since.

But Israel's Shin Bet security service has voiced concerns – which it did not publicly detail – about arrangements at Dubai International Airport and said the three national carriers would stop operating there if these went unresolved.

The current arrangements had been due to expire on Tuesday. But a senior Israeli official said Transport Minister Merav Michaeli extended the deadline "by about a month" so the negotiations could continue.

Dubai authorities have so far not commented on the issue.

In tandem with the deadline extension, Israel increased pressure on the UAE to address its security concerns.

Should the Israeli airlines eventually stop flying to Dubai, the senior Israeli official said, that would spell a de facto end to their UAE operations and prompt a reciprocal ban.

"If El Al can't fly to the Emirates, then Emirati companies can't land here," said the official, who spoke on condition of anonymity.

Emirati state carrier flydubai operates direct Dubai-Tel Aviv flights and

Dubai's Emirates has been looking to launch flights to Israel. Etihad Airways and Wizz Air fly from Abu Dhabi to Tel Aviv.

"The crisis could be regional, not just bilateral," the Israeli official said, citing UAE's cornerstone role in the Abraham Accords, a US-sponsored drive to warm relations between Israel and a range of Arab countries. "It could have a huge impact."

Israel rarely publishes its aviation security measures.

Possible measures, however, could include earmarking special areas of airports, or even separate terminals, for their passengers, parking their planes under Israeli guards, and the presence of armed sky marshals aboard the flights.

The Shin Bet has suggested that UAE capital Abu Dhabi could serve as an alternative for the Israeli carriers, should they no longer be able to fly to Dubai.



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New nuclear deal 'in sight,' US says as talks resume

Author:

Arab News

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Wed, 2022-02-09 03:34

JEDDAH: A revived agreement to curb Iran's nuclear program is "in sight," the US said on Tuesday as international talks resumed in Vienna.

Negotiators from Iran, Britain, China, France, Germany, and Russia returned to the luxury Palais Coburg hotel in the Austrian capital after a break last month for consultations with their governments.

The US is involved in the talks indirectly.

The aim is to restore the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, which collapsed in 2018 when the US pulled out.

The JCPOA restricted Iran's nuclear development in return for the lifting of economic sanctions.

"A deal that addresses all sides' core concerns is in sight, but if it is not reached in the coming weeks, Iran's ongoing nuclear advances will make it impossible for us to return to the JCPOA," the US State Department said.

Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman Saeed Khatibzadeh said that answers that "the US brings to Vienna will determine when we can reach an agreement. We have made significant progress in various areas."

Eric Brewer of the US nonproliferation watchdog Nuclear Threat Initiative said there remained "a combination of issues that require resolution," including the scope of sanctions relief and what to do with nuclear equipment Iran had installed.

"They are the final sticking points for a reason – they are contentious and require concessions that neither side has been willing to make so far," he said.

Russian negotiator Mikhail Ulyanov said the negotiating teams were "five minutes away from the finish line.

A draft of the final document has been crafted. There are several points there that need more work, but that document is already on the table."

German Chancellor Olaf Scholz said the talks were at "the decisive moment."

However, a powerful group of 33 Republican US senators warned President Joe Biden that they would work to thwart any new deal unless Congress reviewed it and voted on its terms.

Led by Sen. Ted Cruz, a long-time opponent of the 2015 nuclear deal, the senators told Biden they would use "the full range of options and leverage available."

The senators said any nuclear agreement with Iran was of "such gravity for US national security" that it would by definition be a treaty requiring the advice and consent of two-thirds of the Senate.

Any deal that fell short of a Senate-ratified treaty would probably be "torn

up in the early days of the next presidential administration,” they said.



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US grants sanctions relief to Iran as nuclear talks remain in balance
Iran nuclear talks pause as diplomats confer with capitals

[Authorities say fire strikes downtown Abu Dhabi](#)

Wed, 2022-02-09 01:56

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates: A fire struck downtown Abu Dhabi early Wednesday, with authorities initially blaming a gas cylinder for an explosion caught on camera in social media.

The blast struck Hamdan Street in the capital of the United Arab Emirates as it hosts the FIFA Club World Cup. Journalists from Brazil covering a match with Sociedade Esportiva Palmeiras reported on the blast.

The state-run WAM news agency described the fire as coming from “a gas cylinder explosion.” Some footage showed what appeared to be a fireball on the roof of a building as emergency service vehicles could be seen on the

street.

The images seen in videos corresponded to known features in Abu Dhabi. Authorities initially said by Twitter there were no injuries, but did not include that detail in a later update.

“The process of cooling and limiting the damage caused by the fire is underway,” the WAM report said.

The incident comes after Yemen’s Houthi rebels have launched several attacks targeting Abu Dhabi, including a recent attack that killed three people and wounded six.



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