

Restoration of Bethlehem's Church of the Nativity uncovers long hidden treasures

Author:

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

Author:

AFP

ID:

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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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Libya urged to reschedule presidential vote 'swiftly'

Author:

By NOHA ELHENNAWY | AP

ID:

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Fri, 2021-12-24 16:32

LONDON: The US and four European powers on Friday urged war-torn Libya to quickly set a new date for delayed presidential elections.

In a joint statement, they urged the North African country's leaders to "swiftly" name a new date and issue the final list of presidential candidates, which had been a key point of contention in the run-up to the polls that were set for Friday.

"We call on the relevant Libyan authorities to respect the aspirations of the Libyan people for prompt elections," said Britain, France, Germany, Italy and the United States.

The authorities overseeing the country's first-ever presidential election said earlier this week that holding it on Friday as scheduled would be "impossible."

The vote was intended to mark a fresh start for the oil-rich country, a year after a landmark cease-fire and more than a decade after its 2011 revolt that toppled and killed dictator Muammar Qaddafi.

But speculation of a delay had been mounting for weeks. There were bitter disputes over the vote's legal basis, the powers of the winner and the candidacies of several deeply divisive figures.

The country's electoral commission has suggested rescheduling the vote to January 24, but it remains to be seen whether agreement can be reached among divided institutions.

Libya's parliament is to meet on Monday to debate a new timeline.

Another key issue will be the mandate of the current interim government, which was meant to end Friday with the elections.

In their statement, the five powers insisted that "transfer of power from the current interim executive authority to the new executive authority shall take place following the announcement of the results" of polls when they happen.

In a later tweet, the UK embassy in Tripoli said London "continues to recognize the #Government_of_National_Unity as the authority tasked with

leading #Libya to #elections and does not endorse the establishment of parallel governments or institutions.”

The Tripoli-based unity administration is headed by Abdulhamid Dbeibah, a tycoon and presidential candidate. Analysts have suggested that his rivals may wish to exploit the delay in order to put him out of the picture.

The presidential ballot was intended to go hand-in-hand with parliamentary polls as part of a United Nations-led peace process, yet UN special envoy Jan Kubis resigned just weeks before the ballot.

One contentious issue was a presidential elections law controversially passed by parliamentary speaker Aguila Saleh and endorsed by Kubis. Critics say it bypassed due process and favored a run by eastern military chief Khalifa Haftar.

Another candidate is Qaddafi’s son Seif Al-Islam – a divisive symbol of the old regime wanted by the International Criminal Court over war crimes allegations.

Libya has seen a year of relative calm since the October 2020 cease-fire following a year-long offensive by Haftar’s forces on Tripoli, with both sides backed by foreign states.

But the delay to elections has once again thrown the political process into doubt, and the potential for new fighting remains ever-present.



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[UK condemns Iran's launch of ballistic missiles in war games](#)

Author:

AP

ID:

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Fri, 2021-12-24 12:42

LONDON: Britain said on Friday it condemned a launch of ballistic missiles by Iran in war games conducted this week.

"These actions are a threat to regional and international security and we call on Iran to immediately cease its activities," the Foreign Office said in a statement.

Iran's paramilitary Revolutionary Guard fired more than a dozen surface-to-surface ballistic missiles, the official IRNA news agency reported on Friday. The report said the Guard fired 16 missiles during an ongoing major military exercise across the country's south. It said the name of missiles were Emad, Ghadr, Sejjil, Zalzal, Dezful and Zolfaghar and that their range is from 350 to 2,000 kilometers (220 to 1250 miles). The short-range and medium-range missiles, Iran has said, can reach US bases in the region as well as Israel. It said the missiles successfully hit one target at the same time as 10 drones simultaneously hit their targets. State TV showed missiles launching in the desert.

Iran had displayed and test fired the missiles in the past.

Major General Mohammad Hossein Bagheri, the chief of staff of Iran's Armed Forces, said the planned drill was an answer to Israel's recent "massive but pointless threats" to Iran.

Bagheri said, "This was a tiny part of hundreds of missiles that can hit any hostile target simultaneously."

Israel has long seen Iran's nuclear program as a threat and seeks a harder line by the US and international community. Iran insists its nuclear program is peaceful.

During the second day of the drill on Tuesday, Iran launched cruise missiles, too.

The Guard in the past has said it has cruise missiles with ranges of 1,000 kilometers (620 miles). It also has missiles that range up to 2,000

kilometers (1,250 miles).

From time to time, Iran holds military exercises, saying they are aimed at improving the readiness of its forces and testing new weapons.

The five-day annual exercise that began on Monday came days after the breakup of talks to revive Tehran's nuclear deal with world powers. Iran has accelerated its nuclear advances as negotiations to return to the accord struggle to make headway. The talks will resume on Monday.

Former President Donald Trump pulled the United States out of the nuclear deal and re-imposed crushing sanctions on Iran in 2018 . Tehran has since started enriching uranium up to 60 percent purity – a short technical step from the 90 percent needed to make an atomic bomb.



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Iran's Guard fires cruise missiles in military exerciseIran holds missile drill in Gulf of Oman amid tensions

Italy pledges support for Baghdad

Author:

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ROME: The Italian government has pledged its support to Iraq to further its goals for stabilization and to continue the fight against terrorism.

Iraq's president and prime minister held talks on Thursday in Baghdad with Italian Foreign Minister Luigi Di Maio.

President Barham Saleh stressed the need to defuse the region's crises and prevent escalation through dialogue.

"Iraq is an indispensable element for regional stability," he said in a statement.

Saleh and the chief of Italian diplomacy discussed bilateral ties and efforts to "strengthen them in various fields, and joint bilateral cooperation in the face of various challenges, especially those related to combating terrorism and extremism, strengthening economic and cultural relations, confronting the dangerous repercussions of climate change and protecting the environment," a spokesman for the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs told Arab News.

Saleh praised "Italy's supportive role for the Iraqi security forces in combating terrorism within the international coalition and Nato, in addition to contributions in the humanitarian and social aspects."

Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa Al-Kadhimi stressed the importance of benefiting from Italy's experience in fighting corruption and organised crime networks.

"Di Maio and Al-Kadhimi discussed ways to develop Iraqi-Italian relations in various political and economic areas and in the war on terrorism," the same source told Arab News.

The two parties also discussed improving security relations, especially with regards to the training of Iraqi forces under the NATO framework, with the defense pact moving to a non-combat role in the country.

Di Maio reaffirmed Rome's support for Iraq and its government.

"Italy is committed to stabilization and development of this country, and to continue help the government in a concrete way to fight against terrorism," he said.

He also praised the Iraqi government's efforts to "bring views closer and enhance local and regional stability," and wished for a boost of bilateral commercial relations.

Italy is part of the international coalition of troops in Iraq, with some 1,000 Italian soldiers currently deployed. The country will head the NATO mission in Iraq from May 2022.



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