

# Renovation of Christianity's holiest site nears completion

Tue, 2021-11-02 23:54

CHICAGO: Palestinian Christian Said Khoury was praying at the iconic Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem when drops of water trickled on his head from the roof above.

Maybe it was a signal from God, or just a coincidence as the rains had battered the Christian town in the Israeli occupied West Bank earlier in the day. But it moved Khoury. He built one of the world's largest construction companies to initiate a church renovation after his family was evicted from its home in Safad during the Alwaziri coup, a violent dynasty overthrow attempt in Yemen in 1948.

Khoury approached the Palestinian government, which initially funded the campaign to repair the roof. The church, which houses the grotto where Jesus was born more than 2,000 years ago, was also in desperate need of other upgrades as it had not undergone a significant renovation since 1480.

Thanks to Khoury, who died four years ago, the renovation of the Church of the Nativity is only a few years away from completion, Mazen Karam, CEO of the Bethlehem Development Foundation – which Khoury founded – told Arab News.

The BDF continues to supervise Khoury's vision while working with the presidential commission for the "Restoration of the Church of the Nativity," which was formed in 2008. The commission's work did not start until Khoury intervened in 2013.

"The focus of this initiative was launched by the late Said Tawfiq Khoury and (it) was to restore the Church of the Nativity. The last time the church was restored was 500 years ago in 1480. It was left uncared of," Karam told Arab News.

"A lot has happened. Many earthquakes have caused some damage to the church, while there has been deterioration of the windows, roof, and insulations."

"But it went dormant for some years until Said Khoury came and rain dropped on top of his head and he was not happy about it," Karam told Arab News.

"This was common. It needed a visionary to see it and go take this up with the president of the country and tell him that we are not allowed to leave the church to deteriorate like this. President Mahmoud Abbas told Said Khoury we support you fully. Go and do whatever you like, whatever you want to do to restore it to its original glory."

Karam said the church had many issues. It was deteriorating from so much damage and erosion that it was near collapse. The conflict with Israel also placed restrictions and the Palestine National Authority intervened in 2009

to establish a committee that remained dormant until Khoury stepped in.

The renovation of the church, which was commissioned by Constantine the Great around the year 330, is not only to uplift the spirits of Christians but to protect the church from collapse.

“Some of the wooden tresses that were discovered were almost to zero and about to fall. It was just in time. They were saved in time,” Karam said, noting how close the church was to structural collapse.

“And during that period after the restoration started, they filed for a World Heritage Site. But UNESCO placed it as a World Heritage Site that was endangered, which meant we had to do all the work to remove it from the danger. Now, it was removed two years ago from endangered status after all of the work that has been done by the presidential committee to restore it and we are safe now. But we have to maintain it, too. We have to come up with a way to maintain that work that we have done.”

Karam said Khoury’s focus was always on the church and he visited it many times. Khoury initiated the studies and renovations himself, and also donated more than \$500,000 from his personal funds.

Renovating the church was not a simple matter, Karam said, because the church is governed under an agreement adopted in 1879, which gave the three major Christian religions separate jurisdictions over different parts of the church structure.

“The grotto is more intricate and more complicated because of the holiest parts of the church and it has to be done right so as not to cause any friction or changes to the status quo. Every piece of the Church of the Nativity was a problem. Even the light switch was the problem,” Karam said, noting that all three churches – Roman Catholic, Greek Orthodox and Armenian – must come to agreement.

“What we have done so far is 90 percent of the work and what is left is 10 percent of the work. We only fundraise for work that is approved to proceed. So, we have 10 percent of the work that has yet to proceed and it is not yet funded. We are raising funds, about \$2 million for the church to be completed. Except for the grotto itself, that will come later.”

The Armenians, Catholics and Greeks have each restored their convents and areas.

“The walls of the church, from the outside, were restored to the original stone as if it was quarried now and constructed now. It is a light colored Jerusalem stone that is original, all around the church, restored to its original beauty,” Karam said.

While erosion and damage has continued, renovation came slowly until Khoury initiated the project.

“When you first walked inside, there were some wood props that were supporting the arches which were damaged during an earthquake in 1927. That

was exposed and the ceiling was protected and saved for the first time in about 60 years, more than, about 80 years," Karam said.

During the renovation, architects discovered a hidden door that had been made in Armenia and donated by the Armenian Emperor many centuries before with engravings in Armenian and Arabic.

Karam said the columns were repaired, and the church's original flooring was covered in ceramic mosaic tiles, which are actually two feet below the current floor of the church. Parts of that original floor were exposed and cordoned off so visitors to the church could see more of the mosaic flooring that was only partially exposed previously.

The renovation has restored the famous "Seven Angels" that are pointing to the grotto where Jesus was born. There are mosaic paintings on the walls inside the church including of Jesus' family lineage, a depiction of Saint Thomas feeling Jesus' wound after his crucifixion and a mosaic of the Palm Sunday, Karam said. Below that is the Orthodox chapel and the grotto. But the floor there is not yet restored but is part of the remaining work to be done, he said.

Karam said that the renovations were delayed during the past two years by many factors.

"The works were supposed to be completed by 2018 but there were not enough funds to complete and then the pandemic hit us. This delayed us too much from fundraising and also for the work to continue," Karam said.

"Now, we expect completion maybe in one year provided we get the funds available, about \$2 million for the stone tiling and the tiling of the promenade outside."

Karam said that there will also be a sprinkler system installed to prevent fires.

Smoke from lighted candles also damaged the mosaics so vents were installed for the smoke to be expelled from the church.

"The renovations will ensure that the Church of the Nativity survives for the next 2,000 years," Karam said.



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[Said Khoury](#)

Bethlehem Nativity Church reopens after coronavirus closure  
Silent night for Bethlehem as coronavirus keeps pilgrims away

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## [Bahrain urges its citizens to leave Lebanon amid row](#)

Author:

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Tue, 2021-11-02 21:04

MANAMA: Bahrain on Tuesday urged its citizens in Lebanon to immediately leave the country amid a row between Beirut and Arab Gulf states over a Lebanese minister's remarks on the Yemen war.

The foreign ministry "urged all citizens in Lebanon to leave immediately,

following the tense situation there, which calls for extra caution,” it said in a statement carried by the official Bahrain News Agency. The call came a day after the United Arab Emirates also urged its citizens to leave Lebanon.

Lebanese Information Minister George Kordahi triggered the row with an interview recorded in August and aired last week in which he said that Yemen’s Iran-backed Houthi rebels were “defending themselves... against an external aggression.”

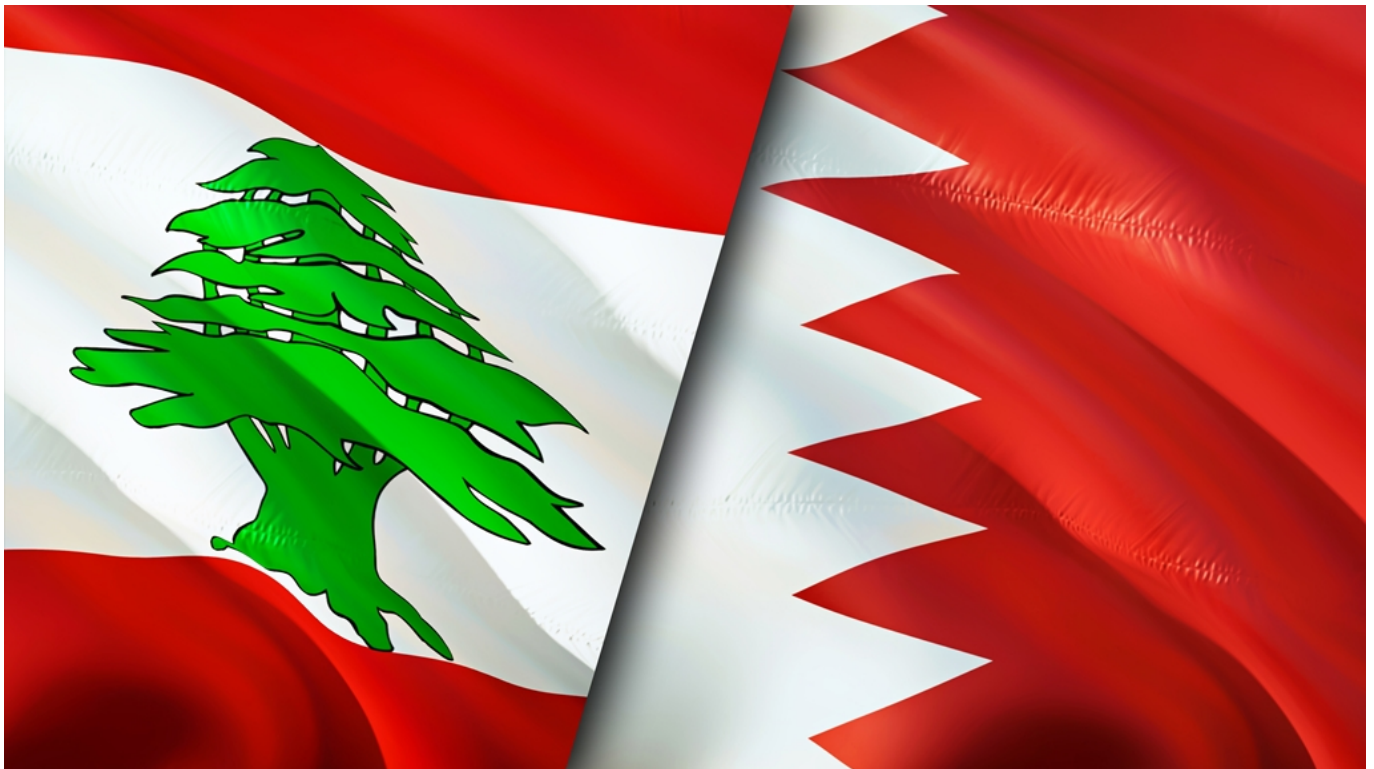
A Saudi-led military coalition that has included the UAE and Bahrain intervened to prop up the Yemeni government in 2015, after Houthi rebels seized the capital Sanaa in 2014.

Saudi Arabia on Friday gave Lebanon’s ambassador 48 hours to leave the country, recalled its envoy from Beirut and suspended all imports from Lebanon.

Bahrain and Kuwait quickly followed suit with similar measures, and the UAE on Saturday recalled its diplomats from Beirut in “solidarity” with Riyadh. The Saudi foreign ministry said its moves were taken after the “insulting” remarks on the Yemen war, but also due to the influence of Lebanon’s Iran-backed Shiite Muslim movement Hezbollah.

Saudi Arabia, which suspended all imports from Lebanon, has said dealing with Beirut was “pointless” due to Hezbollah’s dominance.

Meanwhile, Kordahi has said that resigning was “out of the question.” Lebanon on Monday called for talks with Saudi Arabia to ease the row, which is a fresh blow amid its deep economic crisis and while Beirut’s fragile government is struggling to secure aid, including from wealthy Arab countries.



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Pressure mounts for removal of Lebanese information minister over Gulf row  
Arab League expresses concern over deterioration of Lebanese-Gulf relations

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## [Lebanese PM visits Saudi Arabia's pavilion at COP26 amid Gulf row](#)

Tue, 2021-11-02 20:38

BEIRUT: Lebanese Prime Minister Najib Mikati visited Saudi Arabia's pavilion at the UN Climate Change Conference, amid attempts to ease the diplomatic and economic fallout triggered by a government minister's remarks on the war in Yemen.

Mikati was received at the pavilion by the Kingdom's ambassador to the UK, Prince Khalid bin Bandar Al-Saud, who explained his country's vision for the environment, a green economy, and climate change.

The prime minister praised the green initiatives launched by Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, and he also visited the UAE's pavilion at COP26.

Lebanese Information Minister George Kordahi has caused anger by saying the Iran-backed Houthis were defending themselves in Yemen and that the war should stop.

Gulf states, led by Saudi Arabia, have recalled their ambassadors from Lebanon and also instructed Lebanon's ambassadors to leave.

## **Opinion**

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

Kordahi has not quit despite a request from Mikati, and his refusal to resign has the backing of Hezbollah and the Marada Movement.

Saudi Arabia said Kordahi's stance reflected Hezbollah's hegemony over Lebanon.

A delegation of economic bodies met Lebanon's Maronite Patriarch Bechara Al-Rahi on Tuesday to express their concern about the damage being done to the country and its people.

The secretary-general of the economic bodies, Nicolas Chammas, said: "We condemn all that is happening today between Lebanon and the Arab countries, especially Saudi Arabia. The Kingdom has been the leader of the Gulf Cooperation Council for the past 70 years. The Kingdom and Arab Gulf countries have always supported Lebanon at the political, social, humanitarian, financial, and economic levels, especially during the civil war and post-civil war eras.

"As economists, we were appalled by the setbacks happening today, for the Kingdom is the primary employer of the Lebanese in the Gulf and elsewhere, and is the primary importer from Lebanon. It is also the primary investor. This means that any setback will have severe repercussions on the country, and we should not forget that we heavily rely on the Kingdom regarding voting inside the IMF to retrieve Lebanon out of this crisis."

He warned that thousands of families would be directly affected by the crisis as there were factories in Lebanon that were dependent on the Kingdom and the Arabian Gulf for imports of raw materials, which had already stopped.

The head of economic bodies, Mohammed Choukair, said there was no progress on the political track to resolve the crisis.

He expressed regret that Lebanese President Michel Aoun was distancing himself from the issue and was in "full acquiescence."

The damaged relations with the Gulf come as Lebanon tries to climb out of its economic and financial difficulties.

During a meeting with Mikati, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken reiterated that Washington would "continue to support the efforts of the Lebanese government to re-establish stability and achieve economic recovery, and the negotiations with the International Monetary Fund until the next parliamentary elections."

Mikati's media office said that Blinken stressed "continuous support" to the Lebanese army, the education, healthcare, and environment sectors.

The prime minister met French President Emmanuel Macron on Monday, who stressed his country's support for Lebanon's political and economic stability.

In a meeting with Mikati, German Chancellor Angela Merkel confirmed her country's readiness to support Lebanon in all fields, and stressed Germany's keenness to support Lebanon's stability and recovery.

Leaked information said that all those who met Mikati expressed their opposition to his government's resignation so that it could "achieve what is required from it in getting the country out of its economic and financial predicament."



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[2021 United Nations Climate Change Conference \(COP26\)](#)

Why Lebanon's Prime Minister Najib Mikati never stood a chance Mikati fears slippery slope if Lebanese-Saudi crisis is not resolved

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## [Egypt, US sign 7 grant deals worth \\$125m](#)

Tue, 2021-11-02 20:11

CAIRO: Egypt's Minister of International Cooperation Rania Al-Mashat announced the signing of seven grant agreements with the US Agency for International Development worth a total of \$125 million.

The agreements come within the framework of the joint economic relations program between the two countries in order to support the implementation of

Egypt's development vision.

Al-Mashat noted that the announced agreements will stimulate the state's development efforts in the fields of education, science and technology, agriculture, health, economic governance, trade and investment. A grant worth \$5 million was also directed to the health sector earlier to improve the country's response to the pandemic.

Al-Mashat revealed that Egypt's International Cooperation Ministry, the National Council for Women and the World Economic Forum had also launched the "Closing the Gender Gap Accelerator" initiative – the first of its kind in Africa and the Middle East – which takes institutional measures to empower women.

She explained that the ministry is seeking to agree on a new partnership with USAID to help achieve the goals of the initiative to "bridge the gender gap, improve the work environment for women in the private sector, and enhance financial inclusion for women."

US Ambassador Jonathan Cohen said: "I am pleased to announce \$125 million in economic aid from the US to Egypt. This assistance is part of the US government's \$30 billion investment in Egypt over the past 40 years, which has brought about clean water and wastewater services to 25 million Egyptians, eliminated polio, built 2,000 schools, and provide 4,000 university scholarships."

Egypt's development cooperation portfolio with USAID has recorded about \$900 million since 2014, while the partnership portfolio between Egypt and the US since 1978 amounts to around \$30 billion.



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[Rania Al-Mashat](#)

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[United States of America \(USA\)](#)

Egypt, US in Red Sea naval exercises to support regional security  
Egypt, US foreign ministers discuss cooperation amid coronavirus outbreak

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## [‘The world is watching,’ US tells Sudan’s military](#)

Author:

Tue, 2021-11-02 19:33

LONDON: The US special envoy for the Horn of Africa on Tuesday urged Sudan’s military to re-establish civilian rule, warning that “the world is watching.”

At a press briefing attended by Arab News, Jeffrey Feltman said: “The events of Oct. 25 in Sudan and the days since are a grave setback. The United States will continue to stand with the people of Sudan in their non-violent struggle

to advance the goals of Sudan's revolution."

On Oct. 25, military leaders dissolved Sudan's transitional government and detained its civilian leaders, who had been steering the country toward democratic rule.

Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok, who had been calling for full civilian rule to replace the civil-military power-sharing that had been in place since the 2019 revolution, was confined to house arrest.

"We remain extremely concerned about Sudan's democratic trajectory after the military takeover," Feltman said, adding that the military has "hijacked and betrayed the aspirations of the Sudanese people for a peaceful, democratic country, as evidenced by the 2019 peaceful revolution and enshrined in that year's constitutional declaration."

The 2019 revolution saw the overthrow of dictator Omar Bashir after three decades in power. A large-scale civilian-led movement engaged in peaceful protest and civil disobedience for months until the military enacted a coup against him.

The transitional government was then formed, comprising both civilian and military leaders and aimed at delivering long-term stability and democracy.

Feltman said the international community is largely in agreement in its support for the civilian government.

"The international community, from the African Union, to the Arab League, to the UN Security Council and to international financial institutions, have signaled loudly their deep concern about the military's unconscionable actions," he added. "We join them in calling for the immediate restoration of democratic governance in Sudan."

Since the October coup, protests have seen many Sudanese people killed and injured at the hands of security forces.

"We urge the military to release all civilians detained in connection with the unacceptable events of Oct. 25, and to ensure that any who had been injured receive necessary medical care without interference," Feltman said.

The US has previously suspended huge amounts of funding it had been providing to the new Sudanese government, but Feltman said humanitarian aid is exempt from this.

"I've admired the courage of the Sudanese people in demanding that their voices are heard, and in helping their country make strides toward a new democratic Sudan," he added.

"To those freedom-loving Sudanese, and to those that would seek to rob them of their democratic ambition, I say: The world is watching."



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Demand for special UN rights council meet after Sudan coup  
Sudanese ex-ruling party head Ghandour re-arrested