

## EGYPT'S LAST JEWS AIM TO KEEP ALIVE HERITAGE

**CAIRO:** Once a flourishing community, only a handful of Egyptian Jews, mostly elderly women, remain in the Arab world's most populous country, aiming at least to preserve their heritage. Egypt still has about a dozen synagogues, but like many of the country's monuments they need restoration. Part of the roof of a synagogue in the Mediterranean city of Alexandria caved in last year.

In downtown Cairo, a bustling street lined with old hotels and shops leads to an imposing stone building modeled after an ancient Egyptian temple: The Sha'ar Hashamayim synagogue, built around 1900. Inside, Magda Haroun carefully unrolls Torah scrolls kept in the synagogue's ark. The synagogue is mostly empty these days, but Haroun, 65, remembers when its benches were filled

with worshippers, including her late father Shehata Haroun, a celebrated lawyer. Haroun carries the title of president of Cairo's Jewish community-six elderly women including herself and her mother-and says her task is to preserve a centuries-old heritage. "It's my duty, for future generations," she says. Her mother Marcelle Haroun, 91, cries when she discusses her community's fading past. "According to the stories, Jews lived in Egypt since the pharaohs. Do you want to make centuries of history vanish?" she says. There were between 80,000 and 120,000 Jews in Egypt up until the mid-20th century. They had an impact that far exceeded their numbers in trade and even cinema, with actress and singer Leila Murad dominating the silver screen in the 1940s and 1950s.

### Taboo

But the Arab-Israeli war of 1948 led to the disintegration of the community, with many leaving Egypt or being forced out under the regime of president Gamal Abdel Nasser. Today, the Jews of Egypt are estimated to number 18, with 12 of them in the coastal city of Alexandria. Magda Haroun's dream is for Jewish artefacts to be seen by the public, perhaps in a planned museum of Egyptian civilisation. Officially, the government now makes no distinction between Pharaonic, Islamic, Coptic and Jewish heritage, and the antiquities ministry has come up with the funds to fix the roof of Alexandria's synagogue.

"The (antiquities) minister promised me that a museum of civilisations will

open, representing all the civilisations of Egypt," said Magda Haroun. The Egyptian civilisation museum partially opened in February with a small exhibition but there are no definite plans as yet for displaying Jewish artefacts in it. However the minister, Khaled el-Enany, told AFP that in early 2016 he set up a committee to list "all the Jewish monuments and Jewish collections that are in the synagogues". But on a public level, many Egyptians still have a mixed view of their Jewish compatriots. "It remains a complicated question," says Amir Ramses, who made a 2013 documentary, "The Jews of Egypt", on the community's history. "Mentioning the Jews in Egypt was a taboo," he said. Just screening the film in Cairo cinemas was a struggle before

he eventually obtained clearance. When it was shown, the culture ministry requested that it be introduced as a work of the director's "imagination" rather than a documentary.

Although the tiny community has been spared recent attacks by jihadists targeting Christians, the Sha'ar Hashamayim synagogue was attacked in 2010. An assailant hurled a suitcase containing a homemade bomb at the synagogue's entrance, causing no damage. Some in the community prefer to keep a low profile. The head of Alexandria's Jewish community, Youssef Gaon, wanted to be quoted as little as possible when interviewed by AFP. Gaon simply said he "trusts" the Egyptian government will help restore the country's Jewish heritage. — AFP



**MOSUL:** An Iraqi counter terrorism forces member stands guard in Mosul's Al-Jadida area on March 26, 2017, following air strikes in which civilians have been reportedly killed during an ongoing offensive against the Islamic State (IS) group. — AFP

## IRAQI SNIPERS TARGETING MOSUL JIHADISTS USING HUMAN SHIELDS

**AIR STRIKES HAVE REPORTEDLY KILLED LARGE NUMBERS OF RESIDENTS**

**BAGHDAD:** Iraq has deployed snipers to target jihadists using civilians as human shields in Mosul, as it investigates air strikes that reportedly killed large numbers of residents in the city, the military said yesterday. Hundreds of thousands of civilians are still trapped in Mosul, caught between advancing Iraqi forces and the Islamic State group jihadists that they are fighting to defeat.

Iraqi officials and witnesses said that air strikes killed civilians in the Mosul al-Jadida area in recent days, but the number of victims-said to range from dozens to hundreds-could not be independently confirmed. IS "began to use citizens as human shields, and we are trying to target them with... snipers to eliminate them," Joint Operations Command spokesman Brigadier General Yahya Rasool told AFP. Iraqi forces are relying on "light and medium weapons, among them sniper (rifles), to hunt for Daesh members" located among civilians, he said.

However, Iraqi forces have also frequently fired mortar rounds and unguided rockets during the battle for west Mosul-weapons that pose a much greater risk to residents of areas where fighting is taking place. Rasool accused IS of gathering civilians together and then blowing up explosives-rigged vehicles nearby to

make it look like "Iraqi forces... are targeting innocent civilians." He also said that Iraq has begun a probe into reports of civilians killed by air strikes in Mosul.

"The defense ministry opened an investigation into this issue," Rasool said. The US-led coalition against IS has indicated that it may have been responsible for at least some of the civilian deaths. "An initial review of strike data... indicates that, at the request of the Iraqi security forces, the coalition struck (IS) fighters and equipment, March 17, in west Mosul at the location corresponding to allegations of civilian casualties," it said in a statement on Saturday.

### Mass displacement

At the beginning of this month the international alliance had said that "it is more likely than not, at least 220 civilians have been unintentionally killed by coalition strikes", while other incidents were still under investigation. Two witnesses who have since fled Mosul said that a building with around 170 people inside was destroyed.

One of them, Manhal Sumayr, said that IS snipers had fired on Iraqi forces in the area, after which an aircraft targeted them with a missile. An Iraqi brigadier general said that a total of 27

residential buildings had been hit by multiple days of strikes in west Mosul, and that three of them were completely destroyed. Bashar Al-Kiki, the head of the provincial council for Nineveh, of which Mosul is the capital, said that "dozens" of bodies were still buried under rubble in the city, while Governor Nawfal Hammadi put the toll at hundreds dead.

Other officials also said that hundreds of civilians had been killed. On Saturday, security forces did not permit journalists to reach the area where the strikes were said to have taken place. Following the raids, the United Nations called on parties to the conflict to do "everything possible" to protect civilians in Mosul.

"International humanitarian law is clear. Parties to the conflict-all parties-are obliged to do everything possible to protect civilians. This means that combatants cannot use people as human shields and cannot imperil lives through indiscriminate use of fire-power," said Lise Grande, the UN's humanitarian coordinator for Iraq. According to Iraqi authorities, more than 200,000 people have fled west Mosul since the operation to retake the area was launched on February 19. But the UN has said that around 600,000 are still present inside the city. — AFP

## IN MOSUL, A SCHOOL BECOMES A HOSPITAL

**MOSUL:** Fifteen-year-old Mohammed enthusiastically helps the staff of a makeshift hospital set up in the bullet-scarred school in west Mosul where he himself studied before jihadists seized Iraq's second city. The Islamic State group used the school as part of its program of indoctrination until it lost control of the area during a major Iraqi offensive launched last month, and it is now used to treat people wounded in the ongoing battle for the western side of the city.

Like many buildings in Mosul, the school bears the signs of warfare. In addition to being pockmarked with bullets, most of the windows are broken, walls are cracked and the floor is littered with bullet casings. The entrance hall has been transformed into an emergency room, which is stocked with only limited equipment but still allows for first aid to be administered to the wounded and sick.

One young man lies on a narrow bed, his face pale and tired. "A sniper (from IS) fired at him but missed, so he started to run, and the sniper shot again and hit him," says Fathi Waad, one of the victim's relatives. "This is the third time that someone in the family has been hit by a sniper," he adds.

Each day, the hospital looks after around 100 patients, both civilians and security personnel, often the victims of gunshot wounds, says Aqil Karim, a medic from the elite Counter-Terrorism Service. A dust-covered red pickup suddenly stops in front of the school to deliver a semi-conscious old man whose foot has been injured.

### American dream

Unlike the previous patient, he is not the victim of violence, but rather of an accident, and he is also suffering from dehydration. As soon as he arrives, he is carried to a bed, where his wound is washed, disinfected and dressed. Treating him is just as important as tending to those wounded by war in a city where the fighting has destroyed many medical facilities.

More than 200,000 Iraqis have fled west Mosul since Iraqi forces began the assault to retake the area on February 19, the government says, but hundreds of thousands more are still in danger inside the city. With school lessons unlikely to resume at any time soon, several former pupils have returned to the building to help the medical staff.

Indifferent to the sound of gunfire and explosions outside, one of them rushes around helping out where he can, dressed in a tracksuit with a blue hood. Mohammed has barely finished unloading a delivery of equipment when he is already back inside handing out food rations. "We cook, clean the equipment, and when wounded people arrive we help them," says the slender teenager, who is delighted no longer to be in class under the jihadists.

"Our teachers were hard on us. They'd beat us," he says. "And they'd ask us to pledge allegiance to IS." But Mohammed does not see a future for himself in the ruins of a city disfigured by months of heavy fighting. Instead, he yearns to join his relatives in the United States. His dream job once there? "Doctor" of course. — AFP



**MOSUL:** Displaced Iraqi children, who fled the violence in the northern city of Mosul as a result of a planned operation to retake the city from jihadists, pose for the camera at the Hasan Sham camp. — AFP

## HAMAS CLOSES GAZA CROSSING

**GAZA CITY:** Hamas shut the crossing between the Gaza Strip and Israel yesterday after blaming the Jewish state for the assassination of one of its officials in the Palestinian enclave. The interior ministry in Gaza, run by Islamist movement Hamas, said it was shutting the Erez crossing for an indefinite period as it investigates Friday's murder.

It did not give details on the reason behind the closure, though there was speculation authorities may be seeking to prevent those responsible for the killing from leaving. Hamas security forces were deployed along the Gaza borders and exits by sea were also banned, officials said. Hamas officials have blamed the Israeli intelligence agency Mossad and its "collaborators" for the killing of Mazen Faqha, 38, who was shot dead by unknown gunmen. He was killed by four bullets from a pistol equipped with a silencer. Israel has not commented on the shooting. According to Israeli media, Faqha was responsible for cells of Hamas's military wing, the Ezzedine Al-Qassam Brigades, in the Israeli-occupied West Bank.

### 'Blood is on your hands'

Yesterday, Faqha's wife, Nahed Assida, called on "Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip to respond to this assassination." "The price of my husband's blood is in your hands," she said during a women's conference in Gaza. Faqha's

funeral on Saturday drew thousands of Hamas supporters into the streets with chants of "revenge" and "death to Israel." Ismail Haniya, until recently head of Hamas in Gaza, and Yahya Sinwar, who replaced him as leader, headed the procession. According to Hamas, Faqha formed cells for the Islamist group's military wing in the West Bank cities of Tubas, also where he was born, and Jenin. It said he played an important role in preparing two major attacks. They included a suicide attack in the Israeli settlement neighborhood of Gilgo in east Jerusalem in 2002 that killed 19 people.

The second was a suicide bus attack later that year that killed nine people in the northern Israeli city of Safed. They were part of a wave of suicide attacks that killed hundreds of Israelis during the second intifada, or uprising, between 2000 and 2005. Israel sentenced him to nine life sentences plus 50 years, but he was released in 2011 along with more than 1,000 other Palestinians in exchange for Gilad Shalit, an Israeli soldier Hamas had detained for five years, and transferred to Gaza.

Israel did not immediately comment in detail yesterday's closure but said its side of the crossing remained open. The Erez crossing is the only one between Gaza and Israel for people. Another crossing with Israel, Kerem Shalom, is used for goods and remained open yesterday, Palestinian officials said. — AFP

## REBEL SUPPORTERS FLOOD YEMEN STREETS ON CONFLICT ANNIVERSARY

**SANAA:** Hundreds of thousands of people demonstrated in Yemen's rebel-held capital yesterday in a show of support for the insurgents, two years after a Gulf coalition intervened against the rebels. The Iran-backed Houthi rebels staged a show of force over the weekend with the mass rally in Sanaa and a symbolic court ruling against Yemen's embattled president, whose troops are

supported by the Saudi-led Gulf coalition. Crowds converged on Sabeen Square in Sanaa, raising banners in protest against the Saudi-led intervention and chanting a vow to "resist to the end".

"We came back today to Sabeen Square to send a message to Arabs and Muslims: Does your religion allow you to attack a people in its totality without any reason?"



**SANAA:** Yemeni supporters of the Houthi movement and former president Ali Abdullah Saleh, attend rally to mark two years of the military intervention by the Saudi-led coalition. — AFP

Abdullah Qadiry told AFP at Sabeen Square. Former president Ali Abdullah Saleh, a Houthi ally and political rival of current head of state Abedrabbo Mansour Hadi, appeared briefly in person at the rally to thunderous applause.

Yesterday's protest came a day after a rebel court in Sanaa sentenced Hadi to death in absentia for high treason. The court found Hadi guilty of "usurping the title of president after the end of his term in office... instigating attacks by Saudi Arabia and undermining the independence and integrity of the Republic of Yemen"; the rebel-controlled Saba agency said. Six members of the Hadi government were also sentenced to death. Hadi, whose two-year term in office expired in February 2014, now lives in Saudi Arabia, although he also visits his government's temporary capital of Aden.

### Iranian 'plot'

The president was placed under house arrest after the Houthis overran the capital in September 2014, and later fled to the southern port city of Aden. The Gulf coalition intervened with air strikes on March 26, 2015, after Houthis advanced on

other parts of the country including Aden. Hadi's forces have since gained ground in the south, but the Houthis still control the capital and strategic ports on the Red Sea coast.

The government-run Saba news agency on Sunday ran an editorial slamming the "rise of the Houthi militia" as an Iranian "plot" targeting Yemen and neighboring Saudi Arabia. On Saturday, Ali Abdullah Saleh denounced Riyadh's role in the conflict. "Free Yemenis will continue to choose resistance, as long as the coalition led by Saudi Arabia continues to choose war," Saba quoted Saleh as saying in a speech marking the anniversary. Rebel leader Abdul Malik Al-Houthi said the coalition had been "living under the illusion that they can take Yemen in a week or a month... but have sunk into the mud".

### Possible 'war crime'

Home to one of Al-Qaeda's most dangerous branches, Yemen has a complex history of civil unrest. The rebels, who had long complained of marginalization, in 2011 mobilized protests demanding economic and political reform that led to Saleh's resignation the following year after decades in power. — AP