



A robot waiter carries empty trays after delivering an order to patrons at the 'White Fox' restaurant in the eastern part of Iraq's northern city of Mosul. — AFP photos



This picture shows a view of the exterior of the 'White Fox' restaurant, which employs the use of robot waiters, in the eastern part of Iraq's northern city of Mosul.

Robot waiters take Iraq's Mosulites back to the future

From the rubble of Iraq's war-ravaged city of Mosul arises the sight of androids gliding back and forth in a restaurant to serve their amused clientele. "Welcome", "We wish you a good time in our restaurant", "We would be happy to have your opinion on the quality of the service", chime the automated attendants, red eyes blinking out of their shiny blue and white exteriors. "On television, you see robots and touch-screen tables in the United Arab Emirates, Spain and Japan," said Rami Chkib Abdelrahman, proud owner of the White Fox which opened in June. "I'm trying to bring these ideas here to Mosul."

The futuristic servers are the result of technology developed in the northern city, erstwhile stronghold of the Islamic State jihadist group. "We saw the concept on social media in more than one restaurant," said Abdelrahman, a dentist by profession.

Voyage to space

Occupied by IS between 2014 and 2017, the northern metropolis of Mosul still bears the scars of war. But at dinner-



A robot waiter carries an order to patrons at the 'White Fox' restaurant.

time, patrons of the restaurant that is packed every night can escape from the city on a voyage through space. An astronaut floating across the muralled wall sets the scene and views of Earth and other planets as seen from space give customers the sense of peering out through the portholes of a spaceship. The ceilings are speckled with glowing constellations.

But the star attractions remain the two androids, sporting a scarf and black beret, shuttling back and forth across the restaurant on rails to deliver orders. As they approach, smartphones come out and

children promptly line up next to them for a souvenir snapshot.

Time for a selfie

The robots are imported, Abdelrahman explained without giving the source, adding that everything in the restaurant is digital, including the 15 touch-screen tables with built-in menus. A team from the University of Mosul's department of mechatronics-integrating several fields of engineering as well as robotics-was in charge of programming and connected a network and server to the restaurant.

Humans have not been completely replaced by machines. Four young waiters are busy picking up the dishes from the robots' trays and placing them on the tables. Having dinner with his wife, Bashar Mahmud was won over. He took a selfie, smiling broadly. "I've travelled abroad and I've never seen anything like this, not in Turkey, Jordan or Saudi Arabia," exclaimed the 50-year-old blacksmith with a salt-and-pepper beard. — AFP



Children pose for a picture next to a robot waiter at the 'White Fox' restaurant.

Imports imperil Jordanian makers of handcrafted shoes

He was once dubbed the "King of Shoes", but after decades of fashioning footwear for kings, queens and presidents, 90-year-old Jamil Kopti fears cheap imports are killing off his craft. "We started losing customers one after another, and we kept losing stores until we closed down three shops," said Kopti, believed to be Jordan's oldest maker of handcrafted shoes. "In the past five years, our profession began to decline dramatically in face of imported foreign shoes that flooded the market," he sighed, surveying his once prosperous workshop.

Now he has just five workers, a far cry from the 42 staff he used to employ. And around the workshop in the popular Al-Jofeh district of Amman, hundreds of molds lie gathering dust. After entering the trade in 1949 at just 18, Kopti attended shoe fairs every year in Bologna and Paris. In 1961, at a show at the University of Jordan, he met the late King Hussein and gifted him four pairs of handmade shoes. Hussein became an instant fan, particularly of black, formal shoes, and "after that, and for 35 years, I made the king's shoes". "He loved classic shoes," said Kopti, proudly showing off two old photos on his phone of him and the late monarch. He was awarded Jordan's Independence Medal and was a frequent palace guest on special occasions.

'Made in Amman'

And Kopti's fame spread. In 1964, the monarch visited France where he met then president Charles de Gaulle. "All the time during the meeting ... he had his eyes on my shoes and when he asked



An employee working for shoemaker Zuhair Shiha at the Marina workshop assembles a shoe.

me where I got them from I told him 'They were made in Amman', the king told Kopti. "King Hussein asked me to make two pairs of shoes for de Gaulle," said Kopti, adding "his shoe size was very big". According to the country's Shoe Manufacturers Association, there used to be over 250 shoe workshops and factories in Jordan, employing about 5,000 people.

Today "we have around 100 workshops and less than 500 workers", said Naser Theyabat, head of the association. During his long career, Kopti has made shoes for the new King Abdullah II and most of Jordan's princes and princesses, as well as top politicians and military offi-

cers. Using imported leather from France, Italy, and Germany, his workshop once made 200 pairs of shoes a day. Nowadays it is more like 10 pairs, forcing him to turn to medical shoes and children's footwear. But Kopti believes his loyal customers will help him survive, pointing to one client he has served for 50 years.

Handmade leather shoemakers had a "golden age" in the 1980s and 1990s, recalls Theyabat. However with time, imports have increased. Textile, Readymade Clothes and Footwear Syndicate head Sultan Allan said that before the Covid-19 pandemic Jordan imported about 44 million dinars (\$62 million) worth of shoes annually. These figures are likely to decrease due to the repercussions of the epidemic. "This craft is on the verge of extinction," said Theyabat, lamenting that Jordanian shoemakers received little support. "On the contrary, there was a policy to flood the market with Chinese-made shoes."

'Profits too low'

In the Marina workshop in an old building of the Ashrafiyeh district, three shoemakers were sewing on soles, adding heels, and trimming off leather, watched by owner Zuhair Shiah. "The terrible decline started in 2015 when the market was flooded with Chinese, Vietnamese, Syrian and Egyptian-made shoes," the 71-year-old told AFP. "I had 20 workers and I am left with three. We used to make 60 to 70 pairs of shoes a day compared to less than 12 today." Holding up a shoe, he pointed out it was "strong and durable"



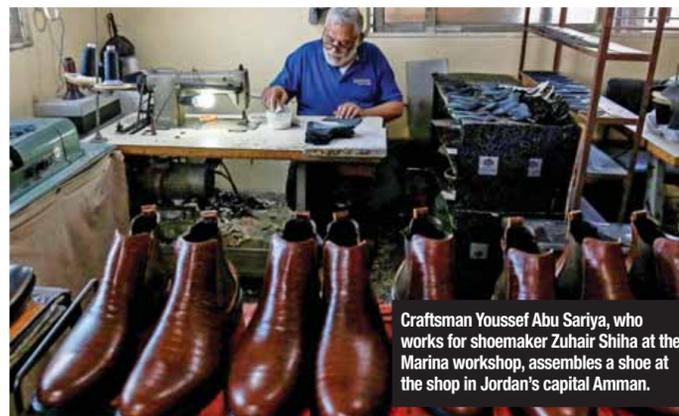
One of the five out of 42 remaining employees working for Jamil Al-Kopti, the oldest shoemaker in Amman.

and said the pair cost 20 dinars (\$28). "Our profit is very low."

Shiah is hoping for government support to "reduce taxes ... because we have debts that we cannot pay". Bent over a machine cutting leather, white-haired Youssef Abu Sariya recalled: "I started doing this 50 years ago. I love this job and know nothing else. "What is happening to us is sad. Most of the workshops closed and their workers have left," he said. "I am sure that we will face the same fate, but I do not know when." — AFP



One of the five out of 42 remaining employees working for Jamil Al-Kopti, checks shoe molds at the workshop in Jordan's capital.



Craftsman Youssef Abu Sariya, who works for shoemaker Zuhair Shiha at the Marina workshop, assembles a shoe at the shop in Jordan's capital Amman.

Taleban to Afghan networks: Stop airing shows with women actors

Afghanistan's Taleban authorities on Sunday issued a new "religious guideline" that called on the country's television channels to stop showing dramas and soap operas featuring women actors. In the first such directive to Afghan media issued by the Ministry for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice, the Taleban also called on women television journalists to wear Islamic hijabs while presenting their reports.

And the ministry asked the channels not to air films or programs in which the Prophet Mohammed (PBUH) or other revered figures are shown. It called for banning films or programs that were against Islamic and Afghan values. "These are not rules but a religious guideline," ministry spokesman Hakif Mohajir told AFP. The new directive was widely circulated late Sunday on social media networks.

Despite insisting they will rule more moderately this time around, the Taleban have already introduced rules for what women can wear at university, and beaten and harassed several Afghan journalists despite promising to uphold press freedoms. The Taleban's guideline for TV networks comes after two decades of explosive growth for independent Afghan media under the Western-backed governments that ruled the country until August 15, when the Islamists regained power.

Dozens of television channels and radio stations were set up with Western assistance and private investment soon after the Taleban were toppled in 2001. During the past 20 years, Afghan television channels offered a wide range of programs—from an "American Idol" style singing competition to music videos, along with several Turkish and Indian soap operas. When the Islamists previously ruled from 1996 to 2001, there was no Afghan media to speak of—they banned television, movies and most other forms of entertainment, deeming it immoral.

People caught watching television faced punishment, including having their set smashed. Ownership of a video player could lead to a public lashing. There was only one radio station, Voice of Sharia, that broadcast propaganda and Islamic programming. — AFP