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The Voice of a Changing Region

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RELIEF FOR REFUGEES

Assad backs down over law to seize refugee homes

'Law 10' withdrawn, UN aid chief says

Najla Housseini Beirut

The Assad regime has withdrawn a law that allowed authorities to seize property left behind by civilians who fled the war in Syria, the UN humanitarian aid chief in the country said on Thursday.

Under Law 10, Syrians had 30 days to prove that they own property in redevelopment zones in order to receive shares in the projects, otherwise ownership was transferred to the local government.

The law was a major impediment to the return of millions of refugees and internally displaced people who fled their homes. Regime officials have insisted the law would not result in the confiscation of property, but was aimed at proving and organizing ownership to combat forgery of documents in opposition-held areas.

Jan Egeland, who heads aid issues in the office of UN Syria envoy Staffan de Mistura, said he had been told of the decision to withdraw the law by Russia, Syrian President Bashar Assad's key military ally.

"When Russia says that it is withdrawn and there were mistakes made ... it is good news," Egeland said. "Hopefully this will now be reality on the ground. So diplomacy can win -- even in Syria."

Syrian politician Mohammed Kheir Alkham said the law had issued by presidential decree and he knew of no decree to abolish it. "These claims are not true so far," he said.

Nevertheless, Syrian refugees across the border in Lebanon welcomed reports that the law had been

withdrawn. "We have not heard the news yet, but this is an excellent move," Abu Mohammed, who is from Al-Qusayr and is the former head the water department in Homs, told Arab News.

"This move reflects the goodwill of the Syrian regime toward its displaced people abroad. Their discourse is no longer an escalation against us, but an attempt to re-establish trust between Syrian citizens and the Syrian regime."

Khalid Melhem, from Qalamoun, said the withdrawal of the law was "a gesture of goodwill, on which trust can be built."

FASTFACT

The law was a major impediment to the return of millions of refugees and internally displaced people who fled their homes.

Melhem, an interior designer in Syria, now lives in a tent in Aarsal and works as a house painter. "I own a 300-square-meter house in Damascus, but the authorities demolished it and acquired the land. I could not return to Syria to prove my ownership of the house because they want to lure me into the country and arrest me."

The regime acquired the property, 600 meters from the barracks of the Scientific Studies and Research Center, in 2017. "They demolished all damaged houses surrounding the barracks and prevented anyone from approaching the property except for a few Alawites, who were allowed to rebuild and reclaim their homes," Melhem said.

Related reports Page 6



"I am so happy, so proud. This is the first gold medal for Saudi Arabia and our first medal ever in karate. I have been working toward this moment for 10 years, especially in the past two when my training intensified."

Mohammed Al-Assiri
Saudi karate champ

Mohammed Al-Assiri, 17, proudly accepted Saudi Arabia's first Olympic gold medal in Buenos Aires. Above: Al-Assiri in action. Photos/Supplied

PRODIGY

Karate kid brings home first Olympic gold for KSA

Gary Meenaghan Buenos Aires

In the end, his smile was as wide and as broad as the Rio de la Plata that flows past Buenos Aires into the Atlantic.

Mohammed Al-Assiri, 17, ascended the podium in the Argentine capital and proudly accepted Saudi Arabia's first Olympic gold medal.

Al-Assiri had triumphed over Masaki Yamaoka of Japan in the under-61 kg kumite, one of the three main karate disciplines at the 2018 Youth Olympics.

"I am so happy, so proud," he said. "This is the first gold medal for Saudi Arabia and our first medal ever in karate. I have been working toward this moment for 10 years, especially in the past two when my training intensified."

"I came for gold and this is the result of years of serious work. It was very difficult, but I am just so proud."

Yousef Jakaiden, the Saudi chef de mission, had confidently predicted medals earlier in the week, and said his expectations had been exceeded.

"We are very happy right now," he said, watching as Al-Assiri, wrapped in a Saudi flag, posed for photos. "It's our best achievement ever at an Olympics."

CARVING OUT NICHE FOR THEMSELVES

Over 400 Afghan women aim to break male stranglehold on Parliament

Sayed Salahuddin Kabul

For women in Afghanistan's Parliament, what a difference a year makes.

Last December, the government proposed 12 candidates for ministerial positions; only one was female, and she failed to win enough votes.

Now hundreds of women aim to be agents of change by standing for Parliament in elections on Saturday.

More than 400 of the 2,691 candidates are women. Their aims are to encourage a consensus among female members of Parliament and to end the reliance on factional leaders and strongmen with power and wealth.

"The young and new candidates



Kandahar Gov. Zalmay Wesa, left, with the NATO head in Afghanistan, Gen. Scott Miller, during a meeting in Kandahar. Three top officials, including Wesa, were killed on Thursday, when their own guards opened fire on them at a security conference. The Taliban said the target was Miller, who remained unhurt. AP Report Page 8

HIGH LIGHT

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are a powerful tool to make Parliament exercise its rights as stipulated in the constitution," said Zahra Nawabi, 28, a candidate from Kabul who has two master's degrees.

"Our priority should be women, first and foremost addressing their health. Parliament should not become a source of shame for the nation."

The practice of wealthy figures and men with power supporting their own choice of female nominees was a greater threat to Afghan democracy than the threatened attacks on the election process by Taliban insurgents, she said.

"The government needs to intervene to stop this, otherwise the next Parliament could be worse than the current one."

Shinkay Karokhail, who was

elected as an MP in 2005, was re-elected in 2010 and is standing again, admitted that female MPs had failed to form a powerful bloc in Parliament. Some of them regarded themselves "as extraordinary," she said, and it was too early to say whether any of the new batch of candidates would be an improvement.

The Brief

URBAN HERITAGE

The Saudi capital will host the sixth National Urban Heritage Forum in April to coincide with World Heritage Day, with its focus on investment opportunities in urban heritage. P5

ARABIC E-LEARNING

The Dubai government has launched a free e-learning education platform to cater for more than 50 million Arabic-speaking students across the region and beyond. P6

LEBANON UPBEAT

While much of the focus ahead of the Asian Cup will be on defending champs Australia, Lebanon's Joao Oumari is hoping his side can grab people's attention. P14

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The British Museum's new Albukhary Foundation Gallery opened on October 18. It is home to the museum's extensive collection of Islamic art.



Weekend

ISLAMIC ART

Five windows and a wall: Reframing Islamic art in the British Museum

Anne Horner London

When the management of the British Museum decided to shift its collection of Islamic art into a new gallery, they selected two artists — Ahmad Angawi from Saudi Arabia and Idris Khan from the UK — to create site-specific works. The pair were selected for their ability to assimilate their heritage in a contemporary way — a blend that is ideal for the new gallery space, which reframes the museum's Islamic art collection, presenting a fusion of cultures in the Islamic world through ancient, medieval and modern times.

Both have used the physical space of the new Albukhary Foundation Gallery, which opened October 18, to display their work in a dynamic way. Angawi has created five Mangour screens to cover windows in the gallery, while 21 of Khan's paintings cover one of the walls.

"The screens complete the atmosphere of the gallery, bringing the spirit of the Hijaz, the heartland of Islam, to the gallery," said Venetia Porter, assistant keeper, Department of the Middle East at the British Museum.

Angawi's five screens are made from walnut wood, using traditional Hijazi craft with modern manufacturing techniques. Samples for the windows were created by craftsmen in Jeddah and finished by craftsmen in London.

Two of the five screens are placed on facing windows. "It feels like they almost have a dialogue with one another, so the idea of the heart and mind in dialogue came to my mind immediately," Angawi explained. "When you do traditional craft you connect your body, mind and soul into an object. I wanted to convey the way that when you look at those screens, you also look with your mind and you see the techniques with your heart and you see the passion and connection they represent."

"I really wanted to work with craftsmen here in London," he continued. "I don't like the idea of cutting something from my culture and pasting it in in London. I wanted to make an integration of cultures between London and Makkah."

For Porter, this integration of tradition and modernity was crucial.

"Right from the beginning, we were very clear about wanting to bring the contemporary into it," she said. "I feel really strongly that when you look at this region ... you need to be looking at it as a continuum. When you look at it all as material culture, it's actually very easy to incorporate contemporary in with the 'old'. We've done it throughout the gallery."

She was first able to articulate this philosophy during the museum's acclaimed "Hajj: Journey to the Heart of Islam" exhibition in 2012, which drew an unprecedented number of Muslim visitors to the venue.

That exhibition ended with Khan's "You and Only You," in



Idris Khan (left) and Ahmad Angawi (above) with the site-specific works they created for the new gallery at the British Museum. Supplied

He had trained as a photographer, but felt that his photographs always looked like paintings.

"2010 was quite a tricky year for my wife and myself," he said. "My mother died — and she was young, 59 — and my wife lost the baby very late in pregnancy and it was really sort of a tough year in terms of grief."

"It was at that point that I (decided) to create drawings with words and stamping. In the studio, I'd get a piece of paper set up and I'd come in, write these sentences, make them into rubber stamps and then start



That emotional release of a stone hitting the wall and becoming words was such a beautiful thing in my mind.

stamping the paper. It was ridding myself of the grief that I was going through at the time in a very cathartic way," he continued.

"When I started (this process), the words were important. But then they became less important — an abstraction of those words. As they become artworks, they lose that content and become something else, something you can't quite... It's intangible."

With "21 Stones," Khan tried to convey the moment of release for a Hajj pilgrim performing the stoning of the Jamarat at Mina (when pilgrims throw 21 stones at three walls).

"The idea itself is a very beautiful thing," he said. "One takes a stone, stands in front of a wall representing the devil and wishes away any bad feelings or thoughts or future or past — whatever the pilgrim wants to think about — and that emotional release of a stone hitting the wall and becoming words was such a beautiful thing in my mind. So I wanted to try and see if I could make an artwork that had that kind of impact."

Unusually, Angawi's and Khan's work will be on display in the gallery for the next year. "Normally we'd have to change it every six months," Porter explained. "But we're so excited by this that we can't bear the thought of it only being up for (that long)."



which the artist used words to represent the footsteps of a pilgrim, in an attempt to capture the energy of a mass of people circling the Kaaba.

Porter — and her patrons group, who support acquisitions of material at the museum — were keen to involve Khan in the new site-specific gallery work.

"We talked about a number of artists and the one we decided upon immediately was Idris, because of that past relationship, because the work that he does

is so interesting, and because of the way that he thinks about his Muslim heritage," Porter said.

The resulting commission is Khan's "21 Stones," — a collection of 21 stamp paintings.

"I turn poems, or passages of writing, into rubber stamps and they become wood blocks basically. Then I paint them with oil, usually on either an aluminum surface or a paper surface," Khan explained.

He began his stamp paintings in 2010, a turning point in his work.