

More Italian Students Learning Arabic to Better Understand the Middle East

Students learning Arabic in Italy have a penchant not only for Arab culture, but a desire to learn about Middle East politics



Learning the Arabic language, culture and history is important to understand what is happening in the Arab region

- Laura, student

"We started to focus on political and economic topics that were the [students'] main motivation for

PADUA, Italy - When entering the old wooden gate of the Center for African and Central Asian Studies at Ca' Foscari University in Venice, there seems to be an overflow of students rushing to get to their classes.

learning [Arabic]," Grande said. Well-known for teaching Arabic in Italy, The Center for African and Central Asian Studies has branches in Venice, Milan, Naples and Rome. With news and photos of civil war, turmoil and revolt across the Middle East dominating the news in the last few years, many Italian students became eager to learn Arabic to better understand the region.

In one of the Arabic classes, Professor Francesco Grande, a teacher at the Universities of Milan and Venice, went through news articles from various main stream media sources in the Middle East, explaining Arabic terms in detail and discussing the topics with his students in Arabic.

In a seminar about Syrian literature in the city of Mestre, near Venice, a group of Italian students that had recently began studying Arabic, students such as Laura.

Israel Unveils Newly Unearthed Section of Western Wall



Archaeologists excavate part of holy Western Wall to uncover well preserved theatre-like Roman structure dating from second or third century AD. It had been buried under eight metres of earth for 1,700 years says IAA

JERUSALEM - Israeli archaeologists in Jerusalem's Old City unveiled a newly unearthed section of the Western Wall and the first Roman public structure ever discovered in the city, they said.

Archaeologist Joe Uziel said he and his colleagues knew the wall section was there and had expected to find a Roman street at its base.

"But as we excavated and excavated we realised we weren't getting to the street. Instead we have this circular building," he told reporters in English at the underground site.

"Basically we realised that we were excavating a theatre-like (Roman) structure." He said that carbon-14 and other dating methods indicated it came from the second or third centuries AD and appeared to be unfinished.

The Israel Antiquities Authority (IAA), which conducted the two-year dig, said that historical sources mentioned such structures but in 150 years of modern archaeological research in the city none had been found.

The section of the 2,000-year-old Western Wall uncovered by the diggers is about 15 metres in width and eight metres high, with the stones very well preserved.

It had been buried under eight metres of earth for 1,700 years, the IAA said.

The Western Wall is the last remnant of the retaining structures which surrounded the second Jewish temple until its destruction by the Romans in 70 AD. It is the holiest site where Jews are permitted to pray.

Previously, the last section to be exposed was in 2007, IAA chief Jerusalem architect Yuval Baruch said.

"Exposing parts of the Western Wall is of course extremely exciting, but the structure we are looking at right now we had no idea would be here," Uziel said, pointing to the 200-seat auditorium.

"It's probably the most important archaeological site in the country, the first public structures from the Roman period of Jerusalem," Baruch said.

Uziel said it was unclear if the building had been a meeting chamber for Roman administrative officials or a concert venue.

Beit Beirut Museum: How will Lebanon Remember its Civil War?



BEIRUT, Lebanon - On the corner of Beirut's busy Sodeco square stands an imposing, bullet-ridden, Ottoman-style building. Named the Barakat building after the family who built it in 1924, it was occupied by different militias during Lebanon's civil war (1975-1990).

Positioned along the Green Line which separated Christian neighbourhoods in the east from Muslims / Palestinian factions in the west of Beirut during the war, the Barakat building is known to have been a snipers' nest because of its strategic location in the city. Fighters are accused of preying on civilians from behind its sturdy walls.

Some of the graffiti has been left untouched, giving a sense of what transpired. "I want to say the truth: my soul has become filthy," says one.

Today, after over a decade of lobbying by activists, the three-storey building has been restored to house a 7,000-square-metre museum dedicated to the memory of Beirut.

Over \$20m, which include its expropriation by the municipality and renovation works, have been poured into the museum that will be known as Beit Beirut, or House Beirut.

Here, the visible impact of the war remains a tribute to the violence that left 150,000 people dead, and around 17,000 kidnapped or "disappeared".



On the ground floor, a 1978 bunker has been transformed into a projection room that can accommodate 70 people. The original rough cement of the bunker's wall is left intact. The date 1978 is carved into it, as well as a cross above a sniper's hole.

The first floor is the most evocative of the civil war, with sandbags still stacked in the main room. Fighters made a second bunker out of the bathroom there, plastering the original doors on the roof and reinforcing the walls with 90 centimetres of concrete on each side to protect it from shelling.

"The line of fire here is formidable," says

the museum's architect, Youssef Haidar, pointing through the sniper's hole. "It goes through the living room, the stairs, the balcony and continues for a kilometre."

Yet even though renovation works were completed after four years in 2015, the building stands mostly empty. Apart from the occasional temporary exhibition or private cocktail party, there is no director, no board, or even a team working at the museum.

Those who have worked on the museum's restoration can only speculate about why it has not officially opened to the public yet. Some news reports have blamed internal disagreements about how to present Lebanon's civil war. According to Andrew Arsan, a senior lecturer in modern Middle East history at the University of Cambridge, schools in Lebanon do not even teach history past the country's independence in 1943.

"A committee was created to draft post-1943 history text books a few years ago, but it was a fiasco. They particularly disagreed on how to present the history of the two civil wars, the 1958 one and the 1975-1990 one," Arsan explains.

"When the civil war ended, we went back to life as quickly as possible and now, 20 years later, we have a dysfunctional community. A lack of apology has created a lack of respect," explains artist Zena el-Khalil, whose exhibition Sacred Catastrophe: Healing Lebanon.

The exhibition highlights the importance of forgiveness for events that happened during the civil war, like the torture of prisoners in Khiam prison in south Lebanon, up to the 2008 conflict which brought the country to the brink of a new civil war.

EU says Israeli Settlements Illegal Under International Law

EU demands Israel 'reconsider' plans for nearly 1,300 new settler homes in occupied West Bank, including first new constructions in flashpoint city Hebron since 2002.



Construction workers building new houses in Jewish-only settlement of Kiryat Arba, east of Palestinian town of Hebron.

BRUSSELS - The EU demanded Israel reconsider plans for nearly 1,300 settler homes in the West Bank, saying they were illegal under international law and undermined the prospects for peace.

Israeli authorities advanced plans for 1,292 new homes, with approval from a committee overseeing settlement construction in the West Bank, according to the Peace Now watchdog.

The move came after Israeli government officials pledged a major boost in settlement home approvals this year, with US President Donald Trump much less critical of such plans than his predecessor Barack Obama.

But the EU condemned the step, restating its position that settlement activity was "illegal under international law" and damaged "the viability of the two-state solution and the prospect for a lasting peace".

"The European Union has requested clarifications from Israeli authorities and conveyed the expectation that they reconsider these decisions, which are detrimental to ongoing efforts towards meaningful peace talks," an EU statement said.

The bloc voiced particular concern about proposals to build settler homes in the flashpoint West Bank city of Hebron for the first time since 2002 and about the start of preparatory groundwork in the east Jerusalem area of Givat Hamatos.

Construction in Givat Hamatos would "severely jeopardise the contiguity and viability of a future Palestinian state", the EU said, adding that it would continue work with international and regional partners to try to restart dia-

logue.

Trump is seeking to restart peace talks between Israel and the Palestinians, which collapsed in 2014 following the failure of an earlier US-led initiative.

Settlement building in east Jerusalem and the West Bank, occupied by Israel in the 1967 Six-Day War, is seen as a major obstacle to peace as the homes are built on land the Palestinians see as part of their future state.

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Saudi Arabia to Monitor Interpretations of Prophet's Sayings

although he gave no timeframe.

The government has begun to promote an alternative narrative of Saudi identity that keeps Wahhabism as a central focus, but still allows secular themes such as nationalism and cultural heritage that predates Islam to shine through.

The ministry said the body would serve Islam by creating "a solid scientific reference to vet and verify the authenticity of hadiths", which are second in importance only to the Koran in Islam. It did not say what form the reference would take.

The decree issued by the king, whose official title is Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques - Islam's most revered places in Mecca and Medina - said the body would be chaired by Sheikh Muhammed bin Hassan al-Sheikh, a member of the Council of Senior Scholars, which serves as Saudi Arabia's highest religious body.