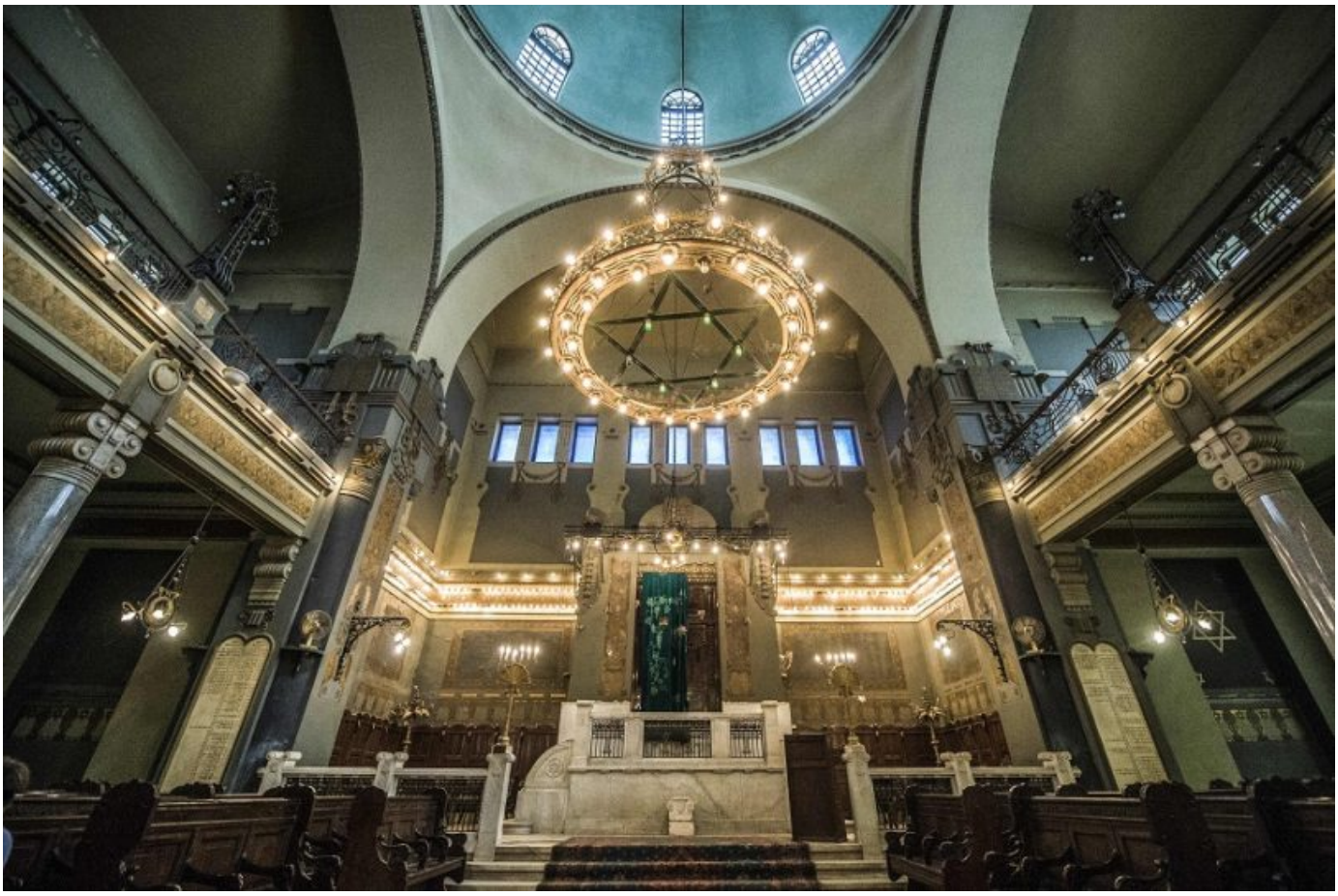
Despite Reports, Egypt Not Spending $71 Million To Restore Jewish Sites

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Maya Margit February 6, 2019



Sources reveal that Cairo's highly-publicized announcement could be part of a propaganda campaign

Reports that Egypt will allocate $71 million to restore Jewish sites are inaccurate and might be part of a wider propaganda campaign aimed at propping up President Abdel al-Fattah al-Sisi, experts familiar with the project argue.

Last month, Egyptian Antiquities Minister Khaled al-Anani announced that Sisi had earmarked the money to rehabilitate Jewish monuments and houses of worship in the country. He was quoted by local media as saying that this is a priority for Cairo "much like [upholding] Pharaonic, Roman, Islamic and Coptic heritage," and that the government "will not wait for any foreign party to grant finances" for the venture.

The Israeli embassy in Cairo issued a statement welcoming the decision which was reported by numerous Arab and Israeli media outlets. However, the actual allotment remains unclear and will, in fact, go towards restoring Islamic and Christian sites as well.

“[There] was exaggerated coverage to catch the eyes of western media and market Sisi as a tolerant leader,” Haisam Hassanein of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy told The Media Line.

To this end, he believes Cairo is seeking to shore up support from policymakers in the United States while encouraging Jews to travel to Egypt in order to boost tourism revenue. Notably, the effort comes ahead of possible constitutional amendments that would allow Sisi to remain in power beyond his two-term limit.

“[The announcement] was a short-lived joy leading to disappointment and a recollection of old promises gone sour,” Desire Sakkal, Founding President and Director of the Historical Society of Jews From Egypt, told The Media Line. “We hunger for deeds and not words, our ears are bursting with the latter. The conclusion of many is: ‘It’s all [theater].’”

Sakkal notes that there are very few Jews left in the North African country capable of conducting religious services and that tourists require special permission—which is exceedingly difficult to obtain—to visit Jewish sites.

“We believe the move by the Egyptian government is a reply to foreign criticism [about the treatment of] Egypt’s minorities and [is intended] to alleviate economic difficulties,” he asserted.

On this backdrop, Cairo has registered some 500 Jewish artifacts collected from several synagogues across that nation, including Torah scrolls, lamps, cups and candlesticks. Jews have lived in Egypt for thousands of years, although most of the 80,000-strong community was expelled following the Suez Crisis of 1956.

Today, only a few Jews remain scattered throughout the state.

“Shortly after the announcement, the minister of antiquities himself issued a correction and said [the money] would go towards the monuments of all religions in need of repair,” Zvi Mazel, former Israeli ambassador to Egypt, explained to The Media Line.

“The media did not update the story to reflect the minister going back on his earlier statement.”

Mazel highlights the fact that Egypt still refuses to allow Jewish artifacts to be sent to Israel or other Jewish communities abroad. In his estimation, though most synagogues in Egypt are in a severe state of disrepair only a small number will ultimately be renovated.

“What Cairo is interested in is sending a message to Jews, especially those in the West, that ‘we are a country that takes care of its minorities,’” he said. “There are not really any Jews remaining in Egypt. The head of the community there, Magda Haroun, hates Israel.”

Rabbi Andrew Baker, Director of International Affairs at the American Jewish Committee advocacy group, has been encouraging the Egyptian government to address the issue of dilapidated Jewish monuments for nearly 15 years.

“I discovered over my repeated visits to Egypt that the government was not interested in partnerships with any foreign organizations,” he recounted to The Media Line. “They maintain that Jewish heritage is also part of Egypt’s, and one could press them on this basis to take care of it.”

Baker previously met with Egyptian ministers on several occasions to discuss a plan to revive Jewish sites, including Cairo’s main synagogue and the Maimonides Yeshiva learning institute. The U.S. government backed his efforts and also made attempts of its own to persuade Sisi to proceed accordingly.

“The Egyptians have provided funds [in the past] but usually without any public announcement,” Baker elaborated. “I believe they recognize that these things are not popular with the public so they preferred to do them quietly.

“At the moment, the Egyptian government is spending over $5 million to carry out repairs and restoration of the Eliyahu Hanavi Synagogue in Alexandria. This in itself is a considerable contribution…and they deserve credit for doing this.”

The Media Line reached out to the Egyptian Antiquities Ministry and other government bodies for comment but did not receive a response.