

British tourists returning to Tunisia after security improvements

Lamine Ghanmi

Tunis

The British government gave tourists the green light to resume travelling to Tunisia, having concluded that the North African country had made significant improvements to security conditions, particularly in tourist areas.

UK Minister of State for Security Ben Wallace, at the end of a 3-day trip to Tunisia, said: "It has been really impressive what I have seen over the last few days. I look forward to the fact there is going to be lots more British people coming in the next few weeks."

Tunisian Foreign Minister Kheimaies Jhinaoui said the United Kingdom's assessment of Tunisia's security conditions would have a "very positive" effect on the tourism industry.

"Wallace visited several locations where he noted strengthened security measures around sensitive areas and tourist areas to prepare for the arrivals and stays of tourists in better conditions," Jhinaoui said.

Britain's updated travel advice is good news for an industry that seems to be rebounding. Tourist arrivals to Tunisia, which plummeted after terrorist attacks in 2015, improved 32.5% in 2017 compared to the previous year and totalled 7.5 million people, government figures stated. The World Tourism Organisation ranked Tunisia's leisure industry the fifth most rapidly expanding in the world in 2017.

Tourism has historically been a major driver of Tunisia's economy, bringing in needed foreign currency and employing thousands. In 2014, Tunisia earned around \$2 billion in tourism revenue.

That changed in June 2015 when an Islamic State gunman killed 38 people – mostly British tourists – in the resort town of Sousse. That attack, along with one in March on the Bardo National Museum

in Tunis that claimed 22 lives that year, prompted London to advise against "all but essential travel" to the country, resulting in a marked decline in the number of British and European visitors.

In the first quarter of 2016, the number of tourists to Tunisia dropped 21.5% compared to the same period the year before. British arrivals fell even more dramatically, down to 8,000 in the first three months of 2016 versus 190,000 during the same period the year before.

The British government lifted its travel warning for most regions of Tunisia in 2017 and Thomas Cook, a leading tour operator, announced it would start flying British tourists to Tunisia as of mid-February.

The news came as a relief to the Tunisian government, which has struggled against high inflation rates, unemployment, dwindling hard currency resources and a stagnant economy.

There have been mass protests over unemployment in the southern region of Gafsa, which paralysed phosphate production, resulting in huge losses for one of the country's most lucrative sectors.

"The phosphate production is being halted 100% since January 20," said junior Energy and Mining Minister Hachem Hmidi.

Tunisia was once one of the world's largest producers of phosphate but its market share fell sharply after strikes and protests following the 2011 uprising that toppled former President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali.

Tunisia received more bad news February 7 when the European Union listed it as a third-party country with "strategic deficiencies in (its) anti-money laundering and terrorism financing regime."

Economists warned the determination could undermine Tunisia's credibility and hinder foreign investment at a time when the country is preparing to sell 1 billion euros (\$1.22 billion) worth of bonds to finance its budget deficit.

Following the EU blacklisting,



Welcome news. UK Minister of State for Security Ben Wallace (L) speaks with Tunisian Foreign Minister Kheimaies Jhinaoui in Tunis, on February 2.

(Tunisian Foreign Ministry)

Tunisian Prime Minister Youssef Chahed submitted a proposal to dismiss Central Bank of Tunisia Governor Chedly Ayari.

Tunisian financial expert Ezzedine Saidane said the EU action would have "serious repercussions" for

Tunisia's economy.

"Each foreigner eyeing investment in Tunisia would be subject in his home country of suspicions of money laundering and the motives of his investments will be questioned," Saidane said.

On the security front, Tunisia has been on the offensive against jihadists since early 2016, when officials dismantled numerous extremist cells across the country.

On January 20, a Tunisian special operations unit killed two commanders of Okba Ibn Nafaa, al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb's (AQIM) Tunisian branch, outside Sbeitla, near the Algerian border.

"We are achieving great progress in the fight against extremist groups," Interior Ministry spokesman Khalifa Chibani said.

Interior Minister Lotfi Brahemi told parliament that security forces carried out 122,000 raids on safe houses and other locations suspected of links to jihadists in 2017, detaining 1,456 suspects.

Tunisia has strengthened cooperation with Algeria on counterterrorism matters to shield the Sahel from spillover from the conflict in neighbouring Libya.

Algerian special forces killed eight AQIM commanders in the mountainous eastern region of Khenchela. The late January operation came after Tunisian and Algerian security services shared intelligence and monitoring capabilities, security officials said.

Lamine Ghanmi is an Arab Weekly correspondent in Tunis.

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UK Minister of State for Security Ben Wallace

Honouring monks killed more than 20 years ago reopens painful chapter of Algeria's bloody civil war

Stephen Quillen

Tunis

Nineteen monks and nuns killed during the Algerian civil war have been recognised as "martyrs" by the Roman Catholic Church, a step ahead of beatification. The long-awaited move, more than 20 years after the religious figures' death, reopens a painful chapter of Algeria's civil war but highlights the important role of French monastic life in the country's history.

● On March 27, 1996, the GIA broke into the monastery and kidnapped seven of the nine monks.

"Honouring the 19 Christian martyrs means paying homage to the memory of all those who gave their life in Algeria during those dark years... for their country and for their faith," Trappist priest Thomas Georgeon told *Mondo e Missione*, the official magazine of the Pontifical Institute for Foreign Missions.

Among those declared martyrs on January 24 were Bishop Pierre Lucien Claverie of Oran and seven monks of Tibhirine, Cistercian Trappists who were captured by Islamic extremists in 1996 and whose story was told in the 2010 film "Of Gods and Men."

The monks – Dom Christian de Cherge, Brother Luc (born Paul Dochier), Father Christophe (Lebreton), Brother Michel (Fleury), Father Bruno (born Christian Lemarchand), Father Celestin (Ringard) and Brother Paul (Favre-Miville) – lived in Atlas Abbey near Medea. There they prayed, worked in the fields and provided services to the predominantly Muslim community. Their Trappist monastery was one of the few remaining in a foreign land.

Modern European history Professor Darcie Fontaine, of the University of South Florida, wrote that the monks' presence in Tibhirine "in many ways represents the ideal of the Christian presence in Algeria after independence."

"The monks lived very humbly and they served the community directly," wrote Fontaine in "Decolonizing Christianity: Religion and the End of Empire in France and Algeria." "Brother Luc continued to see up to 50 patients a day in the monastery clinic until the day he was kidnapped."

As the civil war raged in the mid-1990s, Algeria became an increasingly hostile ground for religious minorities and foreigners, who were frequently targeted by Islamic extremists.

In May 1994, a Catholic priest and nun were killed in a library in Algiers. Later that year, four Catholic priests were killed in a presbytery in Tizi Ouzou, about 100km south-east of Algiers. The Armed Islamic Group of Algeria (GIA), an Islamist



Due homage. A monk looks at seven statues made by artist Anne Deltour of the Tibhirine monks killed in Algeria more than 20 years ago in the garden of the Archdiocese in Lyon.

(AFP)

insurgency that was battling the Algerian government, took responsibility for the attacks, as well as others against foreign workers and clergy.

Despite the reports, as well as calls from the Algerian government for the monks to depart, they unanimously decided to stay.

"The monks of Tibhirine were extremely sensitive to the responsibility on their shoulders," wrote Fontaine in "Decolonizing Christianity." "... If they left... it would look as though Christianity deserted Algeria in its time of need... In addition... they knew that the military would take over the monastery and the villagers would be swept into the violence of war."

On March 27, 1996, the GIA broke

into the monastery and kidnapped seven of the nine monks. Their heads were discovered two months later but their bodies were never found.

The GIA claimed responsibility for the men's death but recent reports cast doubt on that version of events, with some accusing the Algerian government of being behind their killings.

French Judge Marc Trevidic reopened an investigation into their case in 2010 but it has faced delays due to a lack of cooperation from authorities.

Regardless of the events surrounding their death, the monks represent a Christian tradition that has a long and complicated history in Algeria.

Christianity was introduced to North Africa by the Romans in the first and second centuries and it quickly spread across the region. By the end of the fifth century, some historians estimate, parts of Algeria were likely fully Christian. Saint Augustine of Hippo, a leading Christian writer and theologian whose work "City of God" is a seminal text of Catholic theology, was a Berber from Algeria.

After the Islamic conquest in the seventh century, Christianity was all but eradicated in Algeria until the era of French colonisation when it was reintroduced through conquest.

But as the martyrs' lives attest, Christian communities left complicated legacies, many of which involved deep sacrifice and service to those around them. Many missionaries, clergy and monastics contributed generously to charitable causes, while opening schools, medical centres and workshops during Algeria's post-independence era.

As for the monks of Tibhirine, "Each one of them has been a genuine witness of the love of Christ, of dialogue, of openness to others, of friendship and loyalty to the Algerian people," said Georgeon.

The date of their beatification has yet to be announced but bishops said they hope it will take place in Algeria, said Georgeon, where the monks' legacy remains a source of inspiration and unity.

Stephen Quillen is an Arab Weekly correspondent in Tunis.