



BASRA: Iraqi newlyweds ride a boat near the Shaheed (martyr) Mohammed Baqir Al-Sadr Bridge on Monday. — AFP

River cruise weddings return to Iraq's Basra

BASRA: To the sound of drums and trumpets, an Iraqi groom and his bride this week stepped hand-in-hand onto a speedboat on the river in Basra to celebrate. Their wedding on Monday was the first such celebration to be held on the Shatt Al-Arab waterway running through the southern city since the 1980s. Aboard the small speed boat decorated with tinsel and balloons, laborer Hussein Ali Jabbar and his wife donned captain hats and posed for the camera.

Their guests danced away their one-hour ride on four larger vessels to tunes belted out by the brass band and blaring from the television. It was the first wedding on the river since the devastating 1980-1988 war between Iraq and Iran. Many continued to avoid the river afterwards, deeming it unsafe amid tensions with neighboring Iran and Kuwait, and fearing insurgent attacks after the US-led invasion of 2003.

"Everybody in town remembers the river weddings in the past," said Talib Al-Bdairy, spokesman for the state company behind the relaunch. "We want to bring back to life these wonderful memories on these modern safe boats," he said. The General Company of Maritime Transports did not charge for Monday's wedding cruise as the bride's father was killed this year in the northern



city of Mosul fighting the Islamic State group. But the going rate for future celebrations will be 2,000 Iraqi dinars (or \$1.5) per head.

It was the groom's idea to have a wedding on the water. "A wedding on the river makes everyone happy... It's much better than being stuck in traffic in the city," he said. His uncle, Karim Mohammed, offered another reason to celebrate on the Shatt Al-Arab. It "avoids the gunshots in the air that are often how we celebrate a happy event here but often end in tragedy," he said. — AFP

Saudis intercept Houthi missile...

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There are no reported casualties at this time," the government-run Center for International Communication wrote on its Twitter account.

A Kuwaiti foreign ministry source said Kuwait strongly condemns the Houthis' firing of the ballistic missile, which aimed at terrorizing civilians. This cowardly act shows anew how the Houthis are defying the will of the international community, violating UN resolutions and undermining the security and stability of the region, added the source. Kuwait, said the source, stands fully behind Saudi Arabia and supports all measures aimed at preserving security and stability. Kuwait, he added, is committed to supporting the legitimate leadership in Yemen.

Saudi palaces, military and oil facilities are within range of such missiles fired from Yemen, the Houthi said, according to a statement distributed via their television channel Al-Masirah. "In exchange for a thousand days of bombardment with internationally banned weapons, there has been a thousand days of steadfastness in which our people have demonstrated that their resolve will not be broken," rebel chief Abdulmalik Al-Houthi said in a speech yesterday. "Today our people reached the heart of Riyadh - the government palace - with a ballistic missile."

In Washington, a Pentagon spokesman said the United States was aware of the reported missile attack. "We are working closely with our Saudi partners ... to ensure that our Saudi partners have the resources they need to defend their territory against indiscriminate attacks against civilian-inhabited areas," he said.

Saudi Arabia and Iran are locked in struggle for influence in the Middle East. Riyadh is especially sensi-

tive to the civil war in its backyard Yemen, a conflict that has killed more than 10,000 people and displaced over two million. The United Arab Emirates, a close ally of Saudi Arabia and part of the coalition, said the latest Houthi attack underscored the need to keep the military campaign in Yemen going. "With every Iranian missile fired by the Houthi militia against civilian targets, the necessity of (Operation) Decisive Storm becomes clear," United Arab Emirates minister of state for foreign affairs, Anwar Gargash, wrote on his Twitter account.

A Saudi-backed coalition has launched thousands of air strikes against the Houthis and allied forces since intervening in the war on behalf of the government nominally based in Aden. The Houthis for their part have fired several missiles at the kingdom, mostly in the south since 2015, but not caused any serious damage, in their bid to pressure Saudi Arabia, a strategic US ally and the world's biggest oil exporter. Yesterday's attack took place hours before Saudi Arabia was due to announce the country's annual budget in a news conference expected to be attended by senior ministers.

Residents in the Saudi capital reported hearing a loud explosion and seeing smoke after yesterday's attack. "I was in my office when I heard a big bang," said Tomas Kompikan, one of the many foreign workers in Riyadh. "Suddenly after around 30 to 45 seconds I heard a next sound... and we saw a white smoke." Houthi missiles are often modified by reducing payloads and rarely hit their targets. Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince, Mohammed bin Salman, has described what Riyadh says is Iran's supply of rockets to the Houthis as "direct military aggression" that could be an act of war.

Iran, Saudi Arabia's regional foe, has denied supplying such weaponry to the Houthis who have taken over the Yemeni capital Sanaa and other parts of the country during its civil war. Saudi Arabia said on Nov 4 it had intercepted a ballistic missile over Riyadh's King Khalid Airport, an attack that stirred regional tensions and led the coalition to close Yemeni ports. On Nov 30 Saudi Arabia shot down another missile near the southwestern city of Khamis Mushait. — Agencies

Opposition MPs walk out...

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Several MPs opposed to the committee said there was no need for it as it did not do anything in the past.

The Assembly then approved two motions to debate the US decision to transfer its embassy in Israel to Jerusalem and national reconciliation. The first topic was debated, while the other was deferred until today. Foreign Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Sabah briefed the Assembly about the measures Kuwait has taken against the US decision and the contacts made by the government. MPs who spoke praised HH the Amir and the government for the measures taken to support Jerusalem as the capital of a future Palestinian state.



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