

Visits to Berlin museum restore pride in Syrians

The Daily Star (Lebanon) 1 Apr 2016 By Joseph Nasr



Guide Zoya Masoud, center, tells a group of refugees about the facade of Mshatta, from a caliph's palace, in Berlin.

BERLIN: Arabic-language guide Razan Nassreddine says Syrian refugees visiting Berlin's Museum of Islamic Art often ask her how and when the artifacts clearly marked as stemming from their war-torn country ended up in the German capital.

Others jokingly wonder if the shrapnel holes on centuries-old palatial facades and gates brought from the Middle East were caused by fighting between Syrian President Bashar Assad and the rebels seeking to unseat him.

More than 1,600 refugees from Syria and Iraq have visited the museum since November, when it launched the Multaka (or "meeting point" in Arabic) project, which trains refugees from those countries to become Arabic tour guides for their peers.

One visitor, 35-year-old Zafer ElSheikha, says he came to Germany with his wife six months ago from a town near Damascus. "What we

see here is evidence that our region, the Levant, was always a place where different religions and cultures coexisted,” he said, standing outside The Aleppo Room, where 400-year-old ornamental paintings depict Jewish, Christian and Islamic themes. “When I look at what is happening there now, it makes me sad.”

At the Mshatta Facade, which was excavated in Jordan in the 19th century and presented as a gift from the Ottoman sultan to the German emperor in 1903, Nassreddine tells a group of Syrian refugees – all students in the same German language class – that the shrapnel holes were caused by a bomb during World War II.

“It makes me happy that Syrians from all walks of life, old, young, religious, secular, opposition, regime supporters come here,”

Nassreddine said, “happy to see something from Syria.”

Herself Syrian, Nassreddine came to Germany in 2012 from Spain, where she had been a student.

Museum director Stefan Weber, a long-time resident of Damascus and Beirut before returning to Berlin – and a fluent Arabic speaker – said refugees often said after visits that the impressive collection makes them “hold our heads high.”

“One of the goals of the project is to tell people who lost their homes that there is still something to be proud of,” he said. “This has worked out well.”