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Baalbek's ruins saved from trash by one man's efforts

He doesn't get paid, praised, or assisted, but Abdul Nabi al-Afi refuses to leave the Roman quarry site just a few kilometers away from the Baalbek Temple ruins.

"I know that if I leave," he says, "it would just go back to the way it was. I will not let that happen."

The 42-year-old retired army sergeant decided to take matters into his own hands eight years ago when he began cleaning up the Roman quarry, which had become the town's waste dump site.

"The whole area was covered with all sorts of garbage," he said. "From household trash bags to animal carcasses."

The quarry boasts a 20-meter-long, 45-meter-wide, and 1,000-ton monolith which the Romans had destined to be the podium of the Jupiter Temple. But the Temple was never completed and the monolith remained in the quarry.

During the war, the site was neglected and villagers turned it into a dump site.

Meanwhile, Afi had been watching the accumulation of trash with worry. His house was only a few kilometers away and "every time I took my leave from the army and came home, I had to pass by the quarry and every time there was even more rubbish," he said.

By 1991, he decided to take the initiative to begin a clean-up, but first he wanted to get government approval.

"I didn't just want to clean up without some kind of official permit," he said. "Just in case somebody stopped me."

It was easier said than done. It took Afi two years to overcome the many hurdles and bureaucratic nightmares to finally receive a government signature allowing him to clean

he rented a bulldozer and began the clean-up operation.

"But I was still in the army then and couldn't stay in Baalbek for long," he said. "Every time I came back on leave I worked on the quarry."

A year later, Afi retired and used much of his army compensation to beautify the area.

Amused villagers, however, would continuously stop and tease him.

'They told me that I'm a fool, it's only a rock and I'm losing my mind'

"They kept telling me that I'm a fool," recalled Afi. "They said that it's only a rock and that I'm losing my mind."

But Afi persisted. Soon trees were sprouting all around the site, flower beds decorated the surroundings, and a newly constructed staircase led down to the monolith.

But villagers continued to throw their garbage bags at the site. Exasperated, Afi would trace each bag back to its owners and confront them.

"I opened the bags and always found something with a child's name or doctor's pre-

scription or something," he said. "I would then go to their homes and ask them not to throw their trash in the quarry."

Still, villagers persisted in using the site as their waste dump. Finally, Afi devised a plan: he requested all residents to pay LL5,000 per month for a garbage service – making up the difference himself for those who refused.

"I found a man with a pickup who would go around and collect the trash from their homes," he said. "We did this until the municipality took over two or three years later."

Meanwhile, the rehabilitated site was attracting tourists – up to 150 per day in the summer.

Needing to procure funds for the upkeep of the site and also to support his own family, Afi took the opportunity and opened a small tourist shop just near the quarry. In it, he placed all kinds of memorabilia. Visitors are requested to sign his "Golden Guest Book" and everyone – regardless of whether they pur-

chase any of his souvenirs – is offered what he calls "welcome coffee."

In the summer of 1999, representatives from the French Cultural Center came to visit the site. Afi jumped on the chance and suggested the quarry as a possible site to hold a concert. In July, 2,000 people showed up to listen to a concert

by La Fontaine, a French musical folklore group.

Afi cleans the site every morning and evening. Many nights he also sleeps in the shop.

"I don't dare leave it," he said. "If I turn my back

'Leaving me here without help isn't right. This is our heritage'

on it, it will again be turned into a trash dump."

As of yet, Afi gets no aid or governmental assistance in caring for the Roman quarry.

"I don't know how long I can keep on caring for it," he said. "Such a site shouldn't be neglected. But leaving me here without any kind of assistance isn't right. This is our heritage."

Reem Haddad

