

Gaza Christians face canceled Christmas amid pandemic

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GAZA CITY: Nasr Al-Jaldah and his fellow Christians living in Gaza face a canceled Christmas mass as the coronavirus pandemic hits the small enclave's churches.

The celebration usually offers a brief respite for Christian Palestinians living under an Israeli blockade that stops them traveling outside the territory to see family or from taking part in celebrations in Bethlehem in the occupied West bank.

Coronavirus cases have rapidly increased in recent weeks in Gaza, with its Hamas rulers imposing tough restrictions. As Israel trumpets the start of an inoculation campaign, Palestinian leaders in both Gaza and the West Bank have been left scrambling to secure vaccines.

The church in Gaza will broadcast the mass directly online for people confined to their homes after the authorities stopped all gatherings, but it is little consolation for the small Christian community

"After years of conquering the Israeli blockade, coronavirus comes to increase our worries and kill our joy of the holiday," Al-Jaldah told Arab News. "The atmosphere does not help with joy and celebration," he added.

He said that while he had decorated and put lights on his Christmas tree in his home in the Zeitoun neighborhood of Gaza City, he did not feel the usual joys of the holiday season.

The last count by the YMCA in 2014 found fewer than 1,100 Christians living in the Gaza Strip, among a population of 2 million. Their numbers have steadily declined from the 6,000 recorded in the 1960s, before Israel occupied the territory.

Since Israel imposed a siege on Gaza after it was taken over by Hamas in 2007, Christians there have suffered a series of military and humanitarian crises along with the Muslim majority.

"A Christian is a Palestinian citizen, and he receives what is attained by everyone, and we are all in one boat," Al-Jaldah said. "We share the joys and sorrows. The siege, wars and even coronavirus do not differentiate between a Muslim and a Christian."

Israel's siege includes severe restrictions on the movement of Palestinians out of the Gaza Strip.

For nine years, Israel has prevented Al-Jaldah, 61, from obtaining a permit to travel.

He has been banned from celebrating Christmas in Bethlehem, but he was dealt an even more bitter blow five years ago when he was declined permission to see his daughter and grandson at their home in Ramallah in the West Bank. He has still not seen his grandson since he was born.

"Every year Israel deliberately kills our joy on Christmas, and coronavirus came to eliminate any appearances and rituals for the feast," he said.

"What is the value of the feast other than the mass and celebrations inside the church and the lighting of the tree, without the exchange of congratulations and visits with family and friends," Al-Jaldah, said, his voice tinged with sadness.

During the past year, Israel granted his wife and two of his children permits to pass through the Erez checkpoint, but prevented him and his third son from doing the same. "How can a separated family rejoice?" He said.

"My daughter lives in Ramallah alongside my sister, and my brother lives in Jaffa, and we are in Gaza, and we cannot see each other for many years, as if we live in planets isolated from each other."

George Anton, an activist in the Church of the Latin Monastery in Gaza, said the festive celebrations for this year would be limited to the clergy residing in the church.

The church has urged everyone to celebrate at home to avoid a coronavirus outbreak, Anton said.

"We regret that the situation has reached this state due to the outbreak of the pandemic, which kidnapped the souls of the innocent and deprived us of celebrating the Lord Christ and practicing our religious rituals in the places where the feet of Christ came.

"Christians are an integral part of the Palestinian people. They suffer their suffering and rejoice in their joy, and the Christian has no suffering of its own.

"I am a Palestinian citizen residing in Gaza and carry its identity and concerns. I live under war and suffer from the siege as everyone else does, and Israel practices all forms of oppression against us as Palestinians without discrimination in religion, gender or color.

"Israel violates the rights of Gaza Christians to practice their religious rights and access the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, as well as violating the right of Muslim brothers to reach the Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem, in a flagrant violation of international covenants that guarantees for all the freedom of belief, embrace of religion and practice of rituals," said Anton.





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Christmas opens new market for small Gaza sewing business

[Hariri pours cold water on Lebanon govt hopes](#)

Author:

Wed, 2020-12-23 22:40

BEIRUT: Hopes that Lebanon would have a new government before the end of the year have been dashed with Prime Minister-designate Saad Hariri warning of "clear complications hindering the birth of the new leadership."

Speaking on Wednesday after his 14th meeting with President Michel Aoun, Hariri said that despite attempts to halt Lebanon's collapse, "the existing political problems are clear."

He added: "We must be humble and think about the country's interests. A government must be formed after the new year."

The caretaker prime minister addressed the Lebanese people, saying: "Do not let anyone tell you that we cannot stop the current collapse, but President Aoun and I need a government of specialists and experts who know what they are doing, without being politicized."

He added: "We want people who tell us 'no' when we are wrong. We want people who can actually benefit the country, so that we can carry out the reforms we want."

Hariri said that trust between Lebanon's political parties needed to be rebuilt, but warned "there is no time left – the country is rapidly collapsing."

After a previous meeting with Aoun, Hariri was hopeful of forming a government before Christmas, saying "there is positivity and great openness."

However, leaks in the lead-up to Wednesday's meeting showed there was still a dispute over the interior, justice and energy ministries, which the Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) insists on controlling as part of a political deal to break the government deadlock.

International pressure, especially from France, to form a government committed to reform has failed to end the stalemate.

Sources close to Hariri told Arab News that Aoun was "responsive" to the prime minister's suggestions, "but there are those who interfered and

overturned this response.”

Future bloc deputy Mohammed Al-Hajjar said: “It is Gebran Bassil (FPM president). He does not want to see Hariri heading a government of specialists.”

Former prime ministers met with Hariri before his Republican Palace visit and agreed to push on with the French initiative to form a government without links to the parties in power.

The political impasse raises fears over Lebanon’s growing poverty levels, with the number of poor likely to exceed half the population by 2021.

Lebanese people fear the start of the new year in light of talks about harsh measures needed to support basic materials subsidized by the state, including fuel, flour and medicine.

FPM deputy Alain Aoun said: “There has been no decision yet regarding the government. There are many unresolved issues. No team will waiver in favor of the other.”

Independent MP Jihad Al-Samad said: “There are 53 laws relating to the reform process, workflow regulations, and performance of ministries and official departments. These are locked in officials’ drawers and are not being applied. How can reform take place without applying the existing laws and provisions?”

Ghazi Wazni, the caretaker finance minister, said on Wednesday that banking secrecy will be lifted for a year and consultants Alvarez & Marsal asked to resume its financial audit of the central bank, ministries and public institutions.

The firm withdrew from the investigation on Nov. 20, saying it “did not obtain sufficient information to initiate the audit.”

At the time the central bank invoked secrecy laws on cash, credit and banking to avoid providing the required information.



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[Erdogan's oil ship in eastern Med until June](#)

Author:

Wed, 2020-12-23 22:13

ANKARA: Recep Tayyip Erdogan has authorized controversial oil exploration by a survey vessel in the eastern Mediterranean for a further six months, until June next year.

The Turkish president has also obtained parliamentary approval for troop deployment in Libya for another 18 months, after his ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) and its allies outvoted the opposition.

The survey vessel Oruc Reis will now continue searching for oil and gas in territorial waters claimed by Greece and Cyprus, in a move that will infuriate the EU.

Last month, EU leaders committed to limited sanctions on Turkish individuals but suspended more serious steps until March, while Greece has demanded an

arms embargo on Turkey.

In Libya, after a pact on military cooperation between Ankara and Tripoli in 2019, Turkey sent its troops there on a year-long mandate in January. Turkey recently appointed Kenan Yilmaz, a bureaucrat who was involved in the Libyan talks from the outset, as the new ambassador to Tripoli.

“Turkey extended its deployment in Libya because the Turkish government knows there is rapidly increasing cooperation between Greece and regional allies such as Egypt and Israel, as well as the UAE and France,” said Evangelos D. Kokkinos, a geopolitical expert in Athens.

He told Arab News that Erdogan was trying to raise tensions abroad to maintain his influence inside Turkey. However, a full-scale war would come at a political cost to Erdogan, meaning a military standoff between Greece and Turkey was likely.

“Greece will keep on pressuring the EU for an arms embargo and sanctions against Turkey, and not just against Turkish individuals. A large force of the Greek Navy has been deployed across Greek borders and will defend Greek sovereignty, no matter the cost,” he said.

Greek defense agreements with the UAE and Egypt would deter military escalation in the region, he said.

Seth J. Frantzman, executive director of the Middle East Center for Reporting and Analysis, told Arab News that Ankara’s recent decisions about extension of deployment terms were unsurprising.

“Turkey intends to stay in Libya for the long term,” he said. “The goal of Ankara is to create facts on the ground in Libya, Syria, Somalia, Qatar, and other states to justify its involvement and keep up pressure on countries it views as enemies, such as Egypt.”

Frantzman said such a move gave Ankara leverage over the Mediterranean and the chance to continue to threaten to blackmail countries such as Greece, Egypt, and Israel every time it needed a distraction or some new chest-beating populist cause to claim it was challenging other countries.



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[Top US officials discuss 'range of options' to protect Americans in Iraq from Iran attacks](#)

Wed, 2020-12-23 22:13

WASHINGTON: Top US national security officials agreed on Wednesday on a proposed range of options to present to President Donald Trump aimed at deterring any attack on US military or diplomatic personnel in Iraq, a senior administration official told Reuters.

The meeting was spurred by an attack on Dec. 20. At least eight rockets landed in Baghdad's heavily fortified Green Zone in an attack targeting the US Embassy, causing some minor damage, the Iraqi military and the embassy said on Sunday.

The official said the so-called principals committee group of officials, including acting Defense Secretary Chris Miller, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and national security adviser Robert O'Brien, discussed the situation at the White House.

They agreed on a "range of options" that will be presented soon to Trump, the official said. The official would not describe the content of the options or say whether they included military options.

"Each one is designed to be non-escalatory and to deter further attack," the official said.

The Iraqi military blamed the Dec. 20 attack on an "outlaw group."

But US officials blame Iran-backed militia for regular rocket attacks on US facilities in Iraq, including near the embassy in Baghdad. No known Iran-backed groups have claimed responsibility.

The senior administration official said the aim of the White House meeting was "to develop the right set of options that we could present to the president to make sure that we deter the Iranians and Shia militias in Iraq from conducting attacks on our personnel."

An array of militia groups announced in October that they had suspended rocket attacks on US forces on condition that Iraq's government present a timetable for the withdrawal of American troops.

But a rocket strike on the US Embassy on Nov. 18 was a clear sign that Iranian-backed militias had decided to resume attacks on US bases, according to Iraqi security officials.

Washington, which is slowly reducing its 5,000 troops in Iraq, threatened to shut its embassy unless the Iraqi government reins in Iran-aligned militias.



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[Egypt's president sends message of support to Libyan leaders](#)

Author:

Wed, 2020-12-23 21:51

CAIRO: Egyptian President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi has reiterated his rejection of foreign interference in Libya and support for efforts to find a comprehensive solution to the country's security, political, and economic crises.

His comments came in a message, delivered by the head of the Egyptian committee on Libyan affairs, to the leaders of south Libya meeting in Cairo to discuss ways of unifying the parliament, and forming an executive authority and constitutional path.

On Tuesday, members of a 75-strong delegation from southern Libya began talks with committee representatives just hours after arriving in the Egyptian capital for a three-day visit during which meetings will take place with sovereign bodies in Egypt and El-Sisi.

On the first day of discussions, the Libyan delegation stressed the need to strengthen Egypt's role and contributions toward restoring security, peace, and stability in all cities of Libya, while also preserving the country's unity and helping solve the difficult situation in the southern region.

The trip comes as part of Egypt's efforts to communicate with all Libyan parties, with the aim of converging views, uniting the Libyan ranks, deterring extremist militias and countering their attempts to control the government, and supporting international moves to reach a political settlement to the Libyan crisis.

During its visit, the Libyan delegation will present to the Egyptians its vision for resolving the crisis and overcoming obstacles to unification, especially in relation to the country's legislative body, achieving consensus on a mechanism for choosing the next executive authority, and agreeing appropriate constitutional arrangements to allow elections to take place.



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