

Palestinians torn as Israel seeks Gulf tourists in Jerusalem

Mon, 2020-11-16 01:19

JERUSALEM: With Israel courting Gulf tourists and establishing new air links to the major travel hubs of Dubai and Abu Dhabi, Palestinians in East Jerusalem could soon see a tourism boon after months in which the coronavirus transformed the Holy City into a ghost town.

The Palestinians hope to establish a state including East Jerusalem and the West Bank, territories occupied by Israel in the 1967 war. Arab support, seen as a key form of leverage in decades of on-again, off-again peace negotiations, now appears to be evaporating, leaving the Palestinians arguably weaker and more isolated than at any point in recent history.

In a striking development last week, a delegation of Israeli settlers visited the Emirates to discuss business opportunities. The Palestinians view settlements in the West Bank and East Jerusalem as the main obstacle to peace, and most of the international community considers them to be illegal. But the prospect of expanded religious tourism could end up benefiting Israelis and Palestinians alike, as wealthy Gulf tourists and Muslim pilgrims from further afield take advantage of new air links and improved relations to visit Al-Aqsa and other holy sites.

Israel considers all of Jerusalem to be its capital, and its Jerusalem municipality is organizing conferences and seminars to help tourism operators market the city to Gulf travelers.

Hassan-Nahoum, who recently visited the Emirates and is a co-founder of the UAE-Israel Business Council, said the municipality is reaching out to local Arab tour operators to ensure the benefits extend to all.

Abu-Dayyeh expects up to 28 flights a day arriving in Tel Aviv from Dubai and Abu Dhabi, global travel hubs for long-haul carriers Emirates and Etihad, making it easier for travelers from the Far East and South America to reach the Holy Land.

He's confident Palestinian operators will be able to compete. "We're on the ground here and we've been giving this service for many years, for hundreds of years," he said.

Other Palestinians appear to be more skeptical. More than a dozen Palestinian shop owners in Jerusalem's Old City, which is largely shut down because of the coronavirus, declined to comment on the push for Gulf tourism, saying it was too politically sensitive.

There are also concerns that an Israeli push to promote tourism to Al-Aqsa could heighten tensions.

The hilltop esplanade in the Old City, home to the Al-Aqsa Mosque and the iconic Dome of the Rock shrine, is the third holiest site in Islam. It is also the holiest site for Jews, who refer to it as the Temple Mount because it was the location of the two biblical temples in ancient times.

The site is a raw nerve in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and tensions have soared in recent years as religious and nationalist Jews have visited in ever-larger numbers, escorted by the Israeli police.

Officials from the Waqf, the Jordanian religious body that oversees the

mosque compound, declined to comment on Israel's efforts to promote Gulf tourism to the site, underscoring the political sensitivities. Ikrema Sabri, the imam who leads Friday prayers at Al-Aqsa, said any visits must be coordinated with the Waqf so that they do not advance any Israeli claim to sovereignty over the site. The Palestinians have long feared that Israel intends to take over the site or partition it. The Israeli government says it is committed to the status quo. "Any visitor from outside Palestine must coordinate with the Waqf," Sabri said. "But any visitor from the side of the occupation, we do not welcome or accept them."



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Israel strikes Hamas positions after rockets fired from Gaza
Israel resumes plans of east Jerusalem settlement, cuts access for Palestinians

[Saudi Arabia backs Egypt's digital future, crafts with \\$6.4m grant](#)

Mon, 2020-11-16 01:34

CAIRO: Saudi Arabia has given one of Egypt's largest banks a \$6.4 million grant to finance digital transformation and encourage local crafts programs

in the country.

Egypt's Minister of International Cooperation, Rania Al-Mashat, said on Saturday that the Saudi Grant Management Committee funding for the Bank of Alexandria will strengthen financing mechanisms to support small, medium and micro enterprises, and create job opportunities.

The Saudi Arabia Grant Committee has funded 2,180 projects so far in 27 governorates, creating about 12,000 jobs.

Al-Mashat praised the Kingdom's financial contribution to creating new jobs and achieving the goals of the National Development Agenda 2030.

In June, the committee agreed to fund three projects for the Agricultural Bank and two health care initiatives to the tune of \$19 million.

The three projects will finance small and micro enterprises in rural villages, targeting projects undertaken by women as well as handicraft activities.

Financing programs targeted by the Bank of Alexandria include digital transformation in the bank's 176 branches in 26 governorates, with a focus on the Cairo and Alexandria governorates.

The second program will finance handicraft micro-projects through the bank's branches in 26 governorates, focusing on the governorates of Delta, Upper Egypt, Cairo and Alexandria.

The bank's portfolio in the medium, small and micro enterprises sector is worth about \$600 million.

According to an official statement, it is expected that about 1,475 clients will benefit from the funds, with 30 percent going to women-owned companies and 45 percent to firms owned by people under 35.

The most prominent intermediaries are the National Bank of Egypt and the Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises Development Agency, in addition to the beneficiaries of the direct grant financing, including FJ Hermes Financial Leasing Company and Inmaa Leasing Company.



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Saudi stock market rises as financial shares gain strength
Post-Brexit trade talks enter crunch week

[Iran says opposition leader tested positive for coronavirus](#)

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Sun, 2020-11-15 19:37

TEHRAN: An Iranian opposition leader who ran in a disputed 2009 presidential election and his activist wife have tested positive for the coronavirus while under house arrest, the semi-official ILNA news agency reported Sunday. The report came as authorities announced a stricter two-week lockdown set to begin Saturday for some 100 cities and towns to prevent the spread of the coronavirus. Daily death tolls in Iran have spiked to their highest-ever levels in recent weeks.

Mir Hossein Mousavi lost the 2009 race to former hard-line President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Allegations of vote-rigging sparked huge protests, leading to a

wide-scale crackdown on dissent.

Mousavi and his wife Zahra Rahnavard have been under house arrest since 2011 in the capital, Tehran. They both endorsed President Hassan Rouhani, a relatively moderate cleric, ahead of his successful 2013 run for office. ILNA said a person close to the family confirmed the couple had contracted the virus, but that they were in good condition and receiving the necessary care. The report said the two were tested after they began feeling symptoms. During their house arrest, Mousavi and Rahnavard are reportedly allowed occasional visits from their family and certain close political friends. Rouhani, already under fire from hard-liners over Iran's unraveling nuclear deal, faces criticism from reformists for not freeing the pair as promised in his 2013 and 2017 campaigns. The terms of their house arrest have loosened in recent years.

Iran has been struggling to fight the worst coronavirus outbreak in the Middle East, with more than 762,000 confirmed cases. It has seen over 41,400 deaths and 558,800 recoveries.

Starting this Saturday – the first day of Iran's workweek – only medical centers, grocery stores and other "necessary production sectors and necessary services" would be allowed to remain open, Cabinet spokesman Ali Rabiei said. Governmental workplaces would operate with only one-third of their employees. The restrictions would be implemented in some 100 high-risk localities designated "red status" that have a high number of confirmed cases and deaths.

Rabiei said the lockdown could be extended beyond two weeks if it fails to get the virus under control.

The government had recently resisted shutting down the country in an attempt to salvage an economy cratered by unprecedented American sanctions, which effectively bar Iran from selling its oil internationally. The Trump administration reimposed sanctions in 2018 after withdrawing from Tehran's nuclear deal with world powers.

Earlier this week, authorities ordered a month-long nightly business curfew in Tehran and 30 other major cities and towns, asking nonessential shops to keep their workers home. Still, enforcement in the sprawling metropolis remains a challenge.



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US State Department threatens actions against Iran on protests anniversary

Will Turkish government deliver on its latest political promises?

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Sun, 2020-11-15 23:31

ANKARA: The Turkish public wakes up every day to statements from leading political figures in Ankara promising a “new wave of reform” that is expected to arrive soon.

However, considering the country’s past record on the rule of law, democracy, human rights and management of the economy, there is a big question mark over how these actors will deliver on their commitments.

Promises of reform have become a recurrent theme in President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and his government member’s speeches in recent days, especially after the sudden reshuffle of the country’s top economic team, which includes the resignation of Berat Albayrak, the finance minister and also Erdogan’s son-in-law.

Erdogan has chosen a conciliatory tone in his speeches directed at the financial market, speeches reminiscent of those he made in 2014 about reform of the Turkish economy.

On Nov. 11, Erdogan pledged the launch of market-friendly policies, and to contain inflation and put the country back on a path to growth.

The Turkish lira has lost about a third of its value this year and almost half of its value against the US dollar since May 2018 – making it among the worst performers in emerging markets – although it bounced back following the redesign of the country’s economic management team and the appointment of a new central bank governor and finance minister.

The newly appointed figures both committed to prioritizing price stability in a bid to please global markets, although a decision to raise interest rates to a significant level is expected to be announced on Nov. 19.

Berk Esen, a political scientist from Sabanci University in Istanbul, said that Albayrak’s resignation is a blow to Erdogan, whose regime has fallen on hard times due to the economic downturn and growing popular opposition against his government.

Esen does not attribute too much significance to Erdogan’s and his A team’s recent statements about the start of a new era of reforms in the economy and judiciary.

“Under the ruling Justice and Development Party’s (AKP) rule, Turkey has experienced several waves of ‘reform’ that led to centralization of power in the hands of the ruling party and its leader,” he told Arab News.

Justice is another area where the government suffers from internal bleeding from disenchanted party members and constituencies.

Along with declining foreign reserves, a weakening currency and growing isolation due to engagement in several battle scenes in its region, Turkey’s

credentials in the justice field are on a downward trend and making investors concerned about the country.

However, Justice Minister Abdulhamit Gul promised speedy trials and less pre-trial prison time in another speech on Nov. 12 in which he criticized lower courts going against decisions of the country's constitutional court as harmful to investor trust.

"The judiciary should only consider the conscious, law and constitution. Let justice be served, if it means the coming of doomsday," he said.

In the meantime, the Turkish Council of Judges and Prosecutors HSK will re-evaluate the high-profile case of Turkish philanthropist and businessman Osman Kavala, who has been behind bars since Nov. 1, 2017, as part of a legal saga illustrating the deterioration of the rule of law in Turkey.

The new trial of Kavala, accused of "attempting to undermine the constitutional order," is set to begin on Dec. 18.

Esen thinks that following Albayrak's resignation, Erdogan needs to strengthen the ranks of his regime and project an image of stability and calm.

"There were major defections from his party over the past year so he needs to find a way to stop the hemorrhaging of party cadres and votes to the newly established splinter parties and restore confidence in the Turkish economy," he said.

Erdogan's AKP is facing a big fall in popularity according to the latest polls, which reveal that public support dropped below 30 percent for the first time, while his nationalistic partner's vote share drops below the 10 percent election threshold. This decline is significant considering that the AKP secured 43 percent of the vote in the previous parliamentary elections in 2018.

Ali Babacan, former economy czar and the founder of a breakaway party DEVA, recently launched his campaign, "Don't be Afraid, Turkey," urging people to speak their minds and express themselves freely.

According to Esen, Joe Biden's election as US president will bring the issue of sanctions back to the table over Turkey's purchase of Russian air defenses when he takes office in January 2021.

"In response, Erdogan is probably seeking a restorationist course in foreign policy and the economy to stabilize his government. If these moves damage his agreement with his coalition partner and leader of the nationalistic MHP, Devlet Bahceli, the option of early elections may arise," he said.

Burak Bilgehan Ozpek, an Ankara-based political scientist, said that the latest reform promises from high-ranking governmental officials showed that the AKP had noticed its declining political power since local elections last year, where it lost the mayorship of several key cities to the opposition.

"So far, Albayrak and his team were encouraging a policy of criminalization of all dissident actors and they were implementing a political tutelage solely based on national security paradigms. However, this choice further polarized the country and fueled a one-man rule," he told Arab News.

According to Ozpek, the ruling government's only option to protect its voter base is by initiating reforms, ending judicial scandals, transforming its monopoly on the media and opening up space for people to freely express themselves.

"However, if Erdogan doesn't give any concession from his own power, these reforms cannot materialize, and all these promises would remain on paper,

leading to a freefall in their electoral base,” he said.



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US criticism of religious freedom in Turkey stirs debate
Cyprus condemns 'provocation' of Erdogan ghost town picnic

[Yemeni bank reopened after Houthis raid in Sanaa](#)

Author:

Sun, 2020-11-15 22:07

AL-MUKALLA: A major Yemeni bank on Sunday reopened branches across the country, days after shuttering its operations in the wake of a raid by the Houthis on the bank's headquarter in Sanaa.

Last week, Houthi intelligence operatives stormed the main office of Tadhamon Bank in Sanaa and ordered workers to leave the building before switching off

servers and cameras. The operatives seized control of the building for days and stopped operations, forcing the bank to close its branches across Yemen, giving employees leave and barring customers from making withdrawals and other transactions.

On Thursday, the bank issued a statement saying that it is in contact with the Houthi-controlled central bank for clarification about the raid, adding that the closure had disrupted the distribution of humanitarian assistance and affected customers' businesses.

The internationally-recognized-government of Yemen relocated the headquarters of the central bank to Aden in 2016 to deprive the Houthis of a huge source of finance and have sought to convince Sanaa-based banks and mobile operators to move their operations to Aden.

Established in 1996, Tadamon Bank has 37 branches and more than 700 employees, and is owned by Hayed Saeed Anam Group, a major Yemeni family-owned conglomerate.

The Houthi central bank said it ordered the raid after finding out that the bank is involved in illegal financial activities such as large speculation on hard currencies and smuggling money abroad.

Private banks and mobile firms have long complained about Houthi harassment and the installing of operatives in their companies to monitor their financial activities, accusing the rebels of fleecing them by imposing high taxes to fund their military activities.

"The Houthi observers have their own office inside all banks and exchange companies in their territories," an official at a private bank in Yemen told Arab News on Sunday.

Despite Houthi raids and charges, local observers and bank officials doubted that Tadamon Bank or any other major company would move to Aden, given the fact that most of their customers are from the densely populated areas in Houthi-controlled territories. The continuing tension between the government and the pro-independence Southern Transitional Council that led to sporadic clashes in southern provinces has also discouraged companies from moving.

Another reason for not relocating is the fear of Houthi reprisals. "The bank is afraid of meeting the fate of Sabafon," an employee at Tadamon Bank said, referring to a major Yemeni mobile operator that relocated its main offices and operations from Houthi-held Sanaa to Aden in September. The Houthis punished Sabafon by banning other companies and landlines from calling its subscribers and cutting off Internet services. The Houthis reopened the company in Sanaa after seizing control of the companies' servers and computers and issued new SIM cards.

Abdullah Al-Awadhi, a Sabafon spokesman, said on Saturday that the company did not regret moving operations to government-controlled Aden despite heavy losses. "The company relocated to Aden due to nationalist and morale motives," Al-Awadhi said, urging other mobile firms to leave Sanaa to avoid

Houthi extortion and harassment.

Economists have called for financial companies and whole banking sectors in Yemen to be kept neutral, warning against huge economic repercussions due to the war between the Aden-based central bank and the Houthi-controlled central bank in Sanaa and Houthi raids on banks.

Studies Economic Media Center (SEMC), a Yemeni think tank, criticized the Houthis for raiding banks and abducting their officials, warning that such steps would harm the reputation of the Yemeni banking sector and exacerbate the current dire humanitarian crisis.

“This is a dangerous step that will lead to disastrous repercussions at the local, regional and international levels and will affect the reputation of the Yemeni banking sector, local economy and people’s living,” the center said.



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US confirms its continued support to the Central Bank of Yemen Boat carrying 1,000 kg of drugs seized by Yemeni Coast Guard