

Muppets help conflict kids in new Arabic 'Sesame Street'

Author:

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DUBAI: A band of Muppets, both old favorites and new friends, will star in an Arabic retooling of "Sesame Street" with a regional twist.

In its Western iterations, the long-running franchise addresses issues including family breakdown. The new Middle East version instead seeks to help children, especially young Syrian refugees, cope with emotions.

New characters will join Cookie Monster (Kaa'ki), Grover (Gargur), Elmo and others in the new show in Arabic, called "Ahlan Simsim!" (Welcome Sesame).

"We always play and sing and try new things and have many adventures," new puppet Basma, a five-year-old purple girl with a twin twist hairstyle, told AFP on a publicity tour in Dubai.

"We have a lot of friends in the neighborhood, but Jad is my best friend," she added of her new co-star, a yellow boy with a tuft of canary-colored hair.

Basma, Jad and their gluttonous goat friend Ma'zooza, will take to the airwaves six days a week on Middle East satellite channel MBC 3 from Sunday Feb. 2.

The show is a partnership between the International Rescue Committee (IRC) and Sesame Workshop, which is responsible for the program worldwide.

The aim is to offer "nurturing care to children and caregivers affected by the Syrian conflict," according to a statement.

Since erupting in 2011, the war has displaced over 5.1 million Syrian children, with 2.5 million of them now living in regional host countries including Lebanon, Turkey and Jordan.

"Jad and I are not that similar. He is an artist and a painter. I love to sing and dance and he likes things in order. He thinks and plans while I get bored," said Basma.

"Sesame Street" mainstay Grover, meanwhile, sets out to interview children from across the Arab world, tackling myriad issues including jealousy and how to care for loved ones.

"We are all different from each other," Grover told AFP.

"Some of us like to sing and some of us like to dance and some like to exercise," added the gangly blue character, beloved of children and grownups since his 1970 "Sesame Street" debut.

"But I discovered we are all alike because we love each other."

SPEEDREAD

In its Western iterations, the long-running franchise addresses issues including family breakdown. The new Middle East version instead seeks to help children, especially young Syrian refugees, cope with emotions.

The new show is produced in Jordan and is the result of a two-year-long collaboration with numerous child development specialists.

“We have the emotional ‘ABCs’ and at the same time we present coping mechanisms to deal with these emotions. In every episode, we have a coping mechanism,” said executive producer Khaled Haddad.

He said Arab children had difficulty expressing their emotions.

“They don’t know what their emotion is, the child does not know he is terrified or angry or even jealous. Through our episodes we talk about these emotions and how to deal with them,” he added.

In one episode, Basma and Jad learn from big brother figure Hadi how to handle fear.

“You put your hand on your tummy then you take a breath through your nose – inhale and exhale. It calms you down,” Basma said, demonstrating the technique.

Jad’s character, who didn’t join the trip to Dubai, is portrayed as new to the community.

But “we don’t label him as a refugee in the show,” Haddad stressed. “He is new to the neighborhood, meets all the kids and becomes friends with them.” He noted that across the region, “you have kids going from one place to another.”

“Our show speaks to all the children of the Arab world,” he added. “This is not for a certain group.”

The first Arabic version of “Sesame Street,” known as “Iftah ya Simsim” (Open Sesame), aired in the region from 1979 until 1990 and enjoyed immense popularity.

Filming for a second season of the new series will begin in March.

“We hope children will become smarter, kinder and better at expressing their emotions after watching this show,” Haddad said.



Main category:

[Middle-East](#)

Tags:

[Sesame Street](#)

'Sesame Street' sues over new Melissa McCarthy puppet movie
A Muppet with autism to be welcomed soon on 'Sesame Street'

[Air strikes in northwest Syria kill 14 civilians](#)

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Omar Hajj Kadour with Aaref Watad in Harem | AFP

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Sun, 2020-02-02 16:54

SARMEEN: Air strikes by the Syrian regime and its Russian ally on Sunday killed 14 civilians in the last major opposition bastion of Idlib in the country's northwest, a war monitor said.

Moscow-backed government forces have upped their deadly bombardment of the militant-dominated region in recent weeks, chipping at its southern edge and causing tens of thousands to flee their homes.

Eight of those killed Sunday died in a regime barrel bomb attack in the town of Sarmeen, seven from the same family, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said.

Rescue workers pulled the bodies of a nine-year-old girl and a 13-year-old boy from the debris of a two-storey building, an AFP correspondent in the town said.

Their father, Abu Fida, stood by weeping.

"It's a terrible disaster," he said.

Abu Fida said he and his family had fled bombardment on Sarmeen on Thursday, with just the clothes on their back.

They returned on Saturday night to collect their belongings, deciding to spend a last night at home before leaving for good.

"I wanted to get my family out this morning but my wife told me to go to work. So I sent them a driver with a car to transport their things," but then aircraft hit the house, he told AFP.

His wife was inside the house when it was struck, but he survived with three other children.

In the rest of the emballed bastion Sunday, Russian and regime air strikes killed another six civilians, the Observatory said.

The Britain-based monitor says it relies on sources inside Syria, and determines who carries out air strikes according to flight patterns, as well as the aircraft and ammunition involved.

Nine years into the war, the Damascus regime is back in control of around 70 percent of the country, but the northwestern region of Idlib remains beyond its reach.

Syria's former Al-Qaeda affiliate controls the Idlib region, home to some three million people, but pro-Ankara rebel groups are also present.

In recent months, pro-Damascus forces have pressed northwards along the M5 highway that connects the capital Damascus to second city Aleppo in the north, crossing Idlib.

Last week the government forces retook from rebels the key town of Maaret al-Numan along the highway and are now just several kilometres from the abandoned town of Saraqeb.

Clashes are also raging in the bastion's eastern flank in Aleppo province, where state news agency SANA said four television journalists were wounded Sunday.

The journalists for a pro-Damascus channel and two Arabic-language Iranian outlets were targeted by "terrorists", SANA said, using its blanket term for jihadists and rebels.

A Turkish-Russian deal in 2018 saw Turkish troops deploy at observation posts around Idlib, but the agreement has failed to stem repeated regime military offensives.

On Sunday morning, an AFP correspondent and the Observatory said a Turkish military convoy of hundreds of vehicles entered northern Syria, deploying in Idlib and neighbouring Aleppo province.

Increased violence since early December has forced around 388,000 people to escape their homes in northwestern Syria, the United Nations says.

The Observatory says that more than 260 civilians have been killed.

Half of the Idlib region's residents have been displaced throughout the war, with many living in precarious shelters in the countryside along the Turkish border.

Ankara – which already hosts more than three million Syrian refugees on its soil – fears the latest fighting will lead to another mass influx.

On Sunday, hundreds of Syrian men, women and children marched towards the frontier demanding to be allowed through in a symbolic protest, an AFP correspondent said.

Near the Syrian border town of Harem, women lugged bags and men carried small children towards the razor-wired wall blocking the way to Turkey, he said.

"From Idlib to Berlin," read one banner, referring to the German capital many Syrians dream of reaching as they escape the war.

Among the demonstrators, Mohammed said he was looking to a better alternative for his family of nine after fleeing his hometown.

"Our goal is to go and live in a safe country – Turkey or Europe," he told AFP. "Here it's no longer safe."

Syria's civil war has killed more than 380,000 people since it started in 2011 with the brutal repression of anti-government protests.



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[Syria](#)

[airstrikes](#)

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Syrian opposition fighters launch attack near Aleppo

[Israel launches strikes on Gaza after rockets fired](#)

Author:

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Sun, 2020-02-02 09:04

JERUSALEM: Israel launched air strikes on the Gaza Strip early Sunday in retaliation for projectiles fired from the Palestinian enclave into southern

Israel, the army said.

Military jets and helicopters struck targets linked to Hamas, the Islamist group that controls Gaza, shortly after midnight, with no reported casualties.

Israel also suspended cement deliveries to the enclave and canceled 500 commercial entry permits into Israel "until further notice."

The action was taken "due to the continued rocket fire and launchings of incendiary balloons from the Gaza Strip into Israel," said a statement by Major General Kamil Abu Rukun, head of the Israeli military unit responsible for coordination in the Palestinian territories.

Since the announcement Tuesday by US President Donald Trump of his plan to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, rockets, shells and explosive balloons have been fired almost daily from the Gaza Strip into southern Israel, provoking Israeli retaliation.

Palestinians strongly reject the US plan, seen as heavily favoring Israel. The Trump initiative suggests that Israel would retain control of the contested city of Jerusalem as its "undivided capital" and gives the Jewish state the green light to annex settlements in the West Bank, which Israel occupied in 1967.

Rocket fire from Gaza on Saturday night forced Benny Gantz, a leading candidate in Israel's upcoming general election who was campaigning in southern Israel, to take refuge with his team in a shelter, local media reported.

Former military general Gantz heads the Blue and White party and is the chief rival of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in the March 2 election.

The Israeli army said its overnight strikes on Gaza targeted infrastructure belonging to Hamas, the Islamist group that has controlled the enclave since 2007.

"Fighter jets and attack helicopters struck a number of Hamas terror targets in the northern Gaza Strip," it said in a statement.

Among the targets was "underground infrastructure... used as a situation room," it added.

There were no casualties from the strikes, according to Hamas security sources.

Hamas and Israel have fought three wars since 2008 but over the past year the Islamists have gradually shaped an informal truce with Israel, under which the Jewish state has eased its crippling blockade of Gaza.



Main category:

[Middle-East](#)

[Iraqi protesters dig in heels despite new PM-designate](#)

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Sun, 2020-02-02 08:39

NAJAF, Iraq: Furious anti-government youth held their ground in protest squares across Iraq's south on Sunday, despite the previous evening's appointment of a prime minister who insists he is an independent. Mohammad Allawi announced his own nomination as premier on Saturday, which marked exactly four months since the anti-government movement erupted and two months since outgoing prime minister Adel Abdel Mahdi resigned under growing pressure.

Demonstrators had demanded a politically independent successor who had not served in government and for them, ex-communications minister Allawi did not make the cut.

"Mohammad Allawi is rejected, by order of the people!" read a new sign hung

in the holy city of Najaf on Sunday.

Young men with their faces wrapped in checkered scarves had spent the night torching car tires in anger at Allawi's nomination, an AFP reporter in the city said.

Main highways leading out of Najaf and streets within the city were still blocked off with smoldering tires on Sunday morning.

Kut, about 170 kilometers (100 miles) southeast of Baghdad, saw hundreds hit the streets chanting, "If it's been tried before, it shouldn't be tried again!"

In Diwaniyah, further south, protesters marched into government buildings to demand they close for the day, while students began sit-ins at schools and universities.

Protesters in Hillah blocked off all roads leading into the city and chanted, "Allawi is not the people's choice!"

Allawi, named as a consensus candidate after months of political paralysis, now has a month to pull together his cabinet, which will be subject to a vote by parliament.

In his first formal address, he pledged to form a representative government, hold early parliamentary elections and ensure justice for protest-related violence – all key demands of demonstrators.

More than 480 people have died and nearly 30,000 have been wounded since the rallies began on October 1, but few have been held accountable for the bloodshed.

The protests first demanded an end to corruption, better services and jobs for unemployed youth, but they quickly spiraled to calls for a total government overhaul.



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[Iraq](#)

Iraqi president appoints Mohammed Allawi as new PM
Iraqi cleric Al-Sistani condemns use of force, 11 protesters wounded

[British FM warns Israel against West Bank annexation](#)

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LONDON: Britain's foreign secretary warned Israel on Friday against annexing parts of the occupied West Bank.

"The United Kingdom is concerned by reports of possible moves toward annexation of parts of the West Bank by Israel," Dominic Raab said in a statement.

"Any such unilateral moves would be damaging to renewed efforts to re-start peace negotiations, and contrary to international law," he added.

"Any changes to the status quo cannot be taken forward without an agreement negotiated by the parties themselves."

The US has proposed that Israel annex the Jordan Valley and all of its West Bank settlements as part of the Middle East peace plan that was announced on Tuesday.

Britain has cautiously welcomed the plan. Prime Minister Boris Johnson said on Wednesday in Parliament: "No peace plan is perfect, but this has the merit of a two-state solution ... It would ensure that Jerusalem is both the capital of Israel and of the Palestinian people."

Meanwhile, Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas on Saturday said the Palestinian Authority has cut all ties with the US and Israel, including those relating to security, after rejecting the plan.

Speaking at an Arab League foreign ministers meeting in Cairo, he said:

"We've informed the Israeli side ... that there will be no relations at all with them and the United States, including security ties."

The final communique of the meeting said the ministers affirmed the Palestinian people's right to create a state based on the land captured and occupied by Israel in the 1967 Middle East war, with East Jerusalem as its capital.



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[Israel](#)

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[Dominic Raab](#)

OIC rights' body rejects Trump's Middle East peace plan
Israeli Arabs fear for their future under Trump peace plan