

Gaza florists facing extinction amid Israeli blockade

Author:

Fri, 2020-01-10 01:56

RAFAH: Flower cultivation in Gaza is on the verge of extinction, due to the six-year long Israeli blockade and ban on exports, which has prompted dozens of farmers to switch to more popular crops.

Ghazi Hijazi, 62, is the owner of the largest flower farm in Gaza, and is one of the few farmers still clinging to flower cultivation since he started in 1991.

Despite his adherence to this agriculture, Hijazi was forced to reduce the area of the land he cultivates from 40 dunums to 10. He faces many obstacles in order to sell his product in the local market, including reducing his workforce from 40 to three along with his four sons to manage costs.

“Because of the restrictions imposed by Israel on exports from Gaza, marketing is limited to the local, which is not comparable to what was achieved by exports to the Netherlands and the European market,” he told Arab News.

Hijazi recalled the years of prosperity and openness before the imposition of the Israeli blockade on the Gaza Strip following the victory of Hamas in the second legislative elections in early 2006.

Flowers of Gaza were second only to the Dutch in terms of quality, according to Hijazi, who said: “Israel has lost our flowers its international reputation.”

He stressed that Gaza’s flowers maintained a position on the international stock exchange in the Netherlands from 1998 to 2013. But after Israel tightened its restrictions imposed on commercial crossings, this status declined, and international traders turned to other farms in the region.

Ministry of Agriculture data indicates that Gaza farmers were exporting some 60 million flowers annually to Europe, but they only exported 5 million flowers in 2012, before exporting stopped completely after the third Israeli war on Gaza in 2014.

Hijazi explained that exports completely stopped for six years, but before that the farmers faced great obstacles, which affected their commitment to the delivery dates to the Stock Exchange in the Netherlands due to complex Israeli inspections.

According to the ministry, the area currently cultivated with flowers is estimated at only 22 dunums, the majority of which is owned by Hijazi and his siblings in Rafah, on the Palestinian-Egyptian border, in the south of Gaza. Cultivation of flowers began in Gaza in 1991.

The farmers received training courses and Dutch financial support, which led to the expansion of the farm area to 1,200 dunums by 1998.

Hijazi said that dozens of farmers, who have great experience, could not tolerate the bitter reality resulting from the conditions of the blockade, and had to bulldoze their farms, and switch to cultivating other crops.

Flowers planting requires extensive care and high costs.

Hijazi said that these costs cannot be compensated due to local sales being limited to only three seasons: Christmas, Valentine's Day, and Mother's Day, which are not enough to sustain a business.

Flowers are not a priority for 2 million Palestinians suffering from a suffocating siege and collapse in economic conditions. About 80 percent of them depend on humanitarian relief.

Hijazi compared domestic and foreign marketing with a rose, which is sold locally for about one shekel, while it can be exported abroad for 7 shekels.

He does not rule out the complete extinction of flower cultivation in Gaza if the current situation continues.

A spokesman for the Ministry of Agriculture in Gaza, Adham Al-Bassiouni, agreed with Hijazi that the cultivation of flowers is subject to a total collapse.

Bassiouni told Arab News that Gaza farmers were interested in cultivating 10 varieties of flowers, which were among the most important export crops, while some of them are struggling to continue.

Bassiouni said the main issues facing farmers are the blockade, marketing problems, a lack of export guarantee and the high costs of cultivation.



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Anxious Gazans fear for the future as daily life in Palestine worsens Hundreds join final Gaza-Israel border protests for three months

[Yemeni minister blasts Houthi attack on activist](#)

Author:

Fri, 2020-01-10 01:47

AL-MUKALLA: Human rights officials and activists in Yemen have condemned a Houthi attack on a female teacher who criticized the group for not paying her

salary for months, and their ban on recently printed banknotes.

Yemen's Minister of Human Rights Mohammed Asker told Arab News on Thursday that the Houthis had violated social and tribal norms that gave women protection from attacks.

"This is a condemned and immoral act that violated all Yemeni norms," Asker said, vowing to bring the perpetrators to justice.

Ebtessam Abu Donia had recently posted a video on social media, criticizing Houthi economic reforms, including the confiscation of recently printed banknotes and their failure to pay government salaries in areas under their control.

"The relocation of the central bank is not our business. You thieves should pay our salaries or go back to Saada," she said. "I want my salary. I want to eat."

Armed Houthis stormed her house in Sana'a, beat her, terrified her children and confiscated several possessions after the video went viral. After the attack, she posted on social media, saying a relative loyal to the militia attacked her, her children and a brother who rushed to protect her.

"I would like to thank those who reacted to the raid on my house. A (Houthi) gang led by Waleed Abu Donia attacked me and my children and snatched my mobiles and ipad," she said on a post on Facebook on Tuesday, adding that attack's leader was a Houthi military leader in the northern province of Hajja.

Abu Donia said the Houthis had pressured her to give them the passwords to her devices. The post has received hundreds of likes, with Yemeni writers and activists expressing their support and sympathy, blasting the group for the attack.

Public dissatisfaction with Houthi policies has increased over the last couple of months, after the rebels moved to confiscate banknotes issued by the central bank in Yemen. The move created a severe cash shortage, leading to a large drop in the Yemeni riyal against the US dollar.

Despite generating millions of dollars annually from banks, oil imports and telecom companies, the rebels have refused to pay government employees in areas under their control, blaming the internationally recognized government for moving the central bank to Aden.

Since taking power in late 2014, the Houthis have suppressed protests and jailed activists who criticize them, forcing hundreds to flee to government-controlled territories or leave the country.

Dozens of newspapers, TV channels, radio stations and news sites have been blocked, and only those media outlets that support the Houthi movement are allowed to work in Sana'a and other areas.

On Thursday, a local nongovernmental organization (NGO) documenting human

right violations in the region said thousands of Yemenis had been kidnapped and forcibly disappeared by the rebels in 2019.

Yemen Monitor for Freedom and Rights said in a statement it recorded 12,636 kidnappings and forcible disappearance cases committed by the Houthis in the past 12 months.



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Yemen government and southern council to withdraw forces from Aden
Yemeni general vows to seize Sanaa from Houthis

[Egypt's foreign minister says Turkey supports extremists in Libya](#)

Author:

Fri, 2020-01-10 01:19

CAIRO: Egyptian Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry claims Turkey continues to support extremists in Libya's long-running civil war.

Speaking at a press conference on Wednesday following a meeting in Cairo with

his counterparts from France, Italy, Greece, and Cyprus on the situation in the eastern Mediterranean and Libya, Shoukry said the meeting aimed to reach a political consensus for the crisis, that political solutions are the best possible resolution, and that armed conflicts cannot help solve the crisis.

Shoukry called for a cessation of hostilities in Libya, stressing that international law should be respected. He claimed that Turkey supports armed militias listed as sanctioned by the UN Security Council.

He noted that the recent agreements signed between Fayed Al-Serraj and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan were a violation of the Sokhairat Agreement and that Turkish support for extremists continues.

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Ankara is violating international law in light of the escalation of terrorism in Tripoli, and that Egypt has been affected by attempts by terrorists to smuggle arms through its border with Libya.

The Egyptian foreign minister said that Egypt had exerted “numerous efforts” to enable the people of Libya to reach a compromise. He stressed that Libya’s Presidential Council should represent all the Libyan regions, something it does not do currently.

The situation in Libya is only getting more complicated, Shoukry said, adding that Turkey’s interventions are aggravating the situation. He said Ankara is violating international law in light of the escalation of terrorism in Tripoli, and that Egypt has been affected by attempts by terrorists to smuggle arms through its border with Libya. He added that Egypt fully supports the Berlin conference and its attempts to achieve stability in Libya.

Speaking at the same press conference, French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian said that the Demarcation Agreement between Turkey and Libya’s Government of National Accord is a cause for concern as it violates international law and has a direct impact on the European Union.

On a more positive note, Le Drian added that the latest gas explorations in the Eastern Mediterranean have provided increased development opportunities in the Middle East.



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Saudi Arabia condemns Turkey's military interference in Libya
Libya's Haftar makes 'call to arms' over possible Turkey intervention

[Experts uncertain of strength of Libyan cease-fire](#)

Author:

Fri, 2020-01-10 01:15

ANKARA: Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and his Russian counterpart

Vladimir Putin have called for a cease-fire to end the civil conflict in Libya, following their talks in Istanbul on Wednesday.

The cease-fire is expected to come into effect at midnight on Sunday.

However, there is uncertainty about whether the cease-fire will lead to the withdrawal of Turkish troops and Syrian mercenaries from Libya.

After deploying its allied Syrian fighters, Turkey recently sent military advisers and special operations forces to the North African state to support the Government of National Accord (GNA) against the recent gains of military strongman Gen. Khalifa Haftar's Libyan National Army (LNA).

But Ankara accused Moscow of having thousands of Wagner Group mercenaries in Libya on Haftar's behalf. Russia denies the allegation.

Ariz Kader, an independent researcher on MENA conflicts, said that "the cease-fire will allow Turkey to save face through Russian diplomacy as the GNA seems to be militarily collapsing and sending trainers wasn't going to turn the tide."

According to Kader, the GNA is losing regardless of the support it is given.

"The advantage Haftar has is an available air force and thus air superiority. Because of Egyptian and UAE support, Turkish drones have not been able to reverse that advantage," he told Arab News.

"Haftar has been using his last few months to shore up alliances and use his control of oil fields as well as good relations with major tribes in Libya to win over groups from the GNA to the LNA."

The LNA announced on Monday that its forces had captured the coastal city of Sirte.

"With taking Sirte, Haftar has the advantage of both creating two front lines as to advance on Tripoli as well as a much larger advantage: Diverting the powerful Misratan brigades to defend Misrata," Kader said.

According to Kader, Misratan brigades are far more territorial and loyal to their city than they are to the GNA. If Misrata is seriously put under threat, then those brigades will likely disperse, leaving the GNA in a rush to protect Tripoli from Haftar's advance.

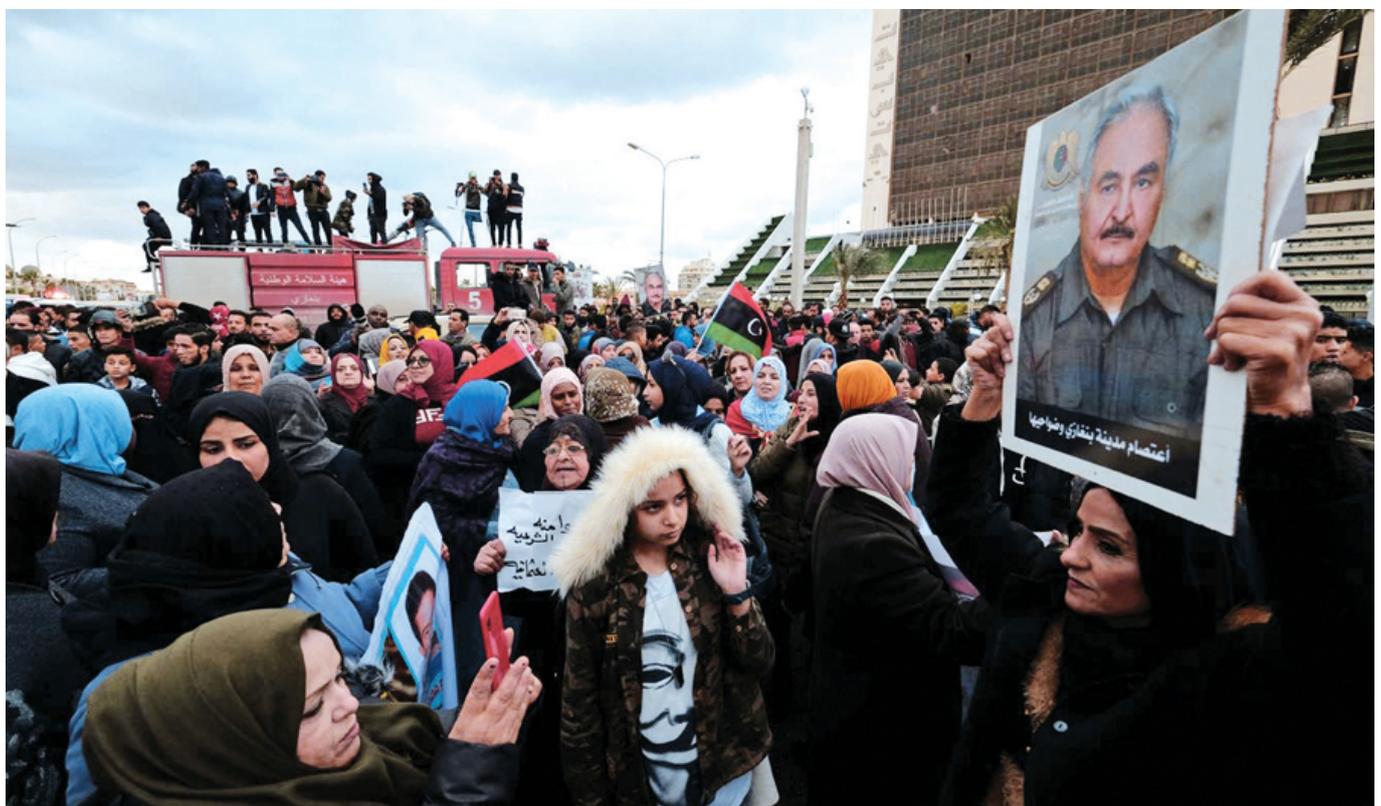
"The logic behind any cease-fire would be an Astana-like template. It is a measure for Turkey to save face and receive some diplomatic gain, however minute. But I severely doubt the momentum built up by regional forces like Egypt is going to allow such an easy scenario for Turkey at this point unless it offers larger concessions," he said.

Dario Cristiani, a fellow at the German Marshall Fund of the US, doubts that Erdogan will recall troops in Libya, adding that the cease-fire will be difficult to implement.

“What Erdogan and Putin said yesterday in Istanbul was more of a political message, especially as the EU countries were hosting Sarraj in Brussels and Haftar in Rome: ‘It’s us who matter in Libya, not others,’” Cristiani told Arab News.

According to Cristiani, Turkey realized it was becoming increasingly isolated within the emerging competition for the eastern Mediterranean. Ankara, he said, saw that Egypt was warming to Haftar because of the likelihood of him supporting Cairo’s view on maritime border delimitation.

“Erdogan is well aware that his position at home depends on his capacity of revitalizing the economy. A strong economy was the actual reason that better explains his political longevity. Turkey has significant business interests in Libya, in several sectors, and a takeover from the forces of Eastern Libya might put these interests at risk,” he added.



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Libya’s Haftar rejects Ankara, Moscow’s call for cease-fire35 Turkish soldiers sent to Libya so far, but won’t see combat: Erdogan

'Coordinated action' key to a water-secure Middle East

Thu, 2020-01-09 01:03

DUBAI: As governments and nongovernmental organizations draw up plans to address the world's major water challenges, experts say that in addition to sound and integrated resources management, what may hold the key to a positive outcome in each case is more attention and coordinated action.

For the countries of the Mediterranean and the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) regions, whose share of global freshwater resources is a meagre 3 percent for a population of more than 460 million, it would certainly not hurt if "more attention, coordinated action and better management" became something of an inter-governmental mantra.

Among the organizations striving to create and maintain momentum for coordinated action is the Global Water Partnership (GWP), a Stockholm-based "multi-stakeholder action network," with its ability to mobilize over 3,000 partner organizations and learn from new experiences.

In keeping with its mission of "advancing governance and management of water resources for sustainable and equitable development," the GWP recently unveiled its strategy for 2020-25, titled "Mobilizing for a water secure world."

Central to the strategy are the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), climate-resilient development and transboundary water cooperation, with particular emphasis on engagement with the private sector, youth participation in decision-making and gender-inclusivity.

"Recent forecasts point to water availability becoming more strenuous due to precipitation decrease, temperature rise and population growth," said Vangelis Constantianos, executive secretary of Global Water Partnership Mediterranean (GWP-Med).

"Due to climate change alone, (water) availability may decrease by two to 15 percent for a +2 degrees Celsius warming (scenario).

"This is among the largest (predicted) decreases in the world. Furthermore, extreme phenomena, like droughts and floods, would increase in the region."



Vangelis Constantianos, executive secretary, GWP-Med. (Supplied)

Irrigation, for instance, represents 50 to 90 percent of the total water used. It is estimated that, by the end of the century, a +2 degrees Celsius warming scenario will translate to a 4 percent increase in irrigation water demand, while a +5 degrees Celsius warming scenario will mean an 18 percent increase.

“If population growth and shift of consumption patterns are also considered, these scenarios may reach a scary +22 percent and +74 percent of water demand for irrigation,” Constantianos said.

“The situation becomes gloomier when seen through the integrated water-energy-food-ecosystems nexus lens, where every shift or pressure affecting each of these sectors has an impact on all the others.” Through GWP-Med, the GWP is an active contributor of policy and technical solutions to countries that are grappling with water-related challenges. It engages with all actors that have a stake in natural resources management.

The “Mobilizing for a water-secure world” strategy “describes where we focus and how we will deliver our contributions responding to demand, plus builds on our more than 20 years of experience,” Constantianos said.

“Of course, water scarcity is not new in the region. Solutions have been worked out over millennia. However, today’s challenges are bigger on natural conditions and far more complex in socioeconomic terms.”

The GWP’s new strategy reinforces and expands its long-term agenda, which includes supporting countries achieve the SDGs by facilitating the framing of water policies and investment plans, incorporating the different values of water in decision making and helping countries to assess their progress

towards set objectives.

The ultimate goal is to make water governance and water financing more effective and comprehensive while addressing the water-energy-food-ecosystem nexus.

“Water is a scarce source in the Middle East,” said Dr Osman Gulseven, associate professor at Skyline University College in Sharjah. “The climate is mostly arid desert. Some countries are on the border of the Mediterranean, but even they do not get much rain.

“In the oil-rich Gulf region, tap water comes from desalinated sea water. However, this is an unsustainable solution because it increases the salinity level of the sea, which in turn negatively affects life underwater.”

According to Gulseven, droughts are becoming frequent in the Levant countries, including Syria, Iraq, Egypt and Jordan, while parts of Saudi Arabia and Kuwait are experiencing unexpected floods.

“The increased frequency of natural disasters shows that there is a need for important climate-resilient development and transboundary water cooperation in the Middle East,” he said.

“Collaboration is important because, in many cases, the countries of the Middle East share scarce water resources.”

For the Gulf, the main freshwater sources are the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers. They have their origins in Turkey, pass through Syria and Iraq and debouch into the Gulf near the Basra shallows.

Another big river of the region, the Nile, has its origins deep in Africa and discharges into the Mediterranean Sea in Egypt.

“A collaborative approach to water management will resolve existing and potential conflicts between these nations in the Middle East,” Gulseven said.

Water challenges in the MENA region are too big and too critical for half measures, say experts who fear the environmental impact of water inadequacy could contribute to social and political instability.



“More than 60 percent of the MENA population is concentrated in places affected by high or very high surface- and ground-water stress, compared to a global average of about 35 percent,” Constantianos said.

"If left unchecked, economic losses related to water are estimated to increase to six to 14 percent of GDP by 2050, the highest in the world."

Among the potential consequences is high unemployment, particularly among youth, which can significantly increase the risk of violence.

"Social stresses, including high inequality in both opportunity and income, are also among causes of conflict, often triggering migration," Constantianos said, pointing out studies that suggest "more than a quarter of MENA youth are willing to migrate."

On the bright side, the GWP sees the pursuit of water security as an enabler of employment opportunities, which in turn could act as an incentive for people to stay in their home country.

Constantianos expects 50 million jobs to be created in the region over the next decade to absorb the labor supply and to tackle some of the root causes of migration.

"Water can become a valid contributor to meeting this target," he said, adding: "We look into the years ahead with excitement and optimism."

Transfer and application of "water technology and innovation," supported by political will, planning tools and investment, can create opportunities for new skills, new job fields and new markets."

Possible jobs include technical and managerial positions in industries related to sustainable agriculture, integrated urban water management, sustainable production and consumption and tourism.

"Technologies for efficient water supply, wastewater treatment and reuse, irrigation and desalination are among the fields with potential for giving rise to new markets and new skills," Constantianos said.

"Importantly, instead of being a destabilizer and conflict creator, water can be a key contributor for collaboration among countries across borders as well as among communities. It's time to stop blaming water scarcity, it has always been in our region, and it won't go. Today, we feel the urgency and we have the knowledge to act."



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Startup of the Week: Red Sea Farms in Saudi Arabia aims to provide viable solutions to water scarcity
How the Middle East can tackle the problem of water scarcity