

In Gaza, a somber Christmas after permits row

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GAZA: With a shining tree, tinsel and Santa miniatures, Hanadi Missak's apartment is all ready for Christmas, yet she still feels sad about spending the holiday at home.

The 48-year-old is one of hundreds of Christian Palestinians from the Gaza Strip who applied for Israeli permission to travel to Bethlehem in the occupied West Bank to celebrate the birth of Jesus.

Church leaders say the normally straightforward process has this year been incredibly difficult, with only around one in five applications granted. With time running out until the celebrations begin, Missak had given up on traveling.

"I was hoping to go to Bethlehem, but the circumstances did not allow it," Missak, who is deputy principal at a Christian school in Gaza, told AFP.

"There is the real celebration – the prayers, decorations in all the streets and the church," she said.

"The midnight mass is wonderful."

There are barely more than 1,000 Christians in all of Gaza, where two million people live crammed into a territory only 40 kilometers (25 miles) long and a few wide.

It is geographically separated from the West Bank – the Palestinian territory where Bethlehem is located – by Israel, and crossing between them requires hard-to-get Israeli permits.

A few hundred Gazan Christians have traditionally been granted permits to attend Christmas festivities in Bethlehem and Jerusalem each year.

This year, Israel initially didn't announce any permits, prompting criticism from church groups and media.

On Sunday, a statement from COGAT, the Israeli military body responsible for the permits, said some would be granted "in accordance with security assessments."

Gaza is ruled by the Islamist group Hamas, which Israel accuses of abusing the permit system to plan attacks against its citizens.

Wadie Abunassar, an adviser to and spokesman for church leaders in the Holy Land, told AFP Monday that out of 951 applications so far, 192 had been granted.

"We still hope there will be more to come. We were promised by many Israeli bodies... but Christmas begins tomorrow," he said.

"We are saying this is a basic human right that should be respected."

Missak said she had traveled to the West Bank multiple times before for Christmas and didn't know why the permit hadn't been granted this year.

COGAT did not respond to multiple requests for comment regarding the number of permits awarded or Missak's case.

AFP reached out to a number of Palestinians from Gaza who were able to leave the enclave, but none wished to speak out of fear they would jeopardize future chances of getting permits.

Nabil Al-Salfiti and his wife Fatten were among those lucky enough to receive permits, but ultimately decided not to travel when their son's application was denied.

They also cited financial constraints for their decision.

Israel maintains a crippling blockade of Gaza it says is necessary to isolate Hamas.

Israel and other critics of the Islamist group, which along with its allies has fought three wars with the Jewish state, accuse it of persecuting minorities.

Local authorities in Gaza used to hold a large celebration for Christmas, but it was stopped after Hamas seized control in 2007.

"People come offer us congratulations and we offer congratulations to them," Fatten said, but, he added, "There is not much joy – the real joy is in Bethlehem where Christ was born."

Despite not traveling this year, Missak is determined to enjoy Christmas. Hanging on the wall in her apartment is a stitched "Merry Christmas" sign, while the bannisters are covered in fake holly.

Missak said Muslim friends and neighbors would pass by the house to take part in the festivities.

"Despite all the misery in Gaza, I try to make joy and celebrate Christmas."



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Tunisian PM-designate says to form government of 'independents'

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Reuters

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Mon, 2019-12-23 17:48

TUNIS: Tunisia's prime minister-designate Habib Jemli will form a government made up of independents who do not represent political parties, he said at a news conference on Monday.

Jemli, who was nominated as prime minister by the moderate Islamist Ennahda party last month after it took most seats in October's parliamentary election, last week asked President Kais Saied for more time to form a government.

Talks to build a ruling coalition capable of winning a vote of confidence have proved difficult because the October election produced a fractured parliament in which no party held more than a quarter of seats.

Several of the main parties have either ruled out joining the government altogether or said they would not join if one or other major party was also involved, or if they did not secure several of the most important portfolios. Jemli told Reuters last month he was a week away from announcing the government, but then failed to do so.

Tunisia, which adopted democracy after its 2011 revolution that sparked the "Arab spring" uprisings, has faced economic difficulties over the past eight years that have at times threatened to undermine its political transition. The next government faces a difficult task in continuing economic reforms to bring its deficits and debt under tighter control, as demanded by foreign lenders, while raising growth and delivering better public services.



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[Car bomb kills 8 in Turkey-controlled Syria town: ministry](#)

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ISTANBUL: A car bomb killed eight civilians including a woman and a child in a Turkish-held border town in northern Syria on Monday, the defense ministry said.

The bomb-laden car exploded in the village of Suluk about 20 kilometers (12 miles) southeast of the Syrian border town of Tal Abyad, the ministry said. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights monitoring group said the attack left five dead.

There was no immediate claim of responsibility for the bombing.

But the Turkish defense ministry put the blame on the Kurdish forces who controlled the town before Turkish troops and their Syrian proxies seized it during a military offensive in October.

Turkish forces and their proxies – former Syrian rebels hired as a ground force by Ankara – launched the deadly offensive against Kurdish forces in Syria on October 9.

The Turkish push was aimed at seizing a strip of land roughly 30 kilometers deep along the 440-kilometer border between the two countries.

The offensive saw Ankara's fighters seize a strip of land roughly 120 kilometers long and 30 kilometers deep on the Syrian side of the border.

Ankara says it wants to establish a "safe zone" there in which to resettle some of the 3.6 million Syrian refugees it hosts on its soil.



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[Iran unveils development at Arak](#)

reactor in face of US pressure

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Mon, 2019-12-23 12:26

GENEVA: Iran said it would unveil a redevelopment of part of its Arak heavy water reactor on Monday – a move that will not breach international restrictions on its nuclear work but show it is developing the sector in the face of US pressure.

Tehran said it would switch on a secondary circuit at Arak, a plant built to produce the heavy water used as a moderator to slow down reactions in the core of nuclear reactors.

“Today we are, in truth, starting a noteworthy section of the reactor,” the head of the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran (AEOI), Ali Akbar Salehi, said in remarks broadcast live on state TV.

Iran has been reactivating parts of its nuclear program in protest at the United States’ withdrawal last year from an international deal meant to limit the Islamic Republic’s ability to develop a nuclear bomb.

Washington says its withdrawal and decision to reimpose sanctions lifted under the 2015 deal will force Iran to agree a broader pact.

Tehran – which has always said its nuclear work is for power generation, medical work and other peaceful purposes – says it will not negotiate until sanctions are lifted.

The secondary circuit would become operational as Iran worked on a modernization of the Arak plant, the semi-official Mehr news agency reported. “The Arak heavy water nuclear reactor ... consists of two circuits,” it said.

“The first circuit is tasked with removing heat from the heart of the reactor, and the secondary circuit is responsible for transferring the heat from the first circuit to cooling towers and finally to the outside environment,” Mehr added.

Iran agreed to shut down the reactor at Arak, – about 250 km southwest of Tehran – under the 2015 deal. The foreign powers that signed the pact said the plant could eventually have produced plutonium, which can also be used in atom bombs.

But Iran was allowed to produce a limited amount of heavy water and Tehran has been working on redesigning the reactor.

The control room of the reactor, named Khondab, will take about five to six months to build and the remaining systems would be completed in about one year, Salehi said at a press conference at Arak.

The reactor will be ready for initial tests in the Iranian calendar year which will begin in March 2021, Salehi said.



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Iranians set up new companies in Turkey to evade US sanctions

[Iraq protests resume as political paralysis deepens](#)

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Mon, 2019-12-23 12:23

DIWANIYAH: Thousands of protesters blocked roads and bridges in southern Iraq on Monday, condemning Iranian influence and political leaders who have missed

another deadline to agree on a new prime minister.

Anti-government demonstrators burned tires in major cities across the south, forcing the closure of schools and government buildings, AFP correspondents reported as political paralysis deepened in Baghdad.

Negotiations over a candidate to replace premier Adel Abdel Mahdi, who quit in November in the face of protests against corruption and unemployment, remained stalemated as a midnight Sunday deadline expired.

While a pro-Iran camp has tried to impose a candidate, Iraqi President Barham Saleh has reportedly put up resistance.

On the street, protesters are mobilizing anew after weeks of relative calm in a movement that has seen hundreds die in clashes with security forces.

Demonstrators announced civil disobedience campaigns in the southern cities of Diwaniyah, Nasiriyah, Hilla, Kut and Amara, where schools and public buildings were closed Monday.

"We are upping our actions because we oppose any candidate from the political class that has been robbing us since 2003," said Ali Al-Diwani, a young protester in Diwaniyah.

For Iraqis protesting since October 1, the system installed by the United States after it led a coalition to overthrow dictator Saddam Hussein in 2003 has become dominated by Iran and is beyond reform.

An economic revival promised for 16 years never came, protesters say, while more than half of all oil revenues were syphoned off by crooked politicians and their cronies.

While renewed protests risk a resumption of the violence that has already caused 460 deaths and 25,000 injuries since October, the government remains paralyzed.

Officials say Iran wants to install Qusay Al-Suhail, who served as higher education minister in the government of Abdel Mahdi.

A former key member of Shiite cleric Moqtada Sadr's movement, Suhail rejoined the State of Law Alliance of former premier Nuri Al-Maliki, who is close to Iran and an enemy of Sadr.

While pro-Iran factions and parliament speaker Mohammed Al-Halbusi are pushing for Suhail, a source in the presidency says Saleh has vetoed his appointment.

Demonstrators also categorically reject his candidacy and that of anyone from the wider political establishment.

"What we want is simple: a prime minister who is competent and independent, who has never been involved with the ruling parties since 2003," said Mohammed Rahman, a protesting engineer in Diwaniyah.

Protesters say an overhaul of the political system must start with electoral reform.

Since 2003, elections have used a complicated mix of proportional representation and list voting that favors major parties and the heads of lists.

Protesters say they want a first-past-the-post system to "guarantee a new generation could enter politics to clean up everything the ruling parties have corrupted," Rahman told AFP.

Parliament has recently discussed electoral reform and was scheduled to resume talks Monday afternoon.

Lawmakers were also likely to continue negotiations to appoint a premier, the deadline for which has already been pushed back twice by Saleh.



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Car bomb kills two soldiers in western Iraq
Thousands protest in Iraq as
deadline for new PM looms