

[A project helps Syrian entrepreneurs in four countries escape the shadow of war](#)

Fri, 2019-12-13 00:14

CAIRO: The Startup Roadshow was founded in 2018 to help Syrian refugees and expats in four different countries: Lebanon, Iraq, Turkey, and Jordan.

It was established when Spark, a Dutch organization supporting youth projects all over the world, reached out to Jusoor.

“We have been running our entrepreneurship program for five years, and we’ve been running training boot camps and competitions for Syrian startups,” said Dania Ismail, board member and director of Jusoor’s Entrepreneurship Program.

“We have also developed our own proprietary training curriculum, which is tailored to Syrian entrepreneurs, in the region and around the world.”

Spark sought out Jusoor to create a project to support Syrian entrepreneurs in those four countries, later bringing on Startups Without Borders to handle the competition’s outreach, marketing and PR.

“We came up with this idea where a team of trainers, facilitators, and mentors would move from one city to another because it’s hard for Syrian youth to travel around. So, we decided to go to them,” said Ismail, a Syrian expat all her life.

The competition goes through five cities: Beirut, Irbil, Amman, Gaziantep and Istanbul.

The boot camps last for five days in each city, and throughout the Roadshow, 100 entrepreneurs will undergo extensive training and one-on-one mentorship to develop their skills and insights into the business world.

“We have five modules that are taught on different days. Then, the pitches are developed, practiced and presented,” Ismail, 39, said.

“In each location, we pick the top two winners – in total, we’ll have top 10 winners from each city.”

The top 10 teams pitched their ideas live in front of a panel of judges, at the second edition of Demo Day 2019, which was held in Amman on Nov. 4.

The best three Syrian-led startups won cash prizes of \$15,000, \$10,000, and \$7,000, respectively.

They also had the opportunity to pitch their business ideas during Spark Ignite’s annual conference in Amsterdam. The competition aims to give young Syrians the hard-to-get chance to secure a foothold in the business world.

"We're trying to empower young Syrians who are interested in the entrepreneurial and tech space. We want to empower them with knowledge, skills and confidence to launch their ideas," Ismail said.

Despite the limited duration of the Roadshow and the lack of financial aid, the people behind the program still do their best to help all applicants.

"We try as much as possible to continue supporting them on their journeys with mentorship, advice and connections through our very large network of experts and entrepreneurs," she said.

Jusoor's efforts to help Syrian youth do not stop at the Roadshow, and the future holds much in store for this fruitful collaboration.

"We're expanding our entrepreneurship program, and our next project will be an accelerator program that will continue working with a lot of the promising teams that come out of the Startup Roadshow," Ismail said.

"We want to provide something that has a partial online component and a partial on-ground one, as well as an investment component where these companies receive funding as investment, not just grants and prizes," she said in relation to the second phase of the Entrepreneurship Program, which is launching in 2020.

Ismail said: "The Roadshow was created so that Syrian youth can have the chance to change their reality, becoming more than victims of an endless war.

"The competition gives them the tools to become active members of society, wherever they may be, contributing to the economies of those countries.

"Once you've built up this generation and given them those skills and expertise, they'll be the generation that comes back to rebuild the economy in Syria, once things are stable enough there.

"We hope that a lot of these young entrepreneurs the Startup Roadshow was able to inspire, train or help will be the foundation for the future of a small- to medium-sized economy inside Syria."

• This report is being published by Arab News as a partner of the Middle East Exchange, which was launched by the Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum Global Initiatives and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation to reflect the vision of the UAE prime minister and ruler of Dubai to explore the possibility of changing the status of the Arab region.



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Poll bodes well for future of women's empowerment in the Arab world
Podcasting presents exciting opportunity for Arab entrepreneurs

[Israel bars Gaza's Christians from visiting Bethlehem and Jerusalem at Christmas](#)

Author:

Reuters

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Thu, 2019-12-12 19:12

JERUSALEM/GAZA: Christians in the Gaza Strip will not be allowed to visit holy cities such as Bethlehem and Jerusalem to celebrate Christmas this year,

Israeli authorities said on Thursday.

Gazan Christians will be granted permits to travel abroad but none will be allowed to go to Israel and the occupied West Bank, home to many sites holy to Christians, a spokeswoman for Israel's military liaison to the Palestinians said.

Israel tightly restricts movements out of the Gaza Strip, territory controlled by Hamas.

The spokeswoman said that following "security orders," Gazans would be allowed to travel abroad via Israel's Allenby Bridge border crossing with Jordan but not to visit cities in Israel or the West Bank.

Gaza has only around 1,000 Christians – most of them Greek Orthodox – among a population of 2 million in the narrow coastal strip.

This year's decision is a break with usual policy. Last year, Israel granted permits for close to 700 Gazan Christians to travel to Jerusalem, Bethlehem, Nazareth and other holy cities that draw thousands of pilgrims each holiday season.

Gisha, an Israeli rights group, said the ban points "to the intensifying of access restrictions between the two parts of the Palestinian territory," calling it "a deepening of Israel's separation policy" for the West Bank and Gaza.

The Palestinians seek to set up a state in the West Bank and Gaza, territory Israel captured in the 1967 Middle East war.

Israel in the past has defended its restrictions on Gazans traveling to the West Bank, saying many Palestinians from Gaza stay on illegally when granted short-term permits.

In Gaza, one Christian woman voiced hope Israel would reverse its policy so she could visit her family in the West Bank city of Ramallah.

"Every year I pray they will give me a permit so I can celebrate Christmas and see my family," Randa El-Amash, 50, said, adding: "It will be more joyful to celebrate in Bethlehem and in Jerusalem."

Christian leaders in Jerusalem condemned the move, but added that they are appealing to Israeli authorities to reverse the decision.

"Other people around the world are allowed to travel to Bethlehem. We think Gaza's Christians should have that right, too," said Wadie Abu Nassar, an adviser to local church leaders.



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Ancient West Bank site draws Christians, and controversyLebanese monastery brings together Christians scattered by war

[Palestinian strawberry farmers hope for rich pickings as export markets open up this season](#)

Thu, 2019-12-12 23:45

BEIT LAHIA/GAZA: Farming in the Gaza Strip can be unpredictable at the best of times, but for strawberry grower Akram Abu Khousa years of toil under Israeli restrictions are starting to bear fruit.

The Palestinian farmer is celebrating the success of the first major export of his crop from Gaza to Gulf markets, business he hopes will compensate him and his fellow growers after years of heavy financial losses suffered due to Israeli blockades and restrictions on border trade crossings.

“Over past years we have faced problems with marketing, which was almost confined to the local market. This forced us to reduce prices significantly and inflicted heavy losses on us, as a result of the deteriorating economic situation in the Gaza Strip,” Abu Khousa told Arab News.

“This season may be different in terms of production volume and quality.”

The blockade imposed by Israel following the success of Hamas in the second Palestinian legislative elections in early 2006, led to huge losses for strawberry farmers, and caused the areas of cultivated land to be reduced to only 450 dunums (111 acres) in 2015.

However, Israel increased the export allowance in 2017, reviving hopes among farmers of a more prosperous future.

The strawberry harvest season begins in early December and continues until the end of March.

This year Abu Khousa planted an area of more than eight dunums (almost 2 acres) of strawberries in the northern Gaza town of Beit Lahia, seven dunums of which were in the traditional way and one using hanging pots.

“The trend for hanging planting has increased the rate of production. One dunum cultivated in the modern way gives more than three times the traditional cultivation,” he said.

The soil and climate of Beit Lahia contain characteristics that distinguish the area from the rest of the Palestinian lands, making it ideal for the cultivation of high-quality strawberries.

SPEEDREAD

The blockade imposed by Israel led to huge losses for strawberry farmers, and caused the areas of cultivated land to be reduced to only 450 dunums in 2015.

At the beginning of December, Abu Khousa and other strawberry farmers began the process of harvesting and exporting their crops to West Bank cities. The Ministry of Agriculture had asked them for samples, and after testing their quality, the daily average of trucks allowed to leave Gaza was determined by the Israeli side.

The price of 1 kilo of strawberries locally, usually at the beginning of the season, was about 10 shekels (nearly \$3), but gradually decreased, reaching four shekels at peak periods.

“If the export process does not continue, we will suffer a major setback and loss,” added Abu Khousa. He pointed out that local sales did not cover the basic cost of production.

He noted that the vast experience of the farmers of Beit Lahia made them capable of producing crops to meet strict international specifications.

The strawberry season provides hundreds of work opportunities during harvest times, helping to alleviate high unemployment rates in the Gaza Strip.

According to the latest data from the Palestinian Statistics Center, jobless rates were running at 53 percent, and 67 percent among youth.

Spokesman for the Ministry of Agriculture in Gaza, Adham Al-Basyouni, told Arab News: “Israel has tried over the years of the blockade to control the export of strawberry products in particular, because it knows that it is one of the distinct crops that come out to the West Bank and European and Arab markets.”

The success of the experimental export of strawberries – which included 8 tons going to Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain – had been a major boost for farmers and the local economy in Gaza, said Al-Basyouni, and he hoped it would be a prelude to further shipments of strawberries and other crops.

Strawberries are exported through Kerem Shalom, the only commercial crossing in the Gaza Strip, and then moved on to Jordan via King Hussein Bridge, and from there to the Gulf states.

The director of the Agricultural Cooperative Society in Beit Lahia, Mohamed Ghaben, said: “Gaza strawberries have very high-quality specifications and compete with the global product.”

There were 1,700 dunums planted with strawberries this season, compared to 1,100 dunums last season, and he expected production levels this time round to reach 5,000 tons, half of which were planned for export, he said.

The cultivation of strawberries in the Gaza Strip began at the end of the 1960s, with an experimental area estimated at one-and-a-half acres, and after achieving remarkable success, it gradually expanded until it reached 2,500 dunums in 2005.



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US hospital causes controversy in Gaza Israel strikes in Gaza after rocket attack

[Indicted Netanyahu to quit all ministries, remain PM](#)

Author:

Thu, 2019-12-12 23:41

JERUSALEM: Embattled Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, facing criminal charges and a new general election, will resign from all other ministerial positions he holds but remain premier, his lawyers said on Thursday.

The announcement to the supreme court came the same morning as Parliament dissolved itself and set a date for a new election, the third within a year.

The court had received a petition from the Movement for Quality of Government in Israel (MQG) demanding that Netanyahu, who is also minister of

agriculture, diaspora, health and welfare, step down from all his positions in light of his indictments.

Attorney General Avichai Mandelblit last month charged Netanyahu with bribery, fraud and breach of trust in three different corruption cases.

Israeli law stipulates that ministers facing criminal charges resign, but has no such provision for prime ministers.

Following the petition, Mandelblit said that while Netanyahu could not be forced to resign as premier, the issue of his ministerial positions would be addressed later.

In the Thursday submission to the court, Netanyahu's legal team said: "He will cease being a minister by Jan. 1, 2020 and appoint other ministers instead.

"The prime minister will continue to be prime minister, as per the law," attorneys Avi Halevy and Michael Rabello said.

The MQG said Netanyahu's intention to resign as minister "was not enough," describing his continued premiership "a terrible shame on Israel."

"Netanyahu should fight for his innocence as a private person and not from the prime minister's office," the NGO said in a statement.

Netanyahu protests his innocence, accusing the state prosecution and media of a witch hunt.

He has yet to announce whether he will seek immunity from prosecution – a parliamentary process complicated by the short life of the current parliament.

A new election was called for March 2, after neither Netanyahu nor his centrist rival Benny Gantz managed to form a majority coalition following the September vote.



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Israel heads to third election as midnight deadline looms
Israel parliament moves for third election as talks falter

[New rocket attack targets Iraq base housing US troops](#)

Author:

Thu, 2019-12-12 23:38

BAGHDAD: Two rockets were fired at a military base near Baghdad airport housing US troops, the 10th such attack since late October, the Iraqi army said on Thursday.

There were no casualties in the overnight attack, which follows one on the same base on Monday which wounded six members of Iraq's elite US-trained counterterrorism force, two of them critically, the army said.

Washington has expressed mounting concern about the flurry of attacks on US bases and diplomatic missions, several of which it has blamed on Shiite militia groups trained by its foe and rival for influence Tehran.

Security sources have linked at least one attack last week to Kataib Hezbollah, a powerful Shiite faction close to Tehran and blacklisted by Washington.

Iran holds vast sway in Iraq, especially among the more hard-line elements of the Hashd Al-Shaabi, a paramilitary force largely made up of Shiite militias.

A US defense official told AFP the rocket attacks made the Hashd a bigger security threat to American troops in Iraq than Daesh, the militant movement which the US has vowed to help Baghdad wipe out.

On Friday, the US imposed sanctions on three senior Hashd figures.

Tensions between Iran and the US have soared since Washington pulled out of a landmark nuclear agreement with Tehran last year and reimposed crippling sanctions.

Baghdad – which is close to both countries and whose many security forces have been trained by either the US or Iran – is worried about being caught in the middle.

US officials say they are considering plans to deploy between 5,000 and 7,000 additional troops to the region to counter Iran.

Anti-protester killed

Meanwhile, demonstrators lynched a teenager accused of attacking a protest encampment in Baghdad on Thursday, police and witnesses said, in an attack that threatened to tarnish the protest movement's broadly nonviolent image.

Police said a dispute between a 17-year-old male and protesters culminated with the body of the youth being strung from a traffic light near Tahrir Square, the epicenter of the months-old anti-government protest movement.

Earlier, police said protesters, some of whom have accused police of not protecting them from "saboteurs," set fire to the nearby house of the young man.

Video streamed live online showed security forces withdrawing before a crowd dragged a man along the ground while people kicked him.

His body, dressed only in underpants, was then strung up by the feet from a traffic light.

The corpse was later removed and taken to a forensic morgue, witnesses said. The morgue confirmed receiving a body.

The brutal episode could radically change the situation for a protest movement that has claimed pacifism in the face of violence in which 460 people have been killed and 25,000 injured, mostly protesters.

A statement signed by “the protesters of Tahrir” shared online denounced “a Machiavellian plan aimed at tarnishing the reputation of the peaceful protesters.”

The thousands of protesters in Tahrir Square “had nothing to do with this morning’s events,” it concluded.

As images emerged online, a Twitter account close to Muqtada Sadr addressed the Shiite cleric’s unarmed “blue helmets,” who deployed to protect protesters after unidentified gunmen attacked them last week.

“If within 48 hours, the terrorists responsible are not identified, the blue helmets will have to withdraw from all the places where protesters assemble,” it wrote.

Powerful pro-Iran militia leader Qais al-Khazali – who was recently targeted by US sanctions – denounced the “chaos” he has warned of since protests began.

“How long will this chaos and lawlessness continue, these weak security forces and proliferation of weapons and dirty militias,” he asked on Twitter.

Protesters accuse pro-Iran armed factions of playing a role in the killing and abduction of protesters.



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Iraqi politician slams protestors, calls them 'monkeys' Iraqi oil-reserve potential 'could exceed' Saudi Arabia's