

# Dazzling lights, swelling crowd give Al-Quds the Ramadan feel

Author:

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JERUSALEM: Salaheedin, the main business street in East Jerusalem, was busy but not extremely full around noon on Tuesday, the second day of the holy month of Ramadan.

But once you pass the structures planted to house Israeli soldiers at the Damascus Gate, and you get inside the walls of Jerusalem, you get an entirely new feeling.

The tiled streets are narrow and naturally more crowded with people of all colors, faiths and languages. The crucible of the Abrahamic religions reflects the nature of its believers, whether Jewish, Christian or Muslim.

Some are easily identifiable as celebrating Ramadan by the fact that they are carrying their food, while others belonging to other faiths are eating outdoors at local restaurants without even noticing locals fasting from sunrise to sunset.

On this day, well-known eateries like Abu Shukri's humus in Wad Street and Bustami restaurants outside the hospice are packed with tourists.

Local tour guides say that this year the number of tourists visiting Jerusalem will break records. The Palestinian restaurant owners are all fasting yet their business dictates that they serve those walking the streets of the old city, visiting the cradle of world religion.

The jewel in the crown of Jerusalem is Al-Aqsa Mosque. And on this second day of Ramadan, the courtyards were full of Muslim worshippers.

Scattered in various locations throughout the 144 dunums that comprise the UNESCO world heritage site, groups of women gather in the shade of trees to carry out prayers.

As you get closer to Al-Aqsa Mosque, Islam's third holiest site, the crowds of worshippers get bigger.

At the western end of Al-Aqsa two Israeli security officers sit quietly under a tree keeping an eye on Bab Al-Rahmeh, the Golden Gate area which had been barred to Muslims for 16 years.

In recent months Palestinians, with support from the newly appointed Jordanian waqf council, broke the chains and regained use of the area.

Othman Sunqrot sits on a chair outside. He tells Arab News that Palestinian families in Jerusalem take turns in manning the location, which Israel wants to close again.

"We took a decision that every Jerusalem family will nominate a member to make sure that this area remains open, often having to break the chain that Israel has put up." Ahmad, a local guard, tells Arab News that at first Israel would arrest every person who broke the chain. Eventually, the entire gate was simply ripped from its hinges.

On the second floor of the waqf offices just outside Bab Al-Hadid sits Sheikh Azzam Al-Khatib, the director general of the Islamic waqf – the Jordanian ministry entrusted with running the mosque.

He has just completed a TV interview about the many projects that Jordan's King Abdullah has funded in the area. Al-Khatib tells Arab News that the issue of the Bab Al-Rahman is not resolved.

"We have a court case on May 15 and we are worried that the Israeli court might take a decision to permanently close it." Al-Khatib offered compromises to the Israeli objection of turning this site into a mosque.

"We are willing to use the location for office space or for a children's kindergarten, but we will not accept to have it closed again. This is part of the mosque area and only Muslims have a right to use it."

The director of the waqf is worried about Israeli extremists entering the mosque under Israeli supervision.

"We have asked them to stop these incursions and for sure we will not allow it in the last 10 days of Ramadan, when the mosque is full of worshippers. This would be a clear provocation."

He adds that while 87 Israelis entered the mosque on May 6, the number went down to 35 the following day. "What is upsetting is that we keep telling the Israelis not to allow the same extremists to keep coming."

Preparations for Ramadan can be seen everywhere in the Haram area. Water fixtures are spread throughout the mosque, and large areas have been covered with tent-like material to provide shade for worshippers.

Many believers will spend entire days in the space and will break their fast on the mosque compound thanks to contributions.

The preparations for Ramadan are not restricted to the mosque. Various neighborhoods in the old city of Jerusalem have been fitted with lights in different arrangements that turn it into a wonderful site at night.

The lighting issue has become a sort of competition, where different communities collect money to pay for lighting up their neighborhoods.

Mohammad Abu Omar lives in the Wadi Joz area. "We got together and asked every family to contribute 1,000 shekels (\$278) to help cover the cost of the lighting ropes. One family offered to use their own electricity. I made the design and we all worked together to put up the lights and the result is very nice."

In the Saadia quarter of the old city, a number of men talk about their lights proudly. "This is from Dahlan, he contributed money for these lights," one of the men standing outside a bakery told us. Dahlan is a former leader of Fatah who is close to the UAE leadership. Other communities say that they got money from the Palestinian government in Ramallah, while in other areas the Israeli municipality supplied and paid for the lighting. The result is that at night the old city of Jerusalem is one amazing site. In the afternoon hours, the streets begin to thin out. Only makeshift locations where fresh qataif pancake patties are being produced attract people, who stand in line to pick up fresh patties to take home.

Slightly before 7:30 p.m. Rajai Sandouka walks up Salaaheedeen Street and enters the Islamic cemetery. Sandouka has inherited from his family the honor of shooting a canon that signals the end of the fast. For some time this tradition was banned, but eventually the Israelis agreed to help keep it going. Two Israeli security officers meet Sandouka at the entrance of the cemetery, and walk up the hill with him. At exactly 7:30 Rajai is allowed to use a set of fire crackers that make the loud booming sound. As fasting Muslims hear the sound from Rajai they begin enjoying their iftar meal. Hundreds gathered at Al-Aqsa squat in front of lines of pre-prepared food break their fast with a date, and a sip from a plastic water cup followed by a full meal.



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# UN council members warn of catastrophe in Syria's Idlib

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UNITED NATIONS: Britain, France, the United States and eight other countries at the UN Security Council warned Friday of a potential humanitarian catastrophe from an all-out assault in Syria's Idlib region, in a statement opposed by Russia.

Syrian forces and their Russian allies have stepped up air strikes and shelling in the jihadist-controlled Idlib region since late April, raising alarm over a possible looming full-on offensive by Damascus to seize the territory.

"We express our deep concern of a potential humanitarian catastrophe in the event of a full-scale military operation in Idlib zone," Belgian Ambassador Marc Pesteen told reporters after a closed-door meeting.

Diplomats said Russia, supported by China, opposed the statement during the meeting.

Two other countries – South Africa and Indonesia – did not join the show of unity outside the council chambers by the diplomats from countries including Kuwait, Poland, Peru and Germany.

The council members said they condemned the loss of civilian lives and were alarmed by the displacement of over 150,000 people as well as the targeting of hospitals and schools.

They called on all warring sides to protect civilians and abide by the cease-fire arrangements reached by Turkey, Iran and Russia in September 2018.

Since April 29, 12 health facilities including two major hospitals have been hit in northwest Syria, according to the World Health Organization.

About three million people live in Idlib, the largest bastion to remain outside the control of the Syrian government.

French Ambassador Francois Delattre said he feared a possible repeat of the bloody battle that devastated Aleppo in 2016.

"A new Aleppo must at all cost be prevented in Idlib," said Delattre ahead of the meeting.

Diplomats said the meeting was to draw attention to the crisis and expected Russia to oppose any joint statement. Russia has used its veto power 12 times at the council to block action against its ally in Damascus.

Belgium, Germany and Kuwait, three non-permanent council members, requested the urgent meeting as they are leading efforts to address the humanitarian crisis in Syria, now in its ninth year of war.



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## [Libya rescues over 200 Europe-bound migrants off coast](#)

Author:

Fri, 2019-05-10 22:05

CAIRO, ROME, RABAT: Libya's navy says it has rescued 213 Europe-bound African and Arab migrants off the Mediterranean coast.

The navy released a statement online on Friday saying its coast guard came to the aid of two rubber boats that had sailed separately on May 8. One of the two boats was carrying 88 men, 12 women and seven children. The second boat carried the remaining 106.

The statement says the migrants – nationals of several Arab and African

countries – were handed over to Libya’s police after having received humanitarian and medical aid.

Libya became a major conduit for African migrants and refugees fleeing to Europe after the uprising that toppled and killed Muammar Qaddafi in 2011. Libyan authorities have stepped up efforts to stem the flow of migrants, with European assistance.

A day earlier, 66 migrants were rescued in international waters off Libya on Thursday during two separate operations carried out by the Italian navy and a charity ship, raising the likelihood of a new stand-off over which port will take them in.

The first group of 36 migrants was picked up by the navy’s Cigala Fulgosi patrol ship around 75 nautical miles off the Libyan coast as part of Italy’s “Mare Sicuro” (“Safe Seas”) operation.

Those on board, including two women and eight minors, were in “mortal danger” as their makeshift craft had taken on water, adding that they had been rescued “in line with Italian and international law.”

#### Crackdown

Moroccan authorities have succeeded in slowing the rate of illegal migration into Spain in recent months after a crackdown on smuggling networks, Morocco’s migration and border control chief said on Friday, unveiling new figures to Reuters.

So far 7,202 people have successfully reached Spain from Morocco this year, around 2,000 more than in the same period last year. But more than half of this year’s crossings took place in January, with numbers declining sharply over the following three months.

Border control chief Khalid Zerouali told Reuters this showed that government efforts were having an effect.

He said the authorities had prevented 25,000 illegal crossings so far this year, up 30 percent compared to the same period last year. So far this year there have been no attempts to storm border fences of the Spanish North African enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla.

“The measures taken by Morocco led to stemming the migration flow to Spain,” Zerouali said.

The route between Morocco and Spain has become one of the main illegal entry routes into Europe for migrants as pressure has been applied to close other routes from Turkey to Greece and Libya to Italy.

Last year some 57,000 people arrived illegally in Spain. Morocco said it stopped 89,000 migrants last year.

The vast majority of illegal Mediterranean crossings are attempted during the summer months which have yet to begin, so the much smaller figures for the

first few months of the year are difficult to compare.

Zerouali denied reports that an agreement has been signed with Spain for Morocco to readmit migrants rescued at sea.

Morocco dismantled 50 migrant trafficking networks operating at the local and international levels so far this year, up 63 percent compared with a year earlier, he said. Authorities had also helped combat traffickers by imposing controls on the import and sale of navigation equipment, he added.

The EU has promised €140 million (\$157 million) in border management aid to help Morocco curb migration flows. Some €30 million was disbursed earlier this year.

Zerouali said half of that aid would come in the form of budget support and half in donated equipment.

In the evening, Italian charity rescue ship Mare Jonio said it saved 30 people, including five minors and a pregnant woman, about 40 nautical miles off the Libyan coast.

"We asked the Italian MRCC (Italian Maritime Rescue Coordination Center) for a safe port," the left-wing collective Mediterranea, which charters the Mare Jonio, tweeted.

Hard-right Interior Minister Matteo Salvini, currently campaigning for EU elections, warned he would not allow the migrants to be disembarked in Italy.

"A military ship which will have to assume its responsibility through its selected ministry is one thing, but a private vessel or one belonging to a social center, like the Mare Jonio, is another," a spokesman for Salvini said.

"For them, the ports will remain closed."

Italy's populist government has taken an increasingly hard line on migration, and Salvini, head of the anti-immigrant League party, last month signed a new directive banning charity vessels from rescuing migrants off Libya.

Charity ships have drawn fire from Rome by attempting on occasion to stop migrants being taken back to crisis-hit Libya, which human rights organizations say is not safe for repatriations.

After Italian concerns that recent violence in Libya will spark an exodus of people determined to seek safety in Europe, Salvini has warned Italian ports are closed to those attempting perilous Mediterranean crossings.

Last August, dozens of migrants aboard the Italian coast guard vessel Diciotti were stranded in a Sicilian port before Salvini allowed them to disembark saying several bishops had agreed to take them in.

An accord was reached with the Catholic Church to have Ireland and Albania take some of the migrants.

Salvini faced a judicial investigation into his role in the initial stand-off, but the Italian senate blocked a criminal case against him.

The UN High Commissioner for Refugees and the International Organization for Migration meanwhile urged “international solidarity” to be shown to the 36 migrants, adding that returning the group to Libya in its current volatile state would violate international law.



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Libya coast guard detains 113 migrants during lull in fighting

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## [Houthis in Yemen agree to withdraw from Hodeidah](#)

Fri, 2019-05-10 22:02

UNITED NATIONS: Yemen's Houthi militia intends to withdraw forces from three key ports in Yemen over four days, starting on Saturday, said a senior United Nations official in charge of monitoring the move.

The Iran-aligned Houthi movement and the the Yemen government initially agreed in December to withdraw troops by Jan. 7 from Hodeidah under a truce aimed at averting a full-scale assault on the port and paving the way for



negotiations to end the four-year war.

Lt. Gen. Michael Lollesgaard, who heads a U.N. mission to monitor the deal, said the Houthis intended to start withdrawing on Saturday from the ports of Hodeidah, Salif and Ras-Issa.



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## [UN calls for talks, ceasefire in Libya](#)

Fri, 2019-05-10 20:05

UNITED NATIONS: The UN Security Council called Friday for warring Libyan parties to recommit to political talks and agree to a ceasefire as a month-long offensive on the capital showed no signs of ending.

The unanimous press statement followed a closed-door meeting called by Britain to discuss the humanitarian situation in Tripoli as world powers seek to overcome divisions about how to respond to the crisis.

Libyan commander Khalifa Haftar, whose forces hold the east of the country, launched the offensive on April 4 to seize Tripoli, seat of the UN-recognized government.

The council "is deeply concerned about the instability in Tripoli and worsening humanitarian situation, which is endangering the lives of innocent civilians and threatens prospects for a political solution," said Indonesian Ambassador Dian Djani, whose country holds the council presidency.

The council "calls for all parties rapidly to return to UN political mediation, and to commit to a ceasefire and de-escalation to help mediation succeed."

Russia, the United States and Kuwait spoke out against including a call to uphold an arms embargo imposed on Libya in 2011, according to diplomats.

Germany had sought to include a mention of the ban after the United Nations raised concerns about new weaponry being supplied to both sides, in violation of the arms embargo.

UN envoy Ghassan Salame has been unsuccessful so far in trying to persuade Haftar to agree to turn away from the battlefield and return to talks with Prime Minister Fayez Al-Sarraj.

Britain was forced last month to put on hold a draft resolution demanding a ceasefire in the face of council divisions.

Libya descended into chaos following the 2011 overthrow of Muammar

Qaddafi that has seen a bitter rivalry emerge between the Tripoli-based authorities and Haftar's supporters scrambling for control in the oil-rich country.



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