

Christmas opens new market for small Gaza sewing business

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Mon, 2020-12-14 15:02

GAZA CITY: In the blockaded Gaza Strip, the Christmas season is giving a boost to a small women's business that produces pandemic face masks decorated with holiday symbols.

The masks, decorated with images of Santa Claus, reindeer and Christmas trees, have found markets as far away as Europe. They also have provided a small lift to a Palestinian enclave run by the Islamic militant Hamas group and where the vast majority of residents are Muslim.

"We exported the first 200 masks two weeks ago to France, last week about 300 to Germany and from 300 to 400 masks will be sent to Britain in the coming days," said Suhad Saidam, owner of the workshop.

It's a rare success story in impoverished Gaza, where unemployment has reached around 50%, and exports are severely restricted by Israel.

Saidam, who has been sewing for 16 years, says she sends the masks to Palestinian companies in the West Bank that export the goods. To be allowed out from Gaza through Israel and to the West Bank, the embroideries must be made of cloths and fabrics only. Decorated electronics, like watches, are forbidden, she said.

Israel, with Egypt's help, imposed the blockade on Gaza in 2007 to isolate Hamas. Both countries cite security concerns and fear of arms smuggling to Hamas in justifying the restrictions.

The Christian population in Gaza, home to some 2 million people, has dwindled to about 1,000 as members of the tiny community have steadily emigrated. However, Christmas decorations can be widely seen on store fronts and at restaurants across the Gaza Strip.

Saidam, 43, opened the workshop in 2017 with support from Care International humanitarian agency under a program for breast cancer survivors like herself. Saidam outsources the work to about 40 women, most of them suffering from cancer, to do the work at home "for a good income." The Christmas-themed masks are sold for 15 to 20 shekels (\$4 to \$6). In Gaza, a typical daily wage is about 30 shekels (\$9).

Wafa Tarifi, a resident of the West Bank city of Ramallah, learned of the masks from a Facebook page and was pleased when she saw them at a bazaar in Ramallah. "I bought some of them for my children's Christian teachers and they liked it so much," she said.

As COVID-19 vaccines are rolled out throughout the world, there might not be great demand for masks next year, but Saidam says she will continue to introduce traditional stitching for other occasions and events.

"We thought beyond the concept that hand-stitching is exclusive to the traditional Palestinian gowns," she said.





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Egyptian security delegation in Gaza to hold talks with Hamas Gaza imposes tighter virus restrictions, extends curfew

[US imposes sanctions on two Iranian individuals allegedly linked to agent's disappearance](#)

Mon, 2020-12-14 18:35

WASHINGTON: The US for the first time on Monday accused Iran of direct involvement in the "probable death" of former FBI agent Robert Levinson, who vanished 13 years ago, and imposed sanctions on two intelligence agents.

No agreement should ever be struck with Iran without its freeing all unjustly detained US citizens, a senior official added as Washington blacklisted two Iranian officials that it accused of involvement in the kidnapping and

probable death while in custody of the former agent.

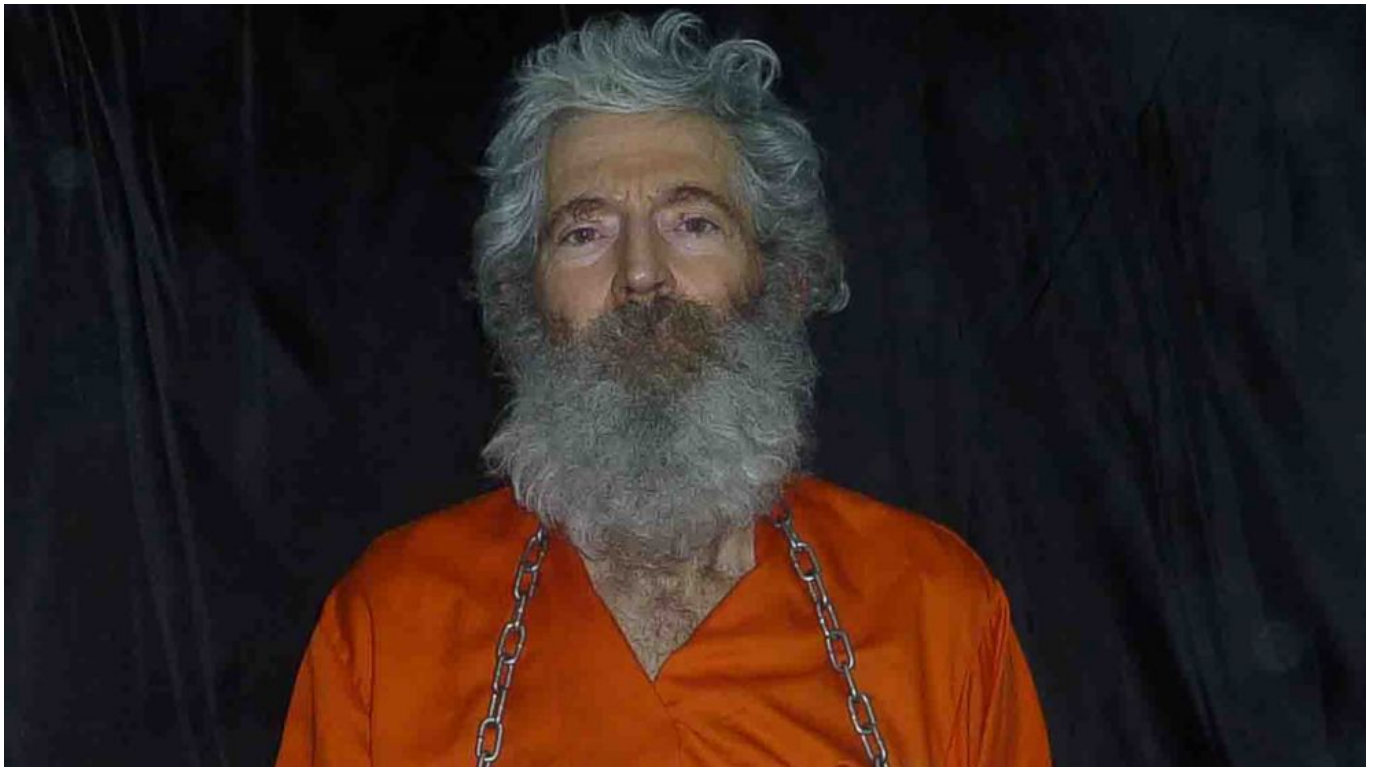
A second US official, speaking to reporters on condition of anonymity, said Washington believed senior Iranian officials Mohammad Baseri and Ahmad Khazai had signed off on the abduction of Levinson, who went missing on Iran's Kish Island in the Gulf in March 2007.

The official said he hoped the naming and sanctioning of the two men, who were separately identified by the US Treasury Department, would lead to further information about Levinson's fate.

"The government of Iran pledged to provide assistance in bringing Bob Levinson home, but it has never followed through," FBI Director Christopher Wray said in a statement.

"The truth is that Iranian intelligence officers – with the approval of senior Iranian officials – were involved in Bob's abduction and detention."

Releasing the finding a month before President-elect Joe Biden takes office, Donald Trump's administration urged his successor to prioritize the release of at least three Americans in Iranian custody as his team expects to resume diplomacy with Iran.



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[Netanyahu: 'Business as usual with Iran' will be mistake](#)

Author:

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Sun, 2020-12-13 14:36

JERUSALEM: Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on Sunday said it would be a mistake "to go back to business as usual with Iran," signaling Israeli resistance to an expected push by President-elect Joe Biden to revive the international nuclear deal with Iran.

Netanyahu spoke at a press conference with Robert O'Brien, President Donald Trump's national security adviser.

But his comments appeared to be aimed at Biden, who has said the US will rejoin the nuclear deal if Iran agrees to strict adherence. The deal, which lifted sanctions on Iran in exchange for curbs on its nuclear program, has unraveled since Trump withdrew from it in 2018.

Netanyahu led an unsuccessful fight against the deal when it was negotiated by then-President Barack Obama in 2015 and welcomed Trump's withdrawal three years later. Netanyahu says the deal will not prevent Iran from developing a nuclear weapon and fails to address other belligerent Iranian behavior, such as its support for proxies across the region and its development of a long-range missile program.

"As long as Iran continues to subjugate and threaten its neighbors, as long as Iran continues calling for Israel's destruction, as long as Iran continues to bankroll, equip and train terrorist organizations throughout the region and the world, and as long as Iran persists in its dangerous quest for nuclear weapons and the means to deliver them, we shouldn't go back to business as usual with Iran," Netanyahu said Sunday. "We should all unite to prevent this major threat to world peace."

O'Brien arrived days after the US announced that Israel and Morocco were establishing full diplomatic relations – making it the fourth such deal between Israel and an Arab state brokered by the outgoing Trump administration.

O'Brien said the Trump administration's pressure campaign against Iran has been successful and said the string of agreements between Israel and Arab countries would cement what he called "the legacies of peacemakers" Trump and Netanyahu.



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[Lebanon's collapse is like the Titanic's sinking, only without the music – Le Drian](#)

Author:

Reuters

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Sun, 2020-12-13 19:42

PARIS: French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian said Lebanon's political and economic collapse was like the sinking of the Titanic, only without the music.

"Lebanon is the Titanic without the orchestra," Le Drian told the daily Le Figaro in an interview published on Sunday. "The Lebanese are in complete denial as they sink, and there isn't even the music."

Le Drian's remarks set a pessimistic tone a little over a week before President Emmanuel Macron makes his third visit to Beirut since a massive port blast destroyed swathes of the city and killed 200 people in August. Macron is losing patience with Lebanon's politicians as rival politicians mired in turf battles stand in the way of sweeping reforms that donors say are imperative for badly-needed financial aid to be released.

It is believed the Titanic's orchestra kept playing for as long as it could as the liner went down in the Atlantic Ocean in 1912, trying to help keep passengers calm amid impending doom. All the musicians perished.



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Lebanese judge charges caretaker PM Diab, ex-ministers over Beirut port blast
Events in Beirut expose public distrust of Lebanese authorities

Egypt, Jordan and Iraq discuss peoples' movement by land

Author:

Sun, 2020-12-13 22:19

CAIRO: The 75th General Assembly of the Arab Bridge Maritime Company, held on Saturday in Cairo, brought together transportation ministers from Egypt, Jordan and Iraq to discuss the establishment of a means to transport passengers by land between the three countries. The meeting was attended by Egyptian Minister of Transportation Kamel Al-Wazir, his Jordanian and Iraqi counterparts and the company's board of directors.

During the meeting, they discussed organizing the movement of passengers by land between their respective countries, whether through the establishment of the Arab Bridge Land Transport Company or through the integration of already existing land transport companies with the Arab Bridge Maritime Company. The goal is to reach a model system that would facilitate the transportation of passengers between the three countries with a unified ticket.

The general assembly reviewed the technical condition of the maritime company's ships, the effects of the pandemic on the company's activity, recent business and financial results, as well as mechanisms that have been employed to ensure the continuity of the company's activity, which represents an important trade link between Egypt, Jordan and Iraq.

The Egyptian minister said that the directives of the political leadership in Egypt are always based on increasing cooperation and trade exchange between Egypt, Jordan and Iraq. He pointed out that the Arab Bridge Maritime Company represents a pioneering model for cooperation between Arab countries in the field of transport.

Al-Wazir praised the company's role in enhancing intra-Arab trade and increasing the volume of Arab-Asian-African trade exchanges. Among the points discussed during the meeting was how to ease procedures for the entry of goods, drivers and travelers in order to help smooth the trade movement. The Jordanian minister of transportation affirmed that this would help achieve economic integration between the three countries.



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