

Bethlehem Nativity Church reopens after coronavirus closure

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BETHLEHEM, West Bank: Bethlehem's storied Church of the Nativity reopened to visitors on Tuesday, after a nearly three-month closure due to the coronavirus pandemic.

The church, built over the spot where Christians believe Jesus was born, was closed on March 5 as the first cases of the virus were reported in the West Bank.

The church is one of Christianity's most sacred shrines and the closure came ahead of the busy Easter holiday season that typically draws tens of thousands of visitors and worshippers.

Bishop Theophylactos, a Greek Orthodox cleric, called the reopening a day of celebration for Bethlehem since "all the people now can enter the church and pray like before."

The Palestinian Authority has reported some 400 cases of the coronavirus in the West Bank, with two deaths. Most of the cases were traced to Palestinians who worked inside Israel, which has been coping with a much larger outbreak. Israeli authorities have begun to gradually reopen schools, houses of worship and markets as the spread of the novel coronavirus has slowed. Israel's Health Ministry has reported over 16,700 confirmed cases of the disease and 279 deaths. More than 14,000 have recovered.



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Palestinian coronavirus restrictions being easedLIVE: Countries ease coronavirus regulations to reverse coronavirus pandemic impact on economies

[Resumed cargo flights: Thaw in Israel-Turkey ties?](#)

Mon, 2020-05-25 22:57

ISTANBUL: Israeli airline El Al has resumed cargo flights twice weekly between Tel Aviv and Istanbul for the first time in 10 years – a sign that decade-long bilateral tensions might be easing. A cargo flight landed in Istanbul on Sunday morning to pick up humanitarian aid and protective equipment destined for US medical teams fighting COVID-19. Burhanettin Duran, head of the Ankara-based think tank SETA, wrote that Turkey's regional empowerment is "obliging Israel to search for normalization

steps with Ankara.”

Dr. Nimrod Goren, head of the Israeli Institute for Regional Foreign Policies, said the cargo flight is a positive and visible development in bilateral relations that was probably approved by top government officials on both sides and required diplomatic efforts.

“However, the fact that this step takes place in parallel to a discussion about Israeli annexation in the West Bank, and to criticism of annexation by regional and international actors, might impact how it’s viewed in Turkey,” he told Arab News.

Goren said while the Israeli and Turkish governments continue to have significant policy differences, they should work to restore their relations to ambassadorial level, and to relaunch a strategic dialogue on regional developments of mutual interest.

“The forming of a new Israeli government, and the appointment of Gabi Ashkenazi as a new foreign minister, could be an opportunity to do so, and the cargo flight brings some positive momentum,” he added.

Turkey expelled Israel’s ambassador in May 2018 after the US moved its embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem.

Ankara’s involvement in Syria’s Idlib province against the Tehran-backed Assad regime has recently provided a common denominator for Turkey and Israel to reconcile, as it also serves the latter’s strategic interests in weakening the Iranian presence in Syria.

But Israel’s treatment of the Palestinians remains a major irritant in relations with Ankara. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan on Sunday reiterated his support for the Palestinians.

In a video message on Twitter, he said the issue of Jerusalem “is a red line for all Muslims worldwide.”

He added that Israel’s “new occupation and annexation project ... disrespects Palestine’s sovereignty and international law.”

Ryan Bohl, Middle East analyst at geopolitical-risk firm Stratfor, told Arab News: “Turkey is trying to create economic ties with Israel because ... Erdogan is finding the political ground changed, caused in part by demographic changes as young Turks are less incensed by the Palestinian issue, and in part by a general weariness among Turks about putting too much skin in the game to solve the Palestinian question,”

Israel is expected to annex large parts of the occupied West Bank on July 1 under the terms of a coalition government agreement. Ankara has strongly criticized the plan.

Israeli and Turkish officials are rumored to have held talks behind closed doors to reach a deal on maritime borders and exclusive economic zones in the eastern Mediterranean.

Israel’s Foreign Ministry recently said it was “proud of our diplomatic relations with Turkey.”

But Goren said it is currently unlikely that Israel will advance a maritime demarcation deal with Turkey as it would shake several regional balances at the same time.

“It will put in jeopardy, and run in contrast to, the important alliances in the eastern Mediterranean that Israel has fostered in recent years with Greece, Cyprus and Egypt,” he added.



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Turkey, Israel turn pandemic into opportunity to mend ties
Erdogan accuses Assad regime of violating Idlib cease-fire

[Palestinian coronavirus restrictions being eased](#)

Mon, 2020-05-25 22:41

GAZA CITY: The Palestinian government is ending its coronavirus lockdown following a declining number of cases, the prime minister said Monday.

As of Sunday, 602 cases had been recorded in the Palestinian Authority, including Jerusalem, the West Bank and Gaza Strip. There have been five deaths and 475 people have recovered from the disease. The Palestinian

Authority imposed a state of emergency on March 5 after the first coronavirus cases were recorded in Bethlehem.

Ministries and industry sectors will resume operations after the Eid Al-Fitr holiday, while churches and mosques can reopen on Tuesday with social distancing and other preventive measures in place.

Prime Minister Muhammad Shtayyeh said the decision was based on a recommendation from the Emergency Committee to Confront Coronavirus after random checks on Palestinian workers returning from Israel. The risk had receded and the curve of cases had fallen "which means that we are in a new phase of facing the disease, which is the easing of procedures."

Tens of thousands of Palestinians from the West Bank work inside Israel, which has recorded about 17,000 cases over the past few months thereby increasing the number of cases in the West Bank.

Shtayyeh said that places of worship could open on the condition that people wore masks, brought their own prayer mat and were prevented from carrying out ablutions on the premises.

Courts will reopen after the Eid holiday, and so will all ministries, official bodies and industrial and commercial establishments starting on Wednesday.

But the prime minister added that restrictions and strict procedures would return in the event that new infections were discovered.

National Economy Minister Khaled Al-Osaily told Arab News that steps to ease restrictions came amid an absence of any cases during the past two days, with the government interested in a return to normal life.

Al-Osaily said the economy was a factor when the government took its decision to ease restrictions.

He added that local authorities would monitor progress and take all the necessary measures, according to developments on the ground, in a way that respected people's safety, security and health.

Palestinians welcomed the reopening of commercial facilities after months of closure.

"This is the happiest news I have heard in months," waiter Rizk Khalaf told Arab News. "We need work, we cannot live without it."

Nasr Abdel Karim, a professor of financial and economic sciences at the Arab American University in Jenin, told Arab News that the government was trying to repair the economic damage caused by the state of emergency.

He said that the government had decided that continuing the severe lockdown would prolong the "bleeding" of the "fragile and distressed" Palestinian economy, and that the loosening of restrictions was mainly motivated by economics.

But he warned against a failure to properly and cautiously deal with the easing of restrictions. The worst case scenario should remain in place because the emergence of new infections could make it harder to return to tough measures, he said.



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Gaza reports 1st virus-related death amid fears of outbreak
Gaza girl, 13, teaches neighborhood children during school closure

[Jordanians celebrate country's 74th Independence Day in confident mood](#)

Author:

Mon, 2020-05-25 22:30

AMMAN: Jordanians on Monday took to the streets to celebrate their country's 74th Independence Day amid the ongoing coronavirus disease (COVID-19) crisis.

The festivities followed a three-day lockdown aimed at slowing the spread of the killer virus in the country, which has so far recorded 708 cases and nine deaths.

Jordan's population of almost 10 million people, the majority of them in

their youth and belonging to different backgrounds and ethnicities which pride themselves on peaceful coexistence, woke up to national flags fluttering throughout the nation as well as on the Google search home page.

The COVID-19 pandemic has instilled a sense of nationalism and unity as well as confidence in the country's leadership that has not been felt in years.

Minister of Digital Economy and Entrepreneurship Mothanna Gharaibeh told Arab News that the virus outbreak had helped to boost Jordan's digital resilience. "During the crisis, internet traffic grew by 70 percent overnight and yet our resilient internet network was able to take it without any reduction on YouTube or Netflix quality."

Gharaibeh, the youngest minister in Prime Minister Omar Razzaz's government, said that the private and public sectors had been working together during the COVID-19 emergency to overcome many challenges.

"From security to food delivery and online learning, thousands of Jordanians who were serving global customers continued to deliver quality services from their homes," he added.

The minister, who was an activist during the short-lived Jordanian spring in 2011, pointed out that despite the economic difficulties caused by the lockdown there had been some positives to emerge from the situation.

"We grew by 700-plus jobs in the last two months by top companies like Cisco, Webhelp, BIGO/IMO, and others relying on the Jordanian solid infrastructure, skills, and work ethics," he said.

Mahmoud Zawahreh, a young political activist from the city of Zarqa, told Arab News that Jordan was battling on two fronts. "The struggle is against different challenges in dealing with the coronavirus as well as the external political challenges.

"Jordan is being forced to escalate its response due to the dangers from the Israeli intentions to annex Palestinian territories while at the same time it has to deal with the economic fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic," he said.

Maamoun Abu Nawwar, a retired two-star air force general, said the people and leaders of Jordan had succeeded in finding a common ground as a nation. "There is a successful trilateral cooperation between the leadership, the army and the people.

"There is a close-knit atmosphere that has been recently articulated with many Jordanians returning from abroad because of the pandemic and realizing how great their country is and that it takes care of its people."

He added that Jordan faced a difficult future and that some of its challenges were "existential" and required a holistic approach. "Jordan needs to be more inclusive to all regional neighbors to seek their help and protection from Israel."

He believes that some of its neighbors have not risen to the challenges

facing the country. “There is bitterness in Jordan regarding how much it can count on regional powers to stand with it. At times Jordan feels like it has to stand alone because it refuses to take sides in regional disputes,” Abu Nawwar said.

Tareq Khoury, the former head of the Wehdat Football Club and now a member of parliament representing Zarqa, told Arab News that independence required hard decisions including the cancellation of the Wadi Araba Treaty (Jordan-Israel peace accord).

“Independence requires fighting with the occupying enemy who is targeting our holy places and the Jordan Valley,” he said.

Khoury, a businessman who trades with regional countries, said that a much more robust economic relationship was needed.

Samar Nassar, the first female secretary-general of the Jordanian Football Association, said Jordan had been a sports pioneer in the region, championing women empowerment, and using sports for social change.

“We hosted the FIFA under-17 Women’s World Cup, which was the first international tournament of its scale in the Arab world and we hosted the 2018 women’s Asian Cup final.”



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[Kuwait will not extend 24-hour curfew beyond May 30](#)

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CAIRO: Kuwait will not extend its 24-hour curfew beyond May 30, the interior minister said at a press conference on Monday.

The minister added that the cabinet will announce on Thursday the details of a partial curfew and a plan for public life to return to normal gradually. Kuwait had imposed a full-time curfew from May 10 to May 30 to help to curb the spread of the new coronavirus.



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