

Easter church services to go 'virtual' in coronavirus-hit Palestine and Jordan

Fri, 2020-04-10 23:40

AMMAN: From Italy to Palestine, plans for the Holy Week, which marks the end of 40 days of the Christian Lent fast, have been thrown into disarray by the global coronavirus pandemic.

For the first time in centuries, rituals in the Old City of Jerusalem will either be cancelled or held without the faithful as a precautionary measure against the spread of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19).

The pandemic has forced humanity to deal with unprecedented challenges, according to Father Atallah Hanna, the Orthodox archbishop of Sebastia.

"The world has united in this suffering. Like in other countries, precautionary measures have been taken in Palestine and Jordan," he told Arab News.

The Catholic Church has been forced to embrace 21st century digital technological tools to transmit images of Holy Week events.

By Hanna's own admission, to hear church services via Facebook is not the same as holding the service in person.



Samaritan worshippers typically take part in a Passover ceremony at Mount Gerizim, near the northern West Bank city of Nablus. This will be called off due to coronavirus. (AFP/file photo)

“It also means being denied the ability to accept the Eucharist from the priest,” he said.

“But this an unprecedented situation. We need to heed the advice of the health experts and government for the protection of lives.

According to Father Issa Musleh, spokesman for the Orthodox Patriarchate in Jerusalem, the oldest Christian church, Easter-related church services will be held in the Old City as usual but with very few attendees.

“A very small number of priests, nuns and singers will carry out the religious rites with the help of multimedia,” he told Arab News.

“We will make sure all believers are able to follow the various church services leading to the culmination of religious events with the celebration of the resurrection on holy Easter Sunday.”

However, one particular church ceremony, Sabt Al-Nour (The Holy Light or Holy Fire), cannot be conducted virtually.

COVID-19 IN PALESTINE

266 coronavirus cases as of April 10

44 recoveries

1 death

Orthodox tradition has it that a blue light glows from the stone bed where Jesus was said to have been buried.

According to this belief, the light emanates on the Saturday before Orthodox Easter from the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in the Old City and is spread around the world.

“Arrangements are being made to send the light to all Palestinian towns and villages without the usual crowds and boy scouts,” Musleh said.

“We are also working jointly with governments, air-transport companies and the Israeli Ministry of Religious Affairs to ensure that the holy light is carried from Jerusalem to the four corners of the world – just as it has been done every year for centuries.”

As for Bethlehem, where the West Bank’s first confirmed COVID-19 case was reported, Father Salem said the situation in the governorate has recently improved.

“There have not been any new cases since the first wave that came to us from Greek tourists,” he said, referring to Bethlehem, which has a significant Christian population. Its Church of the Nativity draws thousands of pilgrims every year.

“All those who were under quarantine have recovered and no new cases have been recorded.”

A COVID-19 patient told Arab News he and his family went through difficult times but emerged healthy and healed.

Reverend Bassam Bannoura of Beit Sahour, a town east of Bethlehem, said he had had dinner with members of a family who were unaware they had the virus.



Samaritan worshippers typically take part in a Passover ceremony at Mount Gerizim, near the northern West Bank city of Nablus. This will be called off due to coronavirus. (AFP/file photo)

After a period of self-isolation and multiple tests, Bannoura said, he has been declared free of the infection.

Bannoura added that he is confident that his wife and son, who have also tested positive, will make a full recovery.

Father Hanna Salem, a Latin priest in Beit Jala, said that in strict compliance with the government's requirements, all churches in the mainly Christian town will remain closed to parishioners.

"Only priests, nuns and church singers will be taking part in the events. On Easter Sunday we will all follow the broadcast on Palestine TV by the Latin Patriarchate from Jerusalem," he told Arab News.

The scene in Ramallah, the center of the Palestinian government, appears to be no different.

Xavier Abu Eid, a Catholic churchgoer, told Arab News that priests from all Latin churches in the governorate will celebrate together in a single service that will be broadcast on the abouna.org website.

The Easter situation in neighboring Jordan is no different as the country battles its own COVID-19 outbreak.

Rev. Ghaleb Kwar, pastor of the Fuhais Pentecostal Evangelical Church, said his group is preparing to replace Palm Sunday and the Passion Week rituals with online events.

“We need to turn our homes into churches,” he told Arab News.



Ministers of Fuheis Pentecostal Church in Jordan conducting services using Zoom. (Supplied by Rev. Ghaleb Kawar)

“I told my team to reproduce videos from last year’s Palm Sunday celebrations to remind worshippers of the events that happened 2,000 years ago when Jesus entered Jerusalem.

“We asked them to record short videos about the passion week and Good Friday while preparing uplifting songs to be broadcast on Easter Sunday along with a short sermon.”

Kawar has also asked Sunday school teachers to record short videos to be sent to children in order to calm their minds.

“We want to relate the Easter story to the current situation to reassure them that this is not war and the government is protecting us,” he said.

Issam Ghattas, founder of Gilad camp, which organizes church picnics for Jordanian Christians on Palm Sunday, believes 2020 will be a year of sorrow.

“Something is missing this year because we can’t enjoy the spring,” he told Arab News.

“Palm Sunday for us is about children and families getting together in a mood of celebrations as we sing ‘hosanna’ and remember the first Palm Sunday in Jerusalem, waving palm and olive branches.”

Ghattas' views were echoed by Wafa Gousous, director of the Amman office of the Middle East Council of Churches and the Orthodox Initiative.

She noted that Christians have no option but to carry out church services virtually during this Easter.

"Churches are closed. Church masses are being done through the priest in churches but no one is allowed to attend," she told Arab News.



Members of Fuheis Pentecostal Church in Jordan attending services using Zoom.
(Supplied by Rev. Ghaleb Kawar)

"We are forced to participate in church services by watching them on our mobile phones. There is real pain."

Gousous said there is a deep pain in every Christian heart anticipating the Resurrection.

"Christians in Jordan, like their compatriots of other faiths, are committed to staying home and abiding by the government laws," she said.

"We remain hopeful that something will happen and this virus will suddenly disappear.

On a more hopeful note, Gousous said: "I pray that our tears can create a river that will lead us to remember the joy of the Resurrection.

"We want to respect the health requirements and the efforts of our

government.

“At the same time, we are looking forward to the happiness of the Resurrection and humanity’s rise from its beds and rooms into a better life.”



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Vatican’s Easter rituals go ‘virtual’ as Italy battles coronavirus outbreak
Christians in the UAE reflect on Easter under coronavirus lockdown

[Lebanese expats pushing up number of](#)

COVID-19 cases

Author:

Sat, 2020-04-11 00:03

ANKARA: Lebanese expats are pushing up the number of coronavirus cases in the country, after nationals returning from London and one from Doha were found to be infected.

The number of people in Lebanon with the disease has exceeded 600, after 14 new cases were recorded among expats coming back from overseas and 13 among locals.

The Ministry of Health said Friday that the number of COVID-19 cases in Lebanon had reached 609 and that the death toll was 20 following one further death.

Of the 14 infected expats, 13 were traveling from London and one was coming from Doha. Five passengers for the London flight were prevented from boarding because they tested positive. The plane returning from Doha carried 122 passengers, including a child.

There were no reported cases on the rescue flights from Accra or Frankfurt. No measures were taken to stop the flights carrying the expats or stranded students, especially those coming from countries where the pandemic is spreading.

Middle East Airlines will operate more rescue flights on Monday. These will carry Lebanese expats from London, Paris, Jeddah and Libreville.

Lebanon has an official holiday until Monday evening, and the push to enforce curfews and quarantines have become tougher as the Easter weekend gets underway.

Streets in Lebanon's main cities are nearly empty, except for some people wearing masks wandering around and birds fluttering with confidence on the roads.

Municipal vehicles carrying speakers are broadcasting Good Friday mass because churches have closed their doors to the public and attendance is restricted to clergy. Televised sermons have urged people "not to lose hope or become weak during the difficult times we are going through."

The country is also grappling with a surge in coronavirus-related crimes, such as theft from pharmacies and the manufacture of fake cleaning and sterilization supplies.

A customs patrol unit was ambushed on Thursday while taking a truck loaded with forged disinfectant into custody in the Dora area, east of Beirut. There was a shootout between the patrol and the gang targeting the unit, with one gang member injured.

FASTFACT

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Others have exploited the lockdown and pressure on security forces by trying to smuggle out drugs.

The Directorate General of Internal Security Forces said a plan had been foiled to smuggle a large quantity of hashish to an African country. It was the largest drug smuggling attempt in the history of Lebanon and it was ready to be “traded, promoted, sold and smuggled abroad,” the directorate added. “A fortnight ago a convoy of eight trucks that was heading toward the Port of Beirut was seized. The trucks carried thousands of nylon bags containing agricultural soil. Twenty-five tons of hashish were seized while inspecting the containers in the port. They were packed into bags, and placed professionally under the agricultural soil in order to hide the drugs.” The bags were labeled “Ah ya Hanane,” “Al Jazeera New 2019,” “Al Ostoura New 2019,” “The Free Bird,” “The Joker,” “Beirut Mood,” “Al-Sham Mood,” “Premium Cruiser,” “Primrose,” and “Kiki Do You Love Me.”



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Turkey, Israel turn pandemic into opportunity to mend ties
Lebanon makes largest ever cannabis drug bust

Turkey, Israel turn pandemic into opportunity to mend ties

Fri, 2020-04-10 23:58

ANKARA: In an interesting move that transcends a years-long diplomatic standoff between the two countries, Turkey began supplying medical equipment to Israel to help the country in its struggle against the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) outbreak.

The medical package comprises face masks, surgical gloves and protective coveralls.

Israel also recently acquired 1 million masks from China to protect its soldiers working on the frontlines against contagion.

The cargo will be delivered to Turkey's southern Incirlik Air Base and will be picked by planes coming from Israel, where nearly 100 people have already lost their lives due to the virus.

In return, Israel is set to green light Turkey's shipment of medical aid to the Palestinian Authority, according to the Bloomberg report.

Relations between Turkey and Israel broke down in May 2010 during the Mavi Marmara crisis, in which a Turkish-owned aid flotilla, attempting to breach the Gaza Strip blockade, was raided by Israeli commandos, who killed 10 activists.

Following this assault, then-Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan urged that Israel should be punished for its "bloody massacre."

In March 2013, with US mediation, Israel and Turkey's prime ministers proceeded to normalize diplomatic ties and stop legal action against the former Israeli commanders, while making arrangements to compensate the victims' families.

Karol Wasilewski, an analyst at the Warsaw-based Polish Institute of International Affairs, described this solidarity move from Ankara as "corona-diplomacy" – the achievement of political goals through humanitarian help.

"This is surely a very interesting development, yet I doubt it will break the ice between Turkey and Israel as the friction between them has been especially deep during the last decade," Wasilewski told Arab News.

"When it comes to the Palestinian issue, Israeli authorities are aware that if the disease spreads rapidly there – especially in Gaza – this will constitute a huge challenge for Israel itself, so agreeing on Turkish aid for the Palestinian Authority is just pragmatism," Wasilewski added.

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Karol Wasilewski, Analyst

“Turkey is probably one of the strongest supporters of Palestinians around the world, so it was only natural they would extend help.”

Wasilewski did not completely exclude the possibility that the Turkish are hopeful such a humanitarian gesture may contribute to mending Turkish-Israeli ties. Therefore, although Turkey’s assistance has a humanitarian dimension, it also serves to further the country’s foreign policy objectives.

In December, Israeli Public Broadcasting Corporation (KAN) claimed that Israeli officials are ready to discuss with their Turkish counterparts a proposal to build a gas pipeline from Israeli reservoirs through Turkey onto the European continent. Ankara has not offered official confirmation, however.

According to Wasilewski, although Turkish decision-makers are reluctant to recognize such talks – as the electorate may not accept them – repairing Turkish-Israeli ties would be a huge win for Turkey, especially when it comes to the issue of resources in the Eastern Mediterranean.

A reservoir of about 800 billion cubic meters of natural gas lies under the Leviathan and Tamar gas fields off the Israeli shore, per projections of the Israeli Ministry of Energy.

“While Turkey is showing its generosity in this difficult period, I think this step in itself will not be enough to repair relations,” Gallia Lindenstrauss, senior research fellow from the Institute for National Security Studies in Tel Aviv told Arab News.

“It was also meant as a way to assist the Palestinians in parallel to Israel.”

Still, according to Lindenstrauss, the move was covered by Israeli media, and it may thus contribute in a small way to improving the image of Turkey in the eyes of the Israeli public.

On the economic front, Israel recently increased import of steel from Turkey, a trend that continues from last year.

However, indulging in antisemitic conspiracy theories is still a matter of daily routine for some segments of Turkish politics.

In a speech on early March, Fatih Erbakan, head of Turkey’s Islamist Refah Party, blamed Israel for the outbreak of COVID-19.

“This virus serves Zionism’s population control goals, and there is significant research to attest to this. Zionism is a five-thousand-year-old bacteria that has triggered the suffering of people,” Erbakan said.



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Organization of Islamic Cooperation slams Israeli treatment of Palestinian inmates
European diplomats in Jerusalem hold video call with Palestinian minister after arrest by Israeli police

[American citizens refuse COVID-19 repatriation to US from Lebanon, say Beirut is 'safer'](#)

Thu, 2020-04-09 23:57

LONDON: US citizens living in Lebanon have reportedly turned down offers of repatriation from their government amid the coronavirus pandemic, saying it is "safer" in the capital Beirut, CNN reported.

In an [interview with the network](#), American Carly Fuglei said "it's probably safer here in Lebanon."

The humanitarian consultant, originally from Montana, was contemplating returning to the US from Beirut as the virus crisis deepened in the city and she was advised to do so by Danish friends returning to their homeland.

But she decided to stay and Lebanon has since closed its borders indefinitely since March 19.

"I made that decision for a combination of personal reasons and calculations about the virus that we're all making," Fuglei told CNN.

With the US becoming the world's worst affected country by the COVID-19 outbreak, it's a decision many other US citizens in Beirut have taken.

The US government last week offered to fly citizens and permanent residents back to the states on a chartered flight for \$2,500 per person, but some Lebanon-based Americans tweeted their refusals.

"And no, Mom, I'm not going," Beirut-based journalist Abby Sewell said.

A Lebanese journalist responded, saying: "For once I'm like no America is not safer than here." Sewell's mother, Meg Sewell, replied: "Actually, for the moment I might have to agree."

For once I'm like no America is not safer than here

– Dalal Mawad [معوض دلال \(@dalalmawad\) April 1, 2020](#)

Sewell told CNN the US embassy's offer was never even an option for her.

"From everything I'm reading, the situation is worse in the US, in terms of the number of cases, prevention measures or lack thereof, and how overburdened the health system is," she says.

"Also, since I've been living overseas for years, I don't have health insurance in the US now, so if I did go back and then got sick, I would be looking at paying thousands of dollars out of pocket."

Another citizen, Daryn Howland, decided to carry on working in Beirut and also refused the repatriation offer.

"My plan is to stay here for the indefinite future, the fact that things are so bad in the US means it's one of the first times where it's safer to be in Lebanon than in the US," Howland said. "Despite the (Lebanese political and economic) situation ... I think my odds are better here.

"All of my American friends here have decided to stay."

The US embassy flew 95 American citizens out of Lebanon on April 5, the US State Department said. According to their figures, there are thousands of American citizens living in Lebanon – many who hold dual US-Lebanese citizenship.

"The Department of State has no greater priority than the safety and security of US citizens overseas," an official told CNN. "We are rising to meet the historic challenge posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, every day, all over the world."

As of Thursday, there are more than 450,000 cases of the virus in the US and 16,000 deaths, with 582 cases and 19 fatalities in Lebanon.



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Life under lockdown in Paris and Beirut
Lebanon's police clear protest camps in Beirut as coronavirus curfew takes effect

[Iran threat to US troops in Iraq remains 'significant'](#)

Thu, 2020-04-09 23:32

WASHINGTON: Iranian-backed militia pose a continuing and "significant" threat to US forces in Iraq, the State Department's top diplomat for the Middle East said on Thursday, about a week after US President Donald Trump warned of a sneak attack by Iran or its proxies.

Speaking to reporters in a teleconference, David Schenker, assistant secretary of Near Eastern Affairs at the U.S. State Department, did not give any details about the threat. "It continues to be significant," he said. Iran-backed paramilitary groups have regularly been rocketing and shelling bases in Iraq that host US forces and the area around the US embassy in Baghdad.

Schenker's comments came after three Katyushka rockets landed near a district in southern Iraq that houses workers for foreign oil companies on Monday, including US oil service company Halliburton. No casualties or damage were reported.



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Rockets hit near site of foreign oil firms, state-run companies in Iraq's Basra
Iran warns US after Patriot deployment to Iraq