

# Bethlehem prepares for Christmas

Author:

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BETHLEHEM: Many Christians in Palestine like to celebrate Christmas by visiting the town of Bethlehem, where Jesus Christ was born.

Every year, hundreds of thousands of pilgrims cover the region, also visiting Nazareth and Jerusalem.

Najwan Saifi and her sister and mother visit Bethlehem "almost every year" at Christmas.

"We come to this city, spend a day or two in a hotel and enjoy the atmosphere, the wonderful celebrations, away from the daily pressures of life and work," Saifi said.

"Sometimes I feel sad that not all Palestinians can come to Bethlehem. There are thousands of people who want to visit, but the barriers and the wall remain, preventing many people. I hope the occupation will one day disappear," She added

In Bethlehem the pilgrimage route known as Star Street is being renovated in the hope that it will return to its former glory: A bustling thoroughfare of historical importance.

Downtown Bethlehem, the commercial heart, is mostly bypassed in favor of the more well-known ancient site: The church built on top of the grotto where Christ was born.

"We are expecting 1.4 million tourists," said Anton Salman, the mayor of Bethlehem, adding that he could only go on figures from organized groups, and that the number could be much higher.

That estimate would still represent a near 20 percent increase from 12 months ago in any event. "Things are going up. This year is better than 2018, and 2018 was better than 2017. It is a continuous increase."

Israel's settlements in the West Bank and its separation wall, which divides Bethlehem from Jerusalem, have restricted access to the city and devastated the local economy.

Twenty-three Israeli settlements take up 21 square km of the Bethlehem area, hosting 165,000 Israeli settlers.

Before Christmas Eve, Manger Square in Bethlehem, which the mayor's office overlooks, is abuzz with tourists taking selfies by the newly lit tree erected at its center by the municipality.

Fadi Kattan, a Palestinian chef who runs Hosh Al-Syrian guesthouse, believes tourism should extend beyond the Christmas season and that changes should be

made to entice visitors to stay in Bethlehem during the rest of the year.

“Tourists usually spend a few hours in Bethlehem – that is not enough for the city’s economy. The real impact would be if they stayed in the hotels and spent a long time,” Kattan said.

As for gift shop owner Saad Sabbagh, the Christmas season is a working season for Bethlehem’s residents, and an opportunity for its economy to recover.

“There are many difficulties, but we are thinking about this season, working and receiving tourists from all over the world. There is already an increase this year in the number of tourists, and work is increasing,” Sabbagh said

Five new hotels are being built and some existing hotels are expanding. The town has even extended the opening hours of the Church of the Nativity. The building has undergone extensive restorations since 2013 to repair its leaky roof, tattered windows and covered mosaics.

The region’s Christians were excited earlier in the year, on Nov. 29, when a religious relic sent to Rome in the seventh century, supposedly a fragment of Christ’s manger, was returned to the Holy Land after nearly 1,400 years by Pope Francis. It is now on permanent display at the church.

Visits to Bethlehem during the holidays are not confined to Christians, with thousands of Muslim Palestinians from the West Bank and Israel also expected over the period.

Ahmad Najib, on holiday with his wife and two children, said: “The atmosphere of Christmas is beautiful, and in Bethlehem it is the most beautiful, especially on Christmas Eve. I am here with my family to enjoy taking pictures, and share with Christians their holidays just as they share ours.”



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Bethlehem welcomes pilgrims for Christmas celebrations  
Carols and bells in Bethlehem as festive season draws near

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## Turkey's 'crazy' canal plan runs into wave of criticism

Author:

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ANKARA: Turkey is hoping to begin work on President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's Canal Istanbul – a gigantic shipping project that even the Turkish leader has described as “crazy” – after the scheme was given an environment green light on Monday.

The mega-project will involve the building of a 45 km shipping canal on the edge of Istanbul that supporters say will rival the Suez Canal.

Viewed as a “signature project” by the ruling AKP government, the canal is expected to ease shipping congestion in the adjacent Bosphorus Strait and will carry up to 160 vessels a day when it is completed in 2025.

However, the scale and cost of the project have drawn criticism from several quarters, including Ekrem Imamoglu, Istanbul's opposition mayor, who says the canal will have a devastating environmental impact and will be difficult to finance.

“This city is a gift of God. Do not betray this city,” he said last month.

Although his concerns have been dismissed by the government, Imamoglu is calling for a referendum on the project, which is expected to cost about \$15 billion.

Erdogan has rejected the Imamoglu's comments, saying: “The mayor is claiming Canal Istanbul is not suitable. Mind your own business.”

However, Yoruk Isik, an Istanbul-based independent geo-analyst, told Arab News that it is unclear if the Canal Istanbul project has received environmental clearance. “It's more likely that the Turkish president is trying to jump the gun and declare victory on the issue,” he added.

Another concern is that the canal might jeopardize the Montreux Convention,

the 1936 agreement that gives Turkey control over the Bosphorus and Dardanelles straits, limiting warships' access to the strategic waterways.

Ilker Basbug, Turkey's former chief of staff, criticized the canal scheme, saying that if conditions change under the project, member states could annul or ignore the convention.

The agreement allows civilian ships to use the straits in peacetime, but restricts warships' access to the Black Sea.

But while the Bosphorus and Dardanelles – both natural waterways – are regulated by the convention, Canal Istanbul, as a man-made canal, would be overseen by Turkish authorities.

“The convention has prevented an arms race in the Black Sea and maintained peace,” Isik said.

According to Isik, Russia views the convention as vitally important to its security and economy, and will never agree to any changes in the agreement.

If the new canal is opened to warships, a serious political crisis could emerge with Russia, Isik said.

“From the historical Turkish perspective, the Montreux Convention (is one of) the founding documents of the Turkish republic. Opening it to discussion is self-defeating and could only be described as a short-sighted domestic policy maneuver,” he said.

The ambitious canal project will also incorporate new residential and business areas, leading critics to claim that it is a “real estate” project.

Financing of the canal in a country where economic deterioration has become widespread, is also a divisive issue.



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## [Iran arrests family of young man killed in 'riots'](#)

Author:

Wed, 2019-12-25 00:47

TEHRAN: Iran has arrested the family of a young man killed in street violence that flared during last month's protests against fuel price hikes, Mehr news agency reported on Tuesday.

The family of Pouya Bakhtiari, who was "killed suspiciously during the recent riots," had been invited for talks with authorities, Mehr said, citing what it called an informed source.

They were found to have been "carrying out a counter-revolutionary project" and "anti-structural activities," said the agency, which is close to moderate conservatives in Iran.

"Consequently, these elements were arrested by a judicial order in order to protect the order and the security of the honorable people and others damaged by the rioters," it said without specifying which family members were taken into custody.

Bakhtiari was reportedly killed in Karaj city, west of Tehran, in street violence that erupted in mid-November during nationwide protests over a shock decision to hike petrol prices by as much as 200 percent. He was 27. His Instagram account, which is now reportedly run by his father, announced a ceremony marking 40 days since his death would be held at Karaj cemetery on Thursday.

It was still active with more than 18,000 followers on Tuesday.

Officials in Iran have yet to issue an overall death toll for the unrest, but international human rights group Amnesty International has put the number at more than 300.

An Iranian security official rejected a foreign media report on Monday that the figure was as high as 1,500, saying it was based on "false propaganda."

## BACKGROUND

“This way of news writing and making accusations is essentially nothing special,” said Alireza Zarifian Yeganeh, head of the information and communications secretariat of Iran’s Supreme National Security Council.

Quoted by the Tasnim news agency, he dismissed the reports as “a series of ludicrous claims.”

“And when you would ask this media about its source, it would refer to some invisible creatures and there is no possibility of verification.”

The days of unrest in Iran from Nov. 15 saw police stations attacked, shops looted and banks and petrol stations torched as authorities imposed a weeklong internet blackout.

Videos that have surfaced since purport to show scenes from the crackdown that followed, including footage of security forces firing at unarmed demonstrators or beating them with batons.

The US, France and Germany have all condemned Iran over the bloodshed.

Iran has repeatedly denied casualty figures issued abroad.

In a report on Dec. 2, state television charged that foreign media had been “hyping up” the death toll.

It also said that security forces “had no choice but to resort to authoritative and tough confrontation in order to save people from the hands of the rioters, and a number of rioters were killed.”





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Amnesty raises to 304 number of Iranians killed in protests  
Fresh protests claim more victims in southern Iran

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## [In Gaza, a somber Christmas after permits row](#)

Author:

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GAZA: With a shining tree, tinsel and Santa miniatures, Hanadi Missak's apartment is all ready for Christmas, yet she still feels sad about spending the holiday at home.

The 48-year-old is one of hundreds of Christian Palestinians from the Gaza Strip who applied for Israeli permission to travel to Bethlehem in the occupied West Bank to celebrate the birth of Jesus.

Church leaders say the normally straightforward process has this year been incredibly difficult, with only around one in five applications granted. With time running out until the celebrations begin, Missak had given up on traveling.

"I was hoping to go to Bethlehem, but the circumstances did not allow it," Missak, who is deputy principal at a Christian school in Gaza, told AFP.

"There is the real celebration – the prayers, decorations in all the streets and the church," she said.

"The midnight mass is wonderful."

There are barely more than 1,000 Christians in all of Gaza, where two million people live crammed into a territory only 40 kilometers (25 miles) long and a few wide.

It is geographically separated from the West Bank – the Palestinian territory where Bethlehem is located – by Israel, and crossing between them requires hard-to-get Israeli permits.

A few hundred Gazan Christians have traditionally been granted permits to attend Christmas festivities in Bethlehem and Jerusalem each year.

This year, Israel initially didn't announce any permits, prompting criticism from church groups and media.

On Sunday, a statement from COGAT, the Israeli military body responsible for the permits, said some would be granted "in accordance with security assessments."

Gaza is ruled by the Islamist group Hamas, which Israel accuses of abusing the permit system to plan attacks against its citizens.

Wadie Abunassar, an adviser to and spokesman for church leaders in the Holy Land, told AFP Monday that out of 951 applications so far, 192 had been granted.

"We still hope there will be more to come. We were promised by many Israeli bodies... but Christmas begins tomorrow," he said.

"We are saying this is a basic human right that should be respected."

Missak said she had traveled to the West Bank multiple times before for Christmas and didn't know why the permit hadn't been granted this year.

COGAT did not respond to multiple requests for comment regarding the number of permits awarded or Missak's case.

AFP reached out to a number of Palestinians from Gaza who were able to leave the enclave, but none wished to speak out of fear they would jeopardize future chances of getting permits.

Nabil Al-Salfiti and his wife Fatten were among those lucky enough to receive permits, but ultimately decided not to travel when their son's application was denied.

They also cited financial constraints for their decision.

Israel maintains a crippling blockade of Gaza it says is necessary to isolate Hamas.

Israel and other critics of the Islamist group, which along with its allies has fought three wars with the Jewish state, accuse it of persecuting minorities.

Local authorities in Gaza used to hold a large celebration for Christmas, but it was stopped after Hamas seized control in 2007.

"People come offer us congratulations and we offer congratulations to them," Fatten said, but, he added, "There is not much joy – the real joy is in Bethlehem where Christ was born."



Despite not traveling this year, Missak is determined to enjoy Christmas. Hanging on the wall in her apartment is a stitched “Merry Christmas” sign, while the bannisters are covered in fake holly. Missak said Muslim friends and neighbors would pass by the house to take part in the festivities. “Despite all the misery in Gaza, I try to make joy and celebrate Christmas.”



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## [Tunisian PM-designate says to form government of ‘independents’](#)

Author:

Reuters

ID:

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TUNIS: Tunisia’s prime minister-designate Habib Jemli will form a government made up of independents who do not represent political parties, he said at a

news conference on Monday.

Jemli, who was nominated as prime minister by the moderate Islamist Ennahda party last month after it took most seats in October's parliamentary election, last week asked President Kais Saied for more time to form a government.

Talks to build a ruling coalition capable of winning a vote of confidence have proved difficult because the October election produced a fractured parliament in which no party held more than a quarter of seats. Several of the main parties have either ruled out joining the government altogether or said they would not join if one or other major party was also involved, or if they did not secure several of the most important portfolios. Jemli told Reuters last month he was a week away from announcing the government, but then failed to do so.

Tunisia, which adopted democracy after its 2011 revolution that sparked the "Arab spring" uprisings, has faced economic difficulties over the past eight years that have at times threatened to undermine its political transition. The next government faces a difficult task in continuing economic reforms to bring its deficits and debt under tighter control, as demanded by foreign lenders, while raising growth and delivering better public services.



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