

Palestinian strawberry farmers hope for rich pickings as export markets open up this season

Thu, 2019-12-12 23:45

BEIT LAHIA/GAZA: Farming in the Gaza Strip can be unpredictable at the best of times, but for strawberry grower Akram Abu Khousa years of toil under Israeli restrictions are starting to bear fruit.

The Palestinian farmer is celebrating the success of the first major export of his crop from Gaza to Gulf markets, business he hopes will compensate him and his fellow growers after years of heavy financial losses suffered due to Israeli blockades and restrictions on border trade crossings.

“Over past years we have faced problems with marketing, which was almost confined to the local market. This forced us to reduce prices significantly and inflicted heavy losses on us, as a result of the deteriorating economic situation in the Gaza Strip,” Abu Khousa told Arab News.

“This season may be different in terms of production volume and quality.”

The blockade imposed by Israel following the success of Hamas in the second Palestinian legislative elections in early 2006, led to huge losses for strawberry farmers, and caused the areas of cultivated land to be reduced to only 450 dunums (111 acres) in 2015.

However, Israel increased the export allowance in 2017, reviving hopes among farmers of a more prosperous future.

The strawberry harvest season begins in early December and continues until the end of March.

This year Abu Khousa planted an area of more than eight dunums (almost 2 acres) of strawberries in the northern Gaza town of Beit Lahia, seven dunums of which were in the traditional way and one using hanging pots.

“The trend for hanging planting has increased the rate of production. One dunum cultivated in the modern way gives more than three times the traditional cultivation,” he said.

The soil and climate of Beit Lahia contain characteristics that distinguish the area from the rest of the Palestinian lands, making it ideal for the cultivation of high-quality strawberries.

SPEEDREAD

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caused the areas of cultivated land to be reduced to only 450 dunums in 2015.

At the beginning of December, Abu Khousa and other strawberry farmers began the process of harvesting and exporting their crops to West Bank cities. The Ministry of Agriculture had asked them for samples, and after testing their quality, the daily average of trucks allowed to leave Gaza was determined by the Israeli side.

The price of 1 kilo of strawberries locally, usually at the beginning of the season, was about 10 shekels (nearly \$3), but gradually decreased, reaching four shekels at peak periods.

“If the export process does not continue, we will suffer a major setback and loss,” added Abu Khousa. He pointed out that local sales did not cover the basic cost of production.

He noted that the vast experience of the farmers of Beit Lahia made them capable of producing crops to meet strict international specifications.

The strawberry season provides hundreds of work opportunities during harvest times, helping to alleviate high unemployment rates in the Gaza Strip.

According to the latest data from the Palestinian Statistics Center, jobless rates were running at 53 percent, and 67 percent among youth.

Spokesman for the Ministry of Agriculture in Gaza, Adham Al-Basyouni, told Arab News: “Israel has tried over the years of the blockade to control the export of strawberry products in particular, because it knows that it is one of the distinct crops that come out to the West Bank and European and Arab markets.”

The success of the experimental export of strawberries – which included 8 tons going to Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain – had been a major boost for farmers and the local economy in Gaza, said Al-Basyouni, and he hoped it would be a prelude to further shipments of strawberries and other crops.

Strawberries are exported through Kerem Shalom, the only commercial crossing in the Gaza Strip, and then moved on to Jordan via King Hussein Bridge, and from there to the Gulf states.

The director of the Agricultural Cooperative Society in Beit Lahia, Mohamed Ghaben, said: “Gaza strawberries have very high-quality specifications and compete with the global product.”

There were 1,700 dunums planted with strawberries this season, compared to 1,100 dunums last season, and he expected production levels this time round to reach 5,000 tons, half of which were planned for export, he said.

The cultivation of strawberries in the Gaza Strip began at the end of the 1960s, with an experimental area estimated at one-and-a-half acres, and after achieving remarkable success, it gradually expanded until it reached 2,500 dunums in 2005.



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US hospital causes controversy in Gaza Israel strikes in Gaza after rocket attack

[Indicted Netanyahu to quit all ministries, remain PM](#)

Author:

Thu, 2019-12-12 23:41

JERUSALEM: Embattled Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, facing criminal charges and a new general election, will resign from all other ministerial positions he holds but remain premier, his lawyers said on Thursday.

The announcement to the supreme court came the same morning as Parliament dissolved itself and set a date for a new election, the third within a year.

The court had received a petition from the Movement for Quality of Government in Israel (MQG) demanding that Netanyahu, who is also minister of

agriculture, diaspora, health and welfare, step down from all his positions in light of his indictments.

Attorney General Avichai Mandelblit last month charged Netanyahu with bribery, fraud and breach of trust in three different corruption cases.

Israeli law stipulates that ministers facing criminal charges resign, but has no such provision for prime ministers.

Following the petition, Mandelblit said that while Netanyahu could not be forced to resign as premier, the issue of his ministerial positions would be addressed later.

In the Thursday submission to the court, Netanyahu's legal team said: "He will cease being a minister by Jan. 1, 2020 and appoint other ministers instead.

"The prime minister will continue to be prime minister, as per the law," attorneys Avi Halevy and Michael Rabello said.

The MQG said Netanyahu's intention to resign as minister "was not enough," describing his continued premiership "a terrible shame on Israel."

"Netanyahu should fight for his innocence as a private person and not from the prime minister's office," the NGO said in a statement.

Netanyahu protests his innocence, accusing the state prosecution and media of a witch hunt.

He has yet to announce whether he will seek immunity from prosecution – a parliamentary process complicated by the short life of the current parliament.

A new election was called for March 2, after neither Netanyahu nor his centrist rival Benny Gantz managed to form a majority coalition following the September vote.



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Israel heads to third election as midnight deadline looms
Israel parliament moves for third election as talks falter

[New rocket attack targets Iraq base housing US troops](#)

Author:

Thu, 2019-12-12 23:38

BAGHDAD: Two rockets were fired at a military base near Baghdad airport housing US troops, the 10th such attack since late October, the Iraqi army said on Thursday.

There were no casualties in the overnight attack, which follows one on the same base on Monday which wounded six members of Iraq's elite US-trained counterterrorism force, two of them critically, the army said.

Washington has expressed mounting concern about the flurry of attacks on US bases and diplomatic missions, several of which it has blamed on Shiite militia groups trained by its foe and rival for influence Tehran.

Security sources have linked at least one attack last week to Kataib Hezbollah, a powerful Shiite faction close to Tehran and blacklisted by Washington.

Iran holds vast sway in Iraq, especially among the more hard-line elements of the Hashd Al-Shaabi, a paramilitary force largely made up of Shiite militias.

A US defense official told AFP the rocket attacks made the Hashd a bigger security threat to American troops in Iraq than Daesh, the militant movement which the US has vowed to help Baghdad wipe out.

On Friday, the US imposed sanctions on three senior Hashd figures.

Tensions between Iran and the US have soared since Washington pulled out of a landmark nuclear agreement with Tehran last year and reimposed crippling sanctions.

Baghdad – which is close to both countries and whose many security forces have been trained by either the US or Iran – is worried about being caught in the middle.

US officials say they are considering plans to deploy between 5,000 and 7,000 additional troops to the region to counter Iran.

Anti-protester killed

Meanwhile, demonstrators lynched a teenager accused of attacking a protest encampment in Baghdad on Thursday, police and witnesses said, in an attack that threatened to tarnish the protest movement's broadly nonviolent image.

Police said a dispute between a 17-year-old male and protesters culminated with the body of the youth being strung from a traffic light near Tahrir Square, the epicenter of the months-old anti-government protest movement.

Earlier, police said protesters, some of whom have accused police of not protecting them from "saboteurs," set fire to the nearby house of the young man.

Video streamed live online showed security forces withdrawing before a crowd dragged a man along the ground while people kicked him.

His body, dressed only in underpants, was then strung up by the feet from a traffic light.

The corpse was later removed and taken to a forensic morgue, witnesses said. The morgue confirmed receiving a body.

The brutal episode could radically change the situation for a protest movement that has claimed pacifism in the face of violence in which 460 people have been killed and 25,000 injured, mostly protesters.

A statement signed by “the protesters of Tahrir” shared online denounced “a Machiavellian plan aimed at tarnishing the reputation of the peaceful protesters.”

The thousands of protesters in Tahrir Square “had nothing to do with this morning’s events,” it concluded.

As images emerged online, a Twitter account close to Muqtada Sadr addressed the Shiite cleric’s unarmed “blue helmets,” who deployed to protect protesters after unidentified gunmen attacked them last week.

“If within 48 hours, the terrorists responsible are not identified, the blue helmets will have to withdraw from all the places where protesters assemble,” it wrote.

Powerful pro-Iran militia leader Qais al-Khazali – who was recently targeted by US sanctions – denounced the “chaos” he has warned of since protests began.

“How long will this chaos and lawlessness continue, these weak security forces and proliferation of weapons and dirty militias,” he asked on Twitter.

Protesters accuse pro-Iran armed factions of playing a role in the killing and abduction of protesters.



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Iraqi politician slams protestors, calls them 'monkeys' Iraqi oil-reserve potential 'could exceed' Saudi Arabia's

[Date palm, Arab region symbol of prosperity, listed by UNESCO](#)

Author:

AFP

ID:

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DUBAI: The date palm, which was recognized by UNESCO on Wednesday, has for centuries played an important role in the establishment and growth of civilizations in the hot and dry regions of the Arab world.

Now date palm-related knowledge, traditions and practices have been inscribed on UNESCO's list of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

The tree, whose roots penetrate deep into the soil, allowing it to grow in arid climates, has not only been a source of food but also of economic gain.

"Date palms gather in oases of different densities within desert areas indicating the presence of water levels suitable for irrigation," according to a nomination put forward by 14 countries – Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, Palestinian Territories, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates and Yemen.

"As a result, this aided mankind in settling down despite harsh conditions," said the document.

Until this day, platters of dates adorn tables in homes and businesses across the Arab world, where the symbol of the date palm tree has historically presented prosperity.

The offering of the sweet fruit, coupled with a cup of coffee, is a sign of good old-fashioned Arab hospitality.

According to the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization, the date palm is probably the most ancient cultivated tree.

It was grown as early as 4,000 BC and used for the construction of the moon god temple near Ur in southern Iraq – the ancient region of Mesopotamia.

"The population of the submitting states has been associated with the date palm tree for centuries as it aided them in the construction of civilization," they said in the nomination.

"Historical research and various antiquities excavations have resulted in the plant's significant cultural and economic status in numerous regions such as Mesopotamia, ancient Egypt and the Arab Gulf."

The ancient crop also faces some modern challenges. Gulf countries have fought hard to eradicate the red palm weevil, which originally came from Asia and was first detected in the region in the 1980s.

The beetle, which is barely a few centimeters (around an inch) long, produces larvae that feed off palm trunks, killing the trees.

“In Gulf countries and the Middle East, \$8 million is lost each year through removal of severely infested trees alone,” according to the FAO.

All parts of the date palm were and are still used in some parts of the region for shelter or to produce a range of products, including handicrafts, mats, rope and furniture.

To celebrate and promote their date palm heritage and palm products, some of the submitting countries hold annual date festivals, most notably the annual Liwa Date Festival in the UAE and the Dates Festival in Al-Qassim in Saudi Arabia.

Both Gulf countries are among the top date exporters, according to the Geneva-based International Trade Center.



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[Political crisis is costing Lebanon more than \\$70m a day](#)

Author:

Wed, 2019-12-11 23:20

BEIRUT: Lebanon is losing more than \$70 million a day as a result of the political and economic crisis, ministers say. There has also been an alarming decline in imports and the 2019 budget deficit will be much greater than expected, they added.

Meanwhile private-sector bosses gathered to demand action, and revealed the devastating effects of the crisis on their businesses, which has forced many to cut wages or fire staff as they struggle to survive.

The country has been in turmoil since October 18, when protests began against the ruling elite. On October 29, Prime Minister Saad Hariri and his government resigned, but replacements are yet to be named, leaving the economy and banking system in chaos.

“Public-sector employees will get paid before December 25 and their salaries for the next months are guaranteed, but there is a dramatic decline in state imports,” said caretaker Finance Minister Hassan Khalil. “The deficit will rise and 2020 budget figures will be reconsidered.”

Caretaker Economy Minister Mansour Bteish added: “The country is half-paralyzed. The total income per day is \$150 million, which means the national economy is losing at least \$70 to 80 million a day. The crisis has dramatically worsened and urgent solutions are needed.”

Owners of private businesses gathered in the heart of Beirut to demand action.

“The private sector in Lebanon represents 75 percent of the country’s revenues,” said Waddah Sadeq, owner of a marketing and advertising company. “Fifty percent of companies are in danger and might close amid the financial and economic crisis, due to the lack of a consensus to form a new government that could save the country.

“The private sector can only survive until the first quarter of 2020. There are 40,000 private companies in Lebanon with 850,000 employees providing for 500,000 families. About 5,000 employees have been dismissed, especially in the restaurant, tourism and services sectors.

“Factories are struggling to survive and if the situation does not improve, they will most certainly close. Imports have been blocked due to the banking restrictions and so the work of businesses relying on imports is suspended. What are politicians still waiting for?”

Pierre Issa, the cofounder of Arc-en-ciel, a non-profit organization that works with private companies, said: “Our state is making us pay taxes with no services in return. The situation of organizations such as ours has become very critical and we are stuck with two options: paying employees or paying taxes.”

Sahar, a restaurant owner, said: “Work has been severely affected. Suppliers are unable to withdraw their money from banks to meet our needs. People are avoiding eating at restaurants because they are being paid half their salaries or have been fired from their jobs.

“We are struggling to survive. This month I must cut my employees’ salaries in half because I do not want to fire any of them. But I do not know what I will have to do if the situation remains this bad in 2020.”

Architect Fouad Naayem said he had to let some staff go, and added: “I have kept only eight employees because I had to reduce expenses. Our work in Lebanon is paralyzed. If the economic stagnation continues, I will be forced to migrate.”

Nabil Kettaneh is the owner of Kettaneh Group, which was established in 1922 and sells cars, hospital equipment and home appliances.

“My concern today is to provide the salaries of 210 employees, given that the company is making zero revenues” he said “People have stopped buying cars due to the banking restrictions and the economic crisis. We want a government able to control the situation, save the national economy and restore banks’ trust. Our deposits are blocked . We cannot transfer money abroad to import goods.”

The International Support Group for Lebanon, which convened in Paris on Wednesday, said that the preservation of “Lebanon’s stability, security, sovereignty, political independence and territorial integrity requires the urgent formation of a competent and credible government to implement economic reforms.” The group added that the government must “be independent of regional crises and tensions,” and called for “the adoption of a reliable budget for 2020” as soon as possible.



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Iran's threat to destroy Tel Aviv from Lebanon condemned Lebanon not expecting new aid pledges at Paris meeting