

Iraqi Christians celebrate Christmas one year after Daesh defeat

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BAGHDAD: Iraqi Christians quietly celebrated Christmas on Tuesday amid improved security, more than a year after the country declared victory over Daesh militants who threatened to end their 2,000-year history in Iraq. Christianity in Iraq dates back to the first century of the Christian era, when the apostles Thomas and Thaddeus are believed to have preached the Gospel on the fertile flood plains of the rivers Tigris and Euphrates. Iraq is home to many different eastern rite churches, both Catholic and Orthodox, traditionally a sign of the country's ethnic and religious diversity.

But war and sectarian conflict shrank Iraq's Christian population from 1.5 million to about 400,000 after the US-led invasion in 2003. Following the onslaught of Daesh in 2014 and the brutal three-year war that followed their numbers have fallen further, though it is not known exactly by how much. In Baghdad, Christians celebrated mass on Tuesday morning – declared a national holiday by government – in churches decorated for Christmas. Once fearful, they said they were now hopeful, since conditions had improved. "Of course we can say the security situation is better than in previous years," said Father Basilius, leader of the St. George Chaldean Church in Baghdad where more than a hundred congregants attended Christmas mass. "We enjoy security and stability mainly in Baghdad. In addition, Daesh was beaten."

Iraq declared victory over the militants more than a year ago, but the damage done to Christian enclaves on the Nineveh Plains has been extensive.

In Qaraqosh, a town also known as Hamdaniya which lies 15 km (10 miles) west of Mosul, the damage is still visible.

At the city's Immaculate Church, which belongs to the Syrian Catholic denomination and has not yet been rebuilt since the militants set it on fire in 2014, Christians gathered for midnight mass on Monday, surrounded by blackened walls still tagged with Daesh graffiti.

Dozens of worshippers prayed and received communion, and then gathered around the traditional bonfire in the church's courtyard.

Before the militant onslaught, Qaraqosh was the largest Christian settlement in Iraq, with a population of more than 50,000. But today only a few hundred families have returned.

Faced with a choice to convert, pay a tax or die, many Christians in the Nineveh Plains fled to nearby towns and cities and some eventually moved abroad.

Some have since returned, Father Butros said, adding: "We hope that all displaced families will return."





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[Christmas](#)

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[Iraqi Christians](#)

Damascus lights up its biggest Christmas tree
Palestinians mark Christmas amid Israeli restrictions

[Clashes erupt as Sudanese march on presidential palace](#)

Author:

By HAMZA HENDAWI | AP

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1545741632979931700

Tue, 2018-12-25 (All day)

CAIRO: Clashes erupted Tuesday in the Sudanese capital between police and thousands of protesters attempting to march on the presidential palace to demand that President Omar Bashir step down, according to activists and video clips posted online.

The clips purported to show crowds of several hundred each gathering on side roads and headed toward the palace on the bank of the Blue Nile in the heart of Khartoum. They sang patriotic songs and chanted "Peaceful, peaceful against the thieves" and "The people want to bring down the regime." The latter was the most popular slogan of the 2010 and 2011 Arab Spring revolts. Large numbers of security forces were deployed across much of Khartoum Tuesday in anticipation of the march, with soldiers riding in all-terrain vehicles. Police used tear gas to disperse some of the protesters.

The protest was called by an umbrella of independent professional unions and supported by the country's largest political parties, the Umma and Democratic Nationalist. The organizers want to submit a petition demanding that Bashir, in power for 29 years, step down.

Tuesday's march follows nearly a week of protests initially sparked by rising prices and shortages of food and fuel, but which later escalated into calls for Bashir to go. The Sudanese leader was in the Al-Jazeera region south of Khartoum on a previously scheduled visit Tuesday. Live TV coverage showed him addressing supporters there.

The petition presented by the protesters demands that he hand over power to a "transitional government of technocrats with a defined mandate agreed upon by all segments of the Sudanese society."

"We are asserting that we will continue to exercise all popular and peaceful options, including general strike and civil disobedience, to bring down the regime," it said.

The march followed a joint statement Monday night by the United States, Britain, Norway and Canada, which said they were concerned by "credible reports" that Sudan's security forces have used live ammunition against

demonstrators.

They urged all parties to avoid violence or the destruction of property while affirming the right of the Sudanese people to peacefully protest to express their "legitimate grievances."

The London-based rights group Amnesty International meanwhile said it had "credible reports" that Sudanese police have killed 37 protesters in clashes during the anti-government demonstrations.

An opposition leader said over the weekend that 22 protesters were killed. The government has acknowledged fatalities without providing any figures. The military vowed Sunday to rally behind Bashir and emphasized in a statement that it was operating in harmony with the police and Sudan's feared security agencies.

Bashir on Monday said his government would introduce measures to remedy the economy and "provide citizens with a dignified life." He also warned citizens against what he called "rumor mongers."

The protests over the past week have been met with a heavy security crackdown, with authorities arresting more than a dozen opposition leaders, suspending school and university classes, and imposing emergency rule or nighttime curfews in several cities. There has also been a near-total news blackout on the protests.

Bashir, in his mid-70s, seized power in a 1989 military coup that overthrew an elected but ineffective government. He is wanted by the International Criminal Court for committing crimes against humanity and genocide in the western Darfur region.

Bashir has ordered the use of force against protesters in the past – including in the last round of unrest in January – successfully crushing them to remain one of the longest-serving leaders in the region. Although his time in power has seen one crisis after another, he is seeking a new term in office, with loyal lawmakers campaigning for constitutional amendments that would allow him to run in the 2020 election.

Sudan lost three quarters of its oil wealth when the mainly animist and Christian south seceded in 2011 after a long and ruinous civil war against the mainly Muslim and Arabized north. More recently, a currency devaluation caused prices to surge and a liquidity crunch forced the government to limit bank withdrawals, leading to long lines outside ATMs.



Main category:

[Middle-East](#)

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Sudan police disperse protesters with tear gas on sixth day of unrest
Sudan opposition leader says 22 killed in bread protests

[Two dead, 11 wounded in car bomb in northern Iraqi city Tal Afar](#)

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BAGHDAD: At least two people were killed and 11 wounded on Tuesday by a car

bomb in the northern Iraqi city of Tal Afar, a former Daesh stronghold, the military said.

Daesh claimed responsibility for the car bomb attack in the northern Iraqi city of Tal Afar, the group said on its news agency Amaq on Tuesday. Tal Afar, about 80 km (50 miles) west of Mosul, experienced cycles of sectarian violence between Sunnis and Shi'ites after the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, and produced some of Daesh's most senior commanders. The city, which had about 200,000 residents, came under the militants' control when Daesh overran swathes of Iraq's north in 2014. It fell to Iraqi Security Forces, backed by the US-led coalition, in August 2017, the last area to be retaken in the north before fighting moved to the Syrian border. A heavy security presence has remained since then and the city has been mostly quiet.



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[Middle-East](#)

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Iraq Cabinet remains incomplete as Parliament defers key appointments
Iraq appoints two more ministers but government still incomplete

[UAE rebuts false allegations regarding Sheikha Latifa](#)

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Mon, 2018-12-24 22:39

DUBAI: The UAE Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation released a statement on Monday via the state run WAM, detailing a communique by the UAE Mission in Geneva rebutting allegations regarding Sheikha Latifa bint Mohammed Al-Maktoum.

Below is the statement in full:

“On Dec. 21 2018, the UAE Mission in Geneva delivered a communique regarding H.H. Sheikha Latifa bint Mohammed Al-Maktoum to the Office of Special Procedures at the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. The communique responds to and rebuts false allegations and provided evidence that Her Highness Sheikha Latifa was at home and living with her family in Dubai.

“At the request of the family, on Dec. 15 2018, Mary Robinson, former United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights and former President of Ireland, met with Sheikha Latifa in Dubai.

“The photographs taken during the afternoon they spent together have been shared, with their consent. During her visit to Dubai, Robinson was reassured that Sheikha Latifa is receiving the necessary care and support she requires.”



Main category:
[Middle-East](#)

[Christmas is about keeping hope alive, says Bethlehem mayor](#)

Author:
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Mon, 2018-12-24 22:25

BETHLEHEM: Bethlehem Mayor Anton Salman said keeping hope alive was his biggest challenge. Talking to Arab News during an exclusive interview, he expressed his wish to bring thousands of diaspora Bethlehemites back to the city, but acknowledged his inability to do so "because there's no land due to Israeli settlements." Following are excerpts from the interview:

Q. What is your biggest challenge as mayor of a city surrounded by walls and settlements?

A. Keeping hope alive. We do so not only as a matter of carrying the message

of Christmas, but also through our daily work: Building institutions and capacity for our people is a strong form of resistance against the occupation.

In practical terms, I'd like to bring back thousands of Bethlehemites from the diaspora, but I can't do that because there's no land due to Israeli settlements, and because the Israelis control the population registry and many people have lost their IDs. Whether by taking land or residency rights, Israel doesn't want us here. We tell Israel that no matter what, we'll remain.

Q. What is the biggest obstacle for tourism in Bethlehem?

A. Israel's monopoly over tourism, but we also have a responsibility in terms of doing more advocacy and promotion. Israel has even tried to prevent tourists from sleeping over in Bethlehem, but we've succeeded in bringing more people. What's important though is not the number of visitors as much as the number of people who stay in the city. Our goal for 2019 is to increase the number of people staying in the city.

Q. Are you interested in Arab tourists? What would you like to see in terms of tourism from Arab and Muslim countries?

A. Bethlehem is the Capital of Arab Culture 2020. We'd love to have thousands of people from Egypt, Jordan, Syria, Iraq and Lebanon here. Unfortunately, this isn't possible today due to the occupation, and we know we're losing a lot from it. We lose our potential, but our Arab sisters and brothers should know that we'll always be waiting for them.

Has the increase in tourism accommodation improved long-term economic conditions, or is it only short-term improvements?

It's too early to make any conclusions about this, but we can't take Bethlehem outside the context of the economic crisis that we have in Palestine in general. In any case, we'll keep working to improve the situation, and to make our residents feel the increase in the number of visitors in their daily lives.

Q. What do you want from the international community?

A. More deeds and less statements. It needs to hold Israel accountable for violating international law. How can a Western government claim to care about the situation of Christians in the Middle East while doing nothing about the oppression we have in Bethlehem? How come separating Bethlehem from Jerusalem with an illegal wall has been normalized by the international community? We need it to uphold its legal and moral responsibilities. That's all we're asking for.

Q. What are the issues on which you would like to see the Palestinian Authority (PA) doing more?

A. We have a direct relationship with the PA, and we raise our issues with it. We'd like it to better promote the potential of our city.



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[Christmas](#)

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[Bethlehem](#)

[Israel](#)

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Iraqi cities preparing for large Christmas celebrations
Real Christmas trees find buyers in the desert among UAE expats