

Israel begins fourth COVID-19 jab for over 60s, health workers

Author:

Mon, 2022-01-03 23:36

TEL AVIV: Israel began on Monday administering fourth Covid vaccine shots to people over 60 and health workers amid a surge driven by the omicron variant.

Health workers at Ichilov Hospital in Tel Aviv lined up for the shot and over-60s received it at the nearby branch of Clalit, Israel's largest health fund.

The shot was given to those who received their third inoculation at least four months ago.

The Health Ministry on Sunday approved the fourth shot for the over-60s and medical staff, two days after those with weakened immunity started to take the shot, making Israel one of the first countries to do so.

The Health Ministry on Monday reported 6,562 new COVID-19 infections over the previous day, nearly double the daily average of last week.

In an address late on Sunday, Prime Minister Naftali Bennett warned that cases could soon surge to around "50,000 cases per day."

More than 4 million people out of Israel's population of 9.2 million have received three shots of coronavirus vaccine.

A total of almost 1.4 million cases of COVID-19 infection, including 8,244 deaths, have been officially recorded in Israel.

Also on Monday, the Health Ministry said it will admit foreigners with presumed COVID-19 immunity from countries deemed medium-risk as of Jan. 9, partially reversing a ban on entry by foreigners imposed in late November in response to the fast-spreading omicron variant.

FASTFACT

Israel's Prime Minister Naftali Bennett warned that COVID-19 cases could soon surge to around '50,000 cases per day.'

The ministry said on Monday that travelers from 199 countries Israel has designated "orange" would have to prove in advance they are vaccinated or have recovered from COVID-19 and would be subject to PCR testing before and after arrival.

They include Australia, Italy and Ireland.

The ministry has also recommended that South Africa, Nigeria, Spain, Portugal, France and Canada, currently among 16 countries listed as “red” or high COVID-19 risk, be changed to “orange.”

Bennett said in the televised address that Israel would this week begin loosening curbs on international travel even as omicron-fueled cases spiral.

The US, Britain, UAE, Ethiopia, Tanzania, Mexico, Switzerland and Turkey remain on Israel’s red list, the ministry said.

Visitors from those countries require advance special permission from an Israeli committee to enter the country. Israel banned most travel to and from red-listed countries – initially all in southern Africa – on Nov. 25 after the omicron variant was first detected.



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Israel to admit some foreigners with presumed COVID-19 immunity as of Jan. 90micron could lead Israel to herd immunity: health official

Lebanese president criticized over 'marketing and populist' motives

Author:

Mon, 2022-01-03 23:06

BEIRUT: The political aide of Lebanon's parliament speaker on Monday attacked President Michel Aoun and the head of the Free Patriotic Movement, MP Gibran Bassil.

MP Ali Hassan Khalil made the remarks in response to Sunday's speech from Bassil, who threatened to break off the partnership with Hezbollah and asked the party to choose between an understanding with him or an alliance with Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri.

Berri's move embarrassed FPM ally Hezbollah a few hours before the Monday evening speech from its secretary-general, Hassan Nasrallah

Hezbollah was keen to avoid commenting on Bassil's press conference.

Political observers were expecting that Nasrallah would not cut ties with Bassil as he was the "only Christian ally of Hezbollah" in Lebanon.

Khalil said at a surprise press conference at the Amal Movement headquarters that the presidency and its movement were "detached from reality" and trying to blame their failure and crises on others.

He said Aoun's and Bassil's invitations to a national dialogue had "marketing and populist reasons" and accused the president's political team of "disrupting" the state and decisions in the Cabinet in order to pass deals and decisions.

Khalil said Aoun was the one who had turned the "principle of participation into a confiscation under the sectarian title and slogans of the movement."

He expressed his surprise at Bassil's adherence to the "financial decentralization" proposal, saying the proposal "blasts the basis of the unified state, its responsibility for all its people and regions, and the principle of balanced development."

He further accused FPM ministers, who held the Ministry of Energy, of having ignored the law of the authority regulating the electricity sector for 12 years in order to remain in control of power and decisions, away from any oversight.

Khalil considered that Aoun and Bassil's demand for a financial criminal audit was "a slogan to delude public opinion that you are not corrupt in the Ministry of Energy and the Ministry of Communications during the era of your ministers and other ministries."

He added that the "lie of the attack on the governor of the Central Bank,

Riad Salameh, will not deceive public opinion and absolve you from the fact that you were the ones who initiated the renewal of his mandate, after you made a deal for banks affiliated with you to benefit from Salameh's financial engineering, and any denial (of this fact) is refuted by published documents."

He said the Amal Movement's relationship with Hezbollah would not be shaken by "inciting words because it is built on foundations of frankness, trust and respect for the privacy of the other, and we are sure that the party and its leadership know that."

The president's team stepped up its attack on Hezbollah and Berri against the backdrop of the Constitutional Council's failure to accept an appeal from Aoun's team against parliamentary amendments to the electoral law.

The dispute expanded to include criticism of Hezbollah and Berri for paralyzing the work of the Council of Ministers over the investigation into the Beirut Port explosion.

Khalil has been accused by Judge Tarek Bitar of being connected to the explosion, with a warrant issued for his arrest. The warrant has yet to be executed.

While Nasrallah was commemorating the third anniversary of the killing of Iranian military officer Qassem Soleimani in his speech on Monday evening, the Ain Al-Hilweh camp for Palestinian refugees witnessed some tension.

It was caused by a protest from a group inside the camp loyal to Hezbollah against people who were tearing up a picture of Soleimani that had been raised inside the camp.

Contacts were made between leaders inside the camp to calm the situation.

The protest extended to the area separating Ain Al-Hilweh camp and Haret Saida, which is dominated by Shiites, against the backdrop of raising the Soleimani picture, with young men placing red crosses on it to express their rejection.

The leaders in Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon decided to neutralize the camps from any events taking place in the country.



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Lebanon's Bassil hits out at Hezbollah amid country's political paralysisAs the crises in Lebanon continue into 2022 so does the suffering of its people

[Palestinian parties urged to remove obstacles for local elections in Gaza and West Bank](#)

Author:

Mon, 2022-01-03 22:32

GAZA CITY: Hamas has rejected plans to hold municipal polls in the Gaza Strip – as is the case in the West Bank – where the Palestinian Authority was preparing for the second phase of elections in March.

More than 100 Palestinian NGOs issued a petition calling on Hamas and Fatah to remove any administrative, technical, or legal obstacles, and to ensure that local elections are held in Gaza and the West Bank.

The director of the NGOs Network in Gaza, Amjad Al-Shawa, said that the

consensus on holding local elections will restore hope to the Palestinian people in the possibility of achieving internal reconciliation.

Hamas and Fatah have failed to achieve internal Palestinian reconciliation after several attempts.

The NGOs said that holding local elections would push the process towards completing the rest of the legislative and presidential elections.

Hamas has made three demands of the Palestinian Authority to participate and allow the second phase of local elections to take place in the Gaza Strip.

In a letter sent to the Palestinian Central Elections Commission, Hamas demanded that comprehensive elections should be held simultaneously or consecutively, in which local elections are a part and not a substitute for them.

Hamas sought a written pledge from President Mahmoud Abbas to ensure that the elections will not be canceled at the last minute, and also wants the amendments he made to the municipal elections law to be cancelled.

Hamas spokesman Hazim Qasem said that the movement does not want partial elections.

He said that the movement's demands match national aspirations and that they must be discussed within the framework of a "serious national dialogue to discuss the elections at all levels, setting specific timetables, with written guarantees that they will be respected."

Hamas wants to hold comprehensive Palestinian elections for the Legislative Council, the presidency, and the National Council, as agreed upon nationally – either simultaneously or consecutively.

Abbas indefinitely postponed the legislative elections that were scheduled for last May, citing Israel's refusal to hold them in Jerusalem.

The Central Elections Commission announced that it had received an official letter from Hamas including its position on the second phase of the local elections scheduled to be held on March 26.

This stage of the elections will not be held in Gaza, according to the letter from Hamas, confirmed the director of the Regional Office of the Elections Commission in Gaza, Jamil Al-Khalidi.

He said that the letter included "political demands," which Hamas set as a basis for agreeing to participate and hold elections in Gaza.

The demands related to the elections law, such as canceling the formation of the electoral court, and returning the jurisdiction to decide on appeals to the courts of first instance in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

Hanna Nasser, the chair of the commission, responded to Hamas with a written letter.

He stressed that Hamas's demands "are political, and require addressing the political level about them."

The chairman said that the commission has an executive mission and it was not within its competence to decide on those political issues.

The commission believes that it is currently impossible to hold local elections in Gaza due to limited time ahead of the voter registration process for local elections, which is expected to begin within a few days.

The first phase of local elections were partially held in early December in 154 local councils in villages and towns in the West Bank, but not in the Gaza Strip.

Hamas has controlled the situation in the coastal strip since the split occurred in mid-2007.

The Palestinian Local Elections Law stipulates that "elections shall be held every four years by a decision of the council of ministers, provided that the term of office of the council shall be four years, and it shall continue to conduct business until the elections are held."

The last local elections were held in 2017 in the West Bank, when Hamas also refused to hold them in Gaza.



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Economy, security meetings will not settle Palestine-Israel conflict:
AnalystsEgypt pushes for calm after flare-up in Gaza hostilities

2022 Look Ahead: The cultural renaissance sweeping the Gulf region

Sun, 2022-01-02 22:40

DUBAI: A century ago, as humanity emerged from the privations of the First World War and the Spanish flu, a wave of creative energy suddenly swept the globe. From London to New York and from Sydney to Tokyo, the decade known as the Roaring Twenties heralded an age of unprecedented cultural exuberance, prosperity and industrial advances.

New technologies, from automobiles to wireless radios, hit the consumer market, and a new zest for life, evident in such fields as music, art and interior design, replaced the drabness and conservatism of the pre-war age.

The phenomenon was viewed as a reflection of a pent-up desire to make up for lost time – a feeling perhaps best captured by F. Scott Fitzgerald's 1925 novel, "The Great Gatsby."

A century on, as the world takes its first tentative steps out of the gloom and turmoil of the COVID-19 pandemic, many are already drawing parallels between this romanticized period of cultural, economic and technological hyperactivity and the somewhat delayed promise of the 2020s.



The Saudi House had been showcasing the Saudi cultural heritage to various audiences. (SPA)

The rollout of vaccines and falling rates of infection in mid-2021 allowed governments to ease lockdown measures and for world travel to resume. That is, until omicron emerged.

The emergence of yet another highly transmissible variant of the virus in November has shown that the pandemic is not yet over.

Far from roaring into 2022, many nations have once again opted to impose new restrictions, closures and postponements at museums, galleries, leisure facilities and performances venues.

How the latest wave of restrictions impacts the ambitions of the Gulf states remains to be seen.

Take Saudi Arabia. The Kingdom has been experiencing nothing short of a cultural revolution. After decades of self-imposed isolation, it hosted scores of “first-time” events in the arts, culture, sports and entertainment industries in 2021.

The words “game-changing” and “historic” could be heard on many lips during the month of December as the Kingdom hosted the inaugural Diriyah International Art Biennale, the first Philosophy Conference, the Red Sea International Film Festival and the first Saudi Arabian Grand Prix.



The region has also welcomed the world's favorite sports, with Formula One making its Saudi debut last month. (AFP)

"The change has happened so fast. We are exhausted but so excited and inspired," one Saudi artist taking part in the Misk Art Institute's Masaha Residency told Arab News.

The cultural explosion has a lot to do with the Kingdom's commitment to expanding new and exciting aspects of its economy under the Vision 2030 reform agenda.

The Saudi Ministry of Culture was established just three years ago. Since then, with the launch of the National Culture Strategy and 11 sector-specific commissions, the Kingdom has created a vibrant cultural ecosystem.

Since early December, the Kingdom has presented "a true cultural spectacle of more than 100 events, initiatives and engagements," according to the Saudi Ministry of Culture.

The spectacle included the return of Desert X – an exhibition of monumental artworks displayed among the ancient ruins and desert landscape of AlUla.

More recently, the Saudi government announced a new \$20 billion master plan to create "a world-class destination" called New Jeddah Downtown in the heart of the Kingdom's historic Red Sea port city, which will include a museum and an opera house.

FASTFACTS

No plans to postpone major art events in KSA and UAE.

Saudi Arabia hosted a record number of cultural events in 2021.

Dubai aims to become a global creative economy by 2025.

“Change has always been a constant in social development,” Ashraf Fagih, head of programming at Ithra, the King Abdulaziz Center for World Culture, which opened in Dhahran in 2017, told Arab News.



The King Abdulaziz Center for World Culture, of Ithra, in Dhahran. (Supplied)

“Vision 2030 propelled us ahead, opening the doors to the Kingdom’s cultural renaissance, and the pandemic ensured that we were dynamic, resourceful and creative enough to see this change through, together as a thriving society.

“As an economic enabler, cultural catalyst and global gateway, we at Ithra were at a crucial point in bringing Saudi’s cultural scene forward to the rest of the world prior to the pandemic, which was backed by the unwavering efforts and unlimited talent pool of creatives who made it come to life in the first place.

“To ensure it would not lose that momentum, we put our creativity to the test and pulled together to ensure we safely delivered this mission at a time of remote connectivity – united.”

Indeed, unity has been essential to the survival of the creative industries through the darkness of the pandemic, as the ban on exhibitions and performances undermined opportunities for artists and performers to work and grow.

“The horrors of COVID-19 have drawn together the cultural community,” Alia Al-Senussi, a noted art patron, consultant and scholar who has worked closely with cultural organizations in Saudi Arabia, told Arab News.

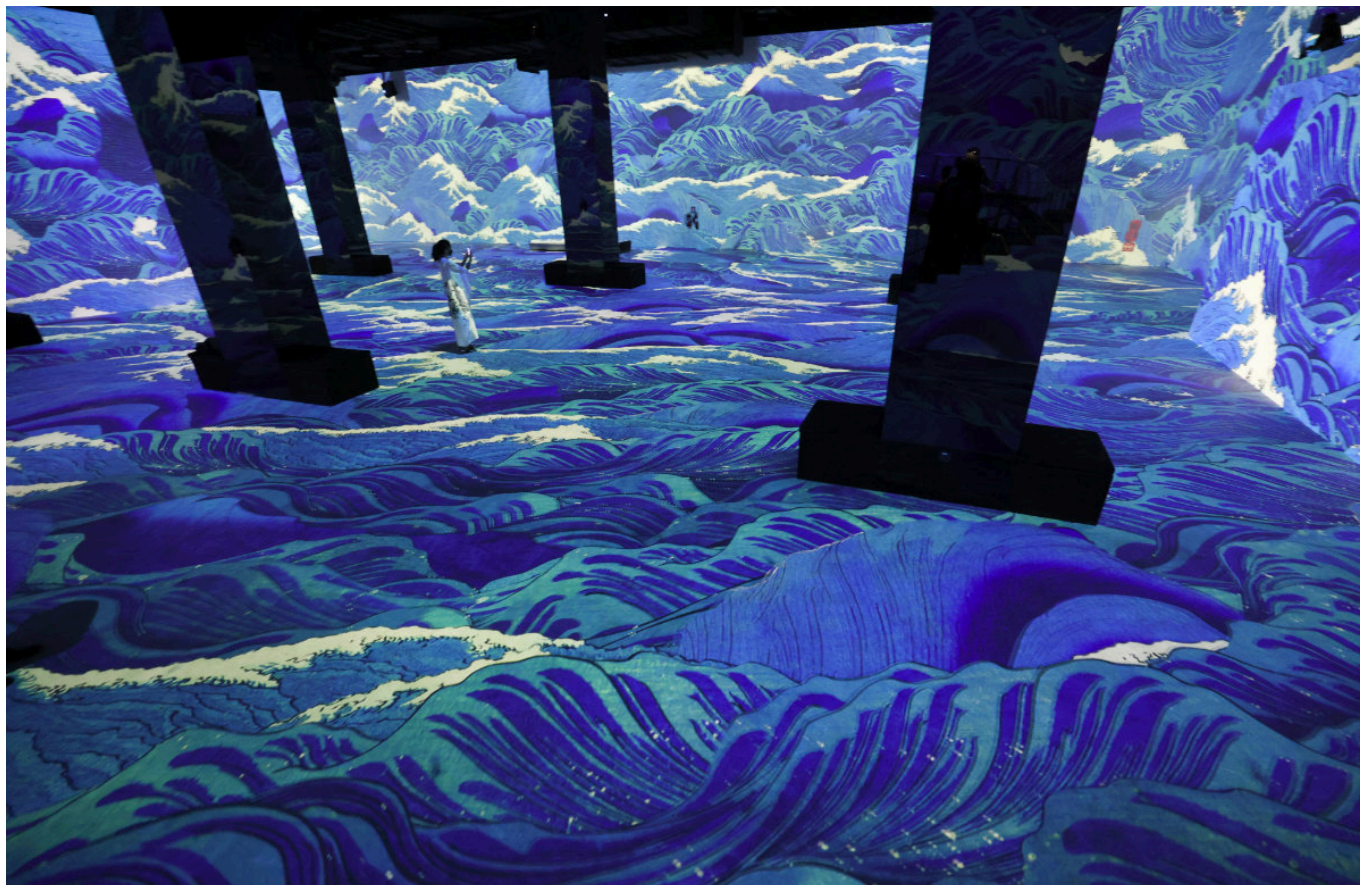


Saudi Arabia's Diriyah has been named the capital of Arab culture for 2030.
(@MOCSaudi)

“There has been this hope that we are getting through this dark period through all these wonderful shows in Europe, art fairs such as Art Basel and the recent Diriyah Biennale. But we can't forget all the suffering that is still taking place. In 2022, there is a hope in embracing that sense of community through cultural enterprise.”

The same cultural vitality is on show in the UAE. In Dubai, open borders, high vaccination rates, widely available testing, and new visa schemes designed to encourage expatriate entrepreneurs have lured thousands of talented individuals and investors.

In spring 2021, the city staged Art Dubai, the world's first major in-person fair since the easing of lockdown restrictions. Even as omicron takes hold, there are no plans to cancel forthcoming events in the cultural calendar.



The explosion of artistic events in the region, such as the 'Infinity des Lumieres' exhibition in Dubai last June have been credited to the reforms in the Gulf. (AFP)

"Yes, COVID-19 hit Dubai hard like everywhere else, but the way the government handled it, including leading the world in vaccinations, meant that the city was able to adapt and bounce back quickly," Ben Floyd, CEO of Art Dubai, told Arab News.

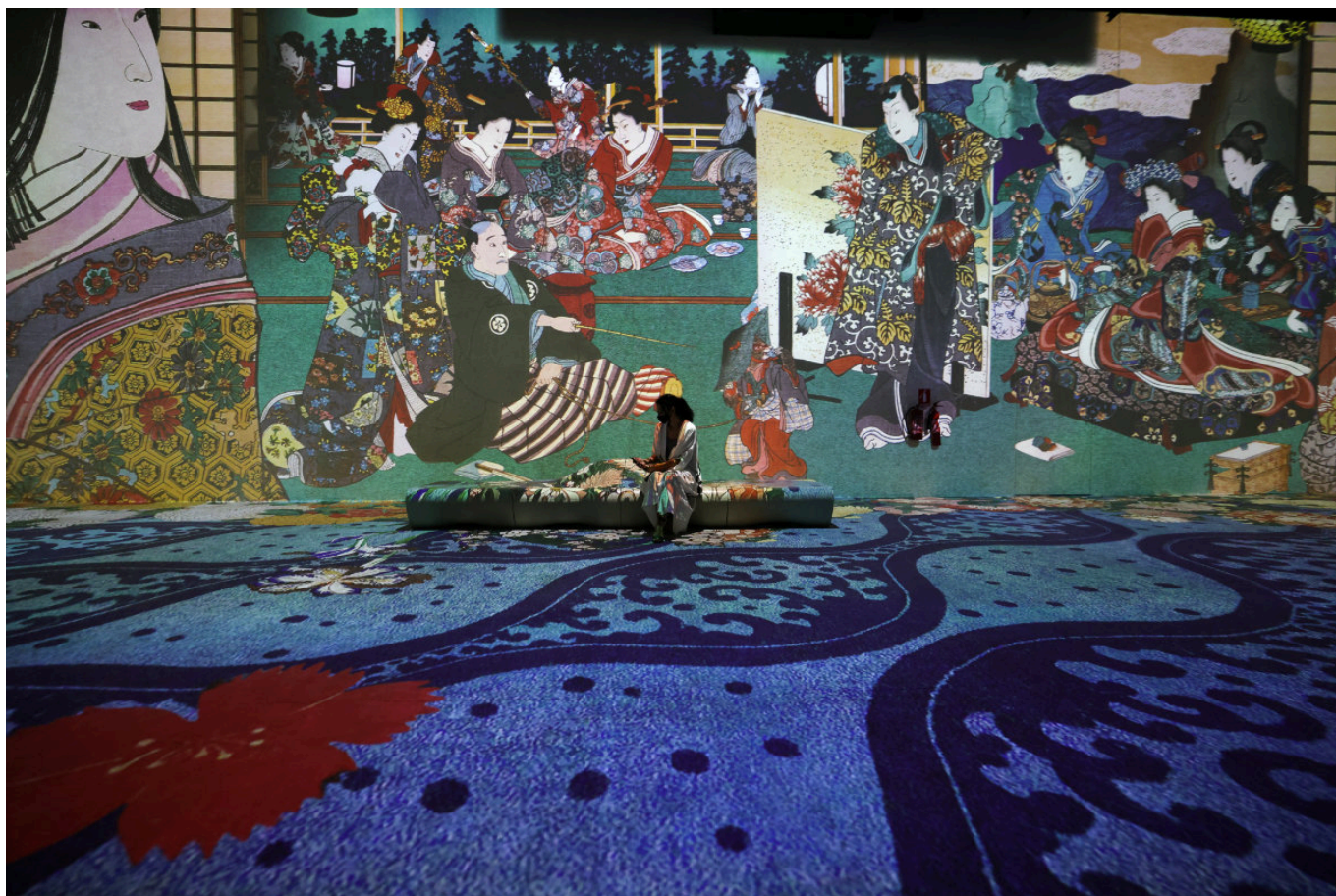
Art Dubai was able to go ahead last year "because we could see that Dubai was attracting high-net-worth families and businesses from all over the world, and we had confidence that we could produce a successful event," he said.

Will 2022 be any different? Floyd put it this way: "We have had more gallery applications than ever, and plan to further innovate our offer, continuing to lead in the sector through our programming.

"We will be launching a new digital sector in response to both the growing tech community here in Dubai and the increased interest in producing and collecting digital art and NFTs."

November's Dubai Festival for Youth Theatre, organized by the Dubai Culture and Arts Authority, saw unprecedented participation from 14 theater groups from across the nation.

Then, in early December, Dubai Culture and the Department of Economy and Tourism launched "Creatives Journey," a new initiative targeting people in creative industries looking to launch their own businesses.



Shoppers and art lovers are now able view masterpieces projected onto walls and floors in an immersive experience at Dubai Mall in Dubai. (AFP file photo)

Meanwhile, Abu Dhabi announced in June that it would invest \$6 billion in cultural and creative industries on top of the \$2.3 billion already pledged as part of its post-pandemic stimulus program.

On Dec. 29, Dubai Culture launched the first ever “Creative Dubai: Dubai’s Growing Cultural Industries” report, providing a comprehensive overview of the Emirati cultural sector and charting a roadmap for its growth.

According to the report, Dubai’s cultural and creative sector contributed about 4 percent to total economic output in 2019. The sector generated revenues of more than AED37 billion (\$8.5 billion) that year and employed more than 108,000 people.

In fact, Dubai, which has more galleries than any other city in the MENA region and some of the fastest growing household spending on cultural activities, ranked among the 10 most influential cities in the world in the FutureBrand Country Index 2020.

That being said, the cultural renaissance sweeping the Gulf has been less evident elsewhere in the region, where the pandemic and resulting economic hardships have placed creative pursuits lower down the list of priorities.

Lebanon was once the region’s capital of art and culture. But with the onset of the 2019 financial crisis, the pandemic, political paralysis, energy shortages and the collective trauma of the Beirut port blast, day-to-day

survival has taken precedence.



Lebanese sculpture Nayla Romanos Iliya's artwork entitled 'On the Other Side of Time' on permanent artwork display in front of St. Elias church Beirut, Lebanon. (AFP file)

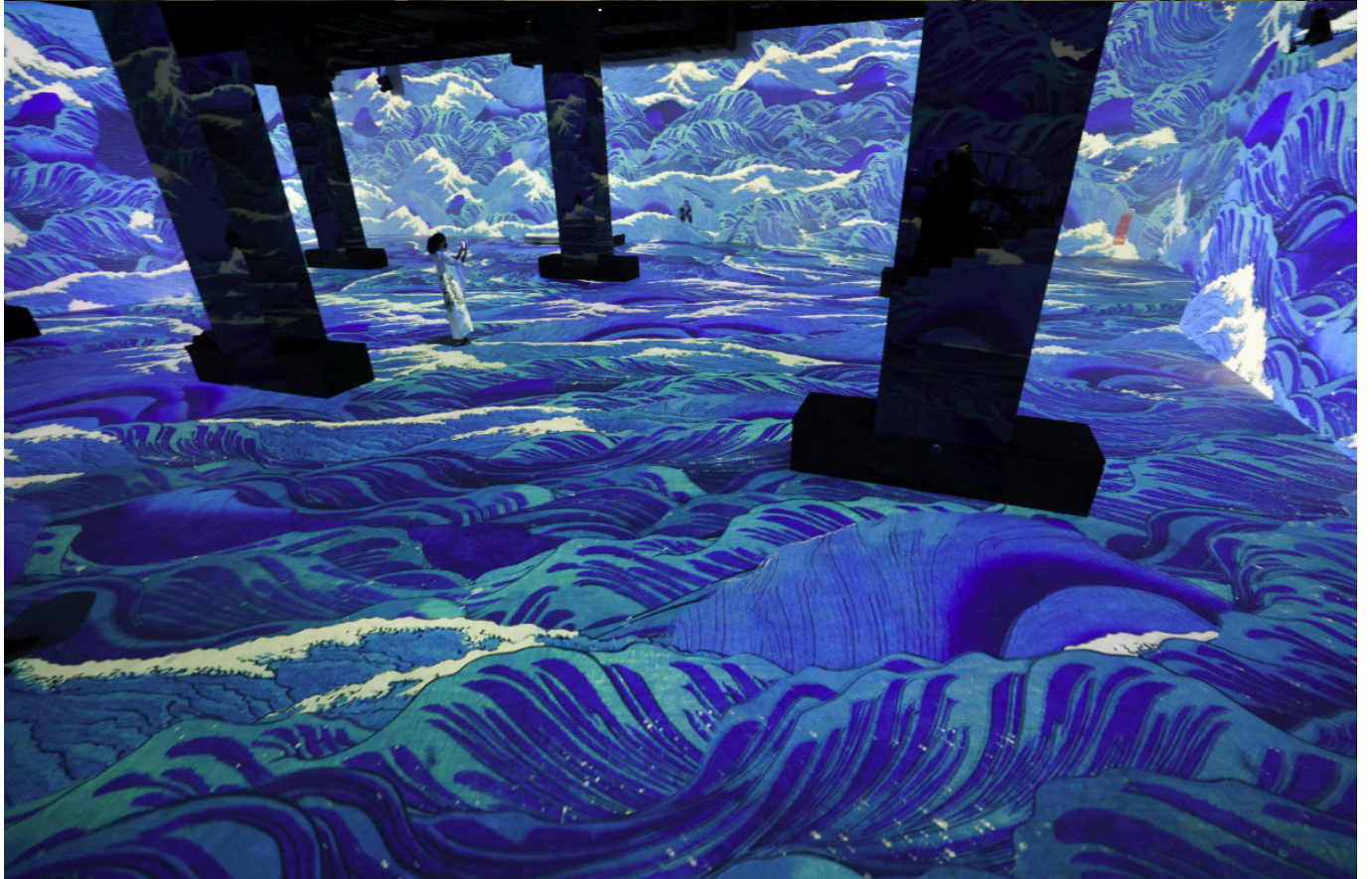
"The Beirut explosion was more powerful than COVID-19, and the country is collapsing at an incredible speed at all levels," Saleh Barakat, a Lebanese gallerist, told Arab News. "Here you don't have fuel, electricity or even water, because they can't pump it. All we can do is go on."

Even so, green shoots of cultural activity have somehow broken through the dense layers of despair.

"If you come to Beirut, you will be amazed at the quantity of exhibitions," said Barakat. "It is not economic. It is the result of our desire to go on with life. This is how we fight."

The decade may not be this century's Roaring Twenties as imagined or perhaps hoped for, but the same impatient urge to move on from past upheavals, embrace new aesthetics and make up for lost time is plain to see.

• *Twitter: @rebeccaaproctor*







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2022 Look Ahead: Saudi Arabia's booming entertainment sector is just getting started
2022 Look Ahead: No end to suffering in sight for war-weary Syrians

Yemeni troops recapture district in Shabwa from Houthis

Sun, 2022-01-02 22:52

AL-MUKALLA: Yemeni government troops pushed deeper into the Houthi-controlled territory in the southern province of Shabwa on Saturday, a day after seizing control of the district of Ouselan, local military officials said.

Fighting broke out between government troops, comprised from the Giants Brigades and army personnel, and the Houthis in Al-Nagoum and Al-Salem between Ouselan and Bayan in Shabwa province, as loyalists push to expel the Houthis from Bayhan and Al-Ain, two remaining districts in Shabwa under Houthi control, an army official told Arab News on Sunday.

The governor of Shabwa, Awadh Mohammed Al-Wazer, announced the liberation of the district of Ouselan from the Houthis during the early hours of a new offensive aimed at expelling them from oil-rich Shabwa.

Army commanders and local officials appeared in videos, taking group photos and speaking to jubilant people outside the center of Ouselan.

Giants Brigades official media also reported that their forces liberated the strategic Bin Ageel Mountain in Ouselan and surrounding areas, and are currently marching towards new areas in Bayhan district.

Warplanes from the Arab coalition on Saturday and Sunday carried out raids in Shabwa, targeting Houthi military vehicles and locations, Yemeni officials said.

By seizing control of Ouselan, the government troops have effectively cut the Houthi supply routes to their fighters in Hareb district, south of Marib, distracting the attention of the Houthis and alleviating pressure on government troops defend the city.

"This is a very important development. We have one goal, one battle and one enemy," a military official said, adding that the Houthis moved some of their forces in Marib province to defend their territory in Shabwa, relieving pressure on government forces and enabling them to score limited gains on Sunday.

“The Houthis are amassing huge forces to defend Bayhan and are inciting tribal leaders to mobilize and recruit people to fight government troops,” the official said.

If the Giants Brigades and army troops fully capture Bayhan and Al-Aid in the coming days, they would surround pockets of Houthis south of Marib, including in Juba, Al-Abedia and Hareb, significantly weakening Houthi attacks on Marib from the south, and would also pave the way for government troops to attack the Houthis in Abyan and Al-Bayda.

In September, the Houthis besieged the district of Al-Abedia and opened a new front in the war south of Marib, taking advantage of their control of Bayhan in Shabwa.

The deployment of several brigades from the Giants Brigades that have long been positioned along the country’s west coast, in Shabwa province, is part of a new military strategy prepared by the Arab coalition.

The strategy is based on moving forces from less fraught areas such as Hodeidah to reinforce government troops on more intense battlefields such as Marib and Shabwa.

The liberation of large amounts of land in Shabwa has sparked joy in Yemen and has given government troops on the battlefields a big morale boost.

Yemen’s President Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi called the governor of Shabwa to congratulate him on the latest military gains in the province and ordered him to press ahead with the offensive until the Houthis are driven out of the province, the official news agency SABA said.

Hadi added that his forces would defeat the Iran-backed militia and return peace and stability to war-torn Yemen.

In a telephone conversation with the governor of Shabwa, Yemen’s Prime Minister Maeen Abdul Malik Saeed, who is currently visiting the UAE, also praised the Yemeni troops and Giants Brigades forces for scoring military gains in Shabwa, pledging support to the governor and other commanders leading the fight against the Houthis.

The Saudi ambassador to Yemen, Mohammed Al-Jaber, also reacted to the news of the military success in Shabwa, by tweeting that the liberation of Ouselan is the “beginning of good.”



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Arab coalition says more than 70 Houthis killed in strikes on Marib Saudi Arabia's defenses destroy 3 drones launched toward Najran