

Wedding season brings new virus outbreak in West Bank

Author:

By MOHAMMED DARAGHMEH | AP

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RAMALLAH: By the end of May, the Palestinian Authority appeared to have quashed a coronavirus outbreak in the Israeli-occupied West Bank, with only around 400 confirmed cases and just two fatalities in the territory, following a nearly three-month lockdown.

Then the wedding invitations went out.

Over the last few weeks, infections have skyrocketed across the West Bank, with more than 4,000 new cases and an additional 15 deaths. Authorities blame the surge on widespread neglect of social distancing and mask-wearing – and on the summer wedding season.

Palestinian Prime Minister Mohammad Shtayyeh told a Cabinet meeting on Monday that 82% of cases in the West Bank were linked to weddings and funerals, saying that such large public gatherings must stop “immediately” or security forces would start breaking them up.

The Palestinian Authority imposed a strict five-day lockdown on Friday, forcing nearly all businesses to close and heavily restricting travel between towns and cities. The stay-at-home orders were renewed for another five days on Tuesday.

The epicenter of the renewed outbreak is in Hebron, the largest Palestinian city and a commercial hub of the territory. It accounts for around 75% of all active cases and more than two-thirds of all deaths, according to Ali Abed Rabu, a Palestinian Health Ministry official.

Palestinian weddings, usually held in the summer months, are major community events in which large families typically invite hundreds of guests. They feature lavish meals, often served buffet-style, as well as dancing and music late into the night.

“Hebronites are proud of their traditions and maintain them even at risky times like these,” Abed Rabu said. “They brag about how many people attend and how many sheep they slaughter to feed them.”

The virus causes mild to moderate flu-like symptoms in most patients, who recover within a few weeks. But it can cause severe illness or death, particularly among the old or infirm. The virus is highly contagious and can be spread by those showing no symptoms.

That makes weddings and other large public gatherings particularly risky. A major outbreak could overwhelm the Palestinian health sector, which has just 350 ventilators for a population of more than 2.5 million people.

Hebron’s mayor, Tayseer Abu Snaineh, points to other potential vectors, including the fact that large numbers of workers and merchants in Hebron travel back and forth from Israel, which is battling a much larger outbreak that has also surged in recent weeks.

Abu Snaineh said the Palestinian Authority, which governs parts of the

Israeli-occupied West Bank, has tried to prevent large gatherings. But Palestinian security forces are not allowed to operate in a large part of downtown Hebron known as H2, which under past agreements is under complete Israeli military control.

Several hundred hard-line Jewish settlers live in H2, protected by Israeli troops. The area is also home to more than 30,000 Palestinians.

With the PA barred from the area and the Israeli military focused on securing the settlements, Abu Snaineh said there is no authority to impose virus restrictions. As a result, residents have held large weddings and other gatherings in recent weeks that appear to have accelerated the outbreak. "People celebrate, hug each other and eat together in this area with no restrictions," he said.

Odeh Al-Rajabi, the head of an informal local committee that administers H2, says it has been reaching out to people and has convinced many to hold small family weddings rather than the usual massive feasts.

"Some people feel it is embarrassing to not hold a feast and invite people, but we tell them not to feel embarrassed, that we all understand, it's an emergency situation," he said.

The committee hopes to convince most large families to sign a code of conduct in the coming days that would prohibit such gatherings.

Abu Snaineh, the mayor, said ultra-conservative Muslims have also defied restrictions in order to pray in mosques. One group, known as Hezb Al-Tahrir, has openly called on people to defy restrictions on group prayers, accusing the PA of "using coronavirus as a pretext to fight Islam." The group is particularly influential in Hebron, where the population is more conservative than in other parts of the West Bank.

Alaa Abu Diab, a popular Palestinian comedian, posted a video this week in which he criticized people for holding weddings during the pandemic.

"I've just seen a video of a wedding party in which people are dancing and hugging as if there is no coronavirus," he said. "Why are you hugging and kissing each other in these sweaty, crowded gatherings?"

He also mocked those trafficking in conspiracy theories about the restrictions. "Who in the hell is conspiring against who? The whole world is collapsing, and you say it's a conspiracy."



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[Pompeo: We are trying to prevent Iran from selling crude oil to Hezbollah](#)

Wed, 2020-07-08 17:13

LONDON: The US is trying to prevent Iran from selling crude oil to Hezbollah, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said on Wednesday.

Pompeo added that the US is working against the “terrorist organization” Hezbollah and is supporting Lebanon to be a country that is not subordinate to Iran.

Hezbollah, which is supported, armed and funded by Iran, is classified as a terrorist group by the United States and many other countries.

The group is now a dominant force in Lebanese politics and supports the government of Prime Minister Hassan Diab.

The Hezbollah chief Hassan Nasrallah said on Tuesday that his group was in discussion with the government about Iran supplying refined oil products to Lebanon in exchange for Lebanese pounds to ease pressure on the plummeting currency. The pound has lost 80 percent of its value since October as the country's economic crisis has escalated.

The secretary of state also urged the UN Security Council to extend an arms embargo on Iran and said the US and partner forces last month seized a vessel carrying arms to the Houthis in Yemen.

"The Security Council must extend the arms embargo on Iran to prevent further conflict in the region," Pompeo told a State Department news conference.

"No serious person can possibly believe Iran will use any weapon it receives for peaceful ends."

He added that Iran continues to supply the Houthis with weapons.



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Lebanese convicted of financing Hezbollah in US returns homeUS, UAE warn

[Dubai reopens doors to tourists after long shutdown](#)

Author:

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Tue, 2020-07-07 17:41

DUBAI: With a “welcome” passport sticker and coronavirus tests on arrival, Dubai reopened its doors to international visitors Tuesday in the hope of reviving its tourism industry after a nearly four-month closure.

But businesses are mainly betting on those already living in the gleaming desert city to energise its ailing economy and serve as a test run before wary foreign holidaymakers return.

“A warm welcome to your second home,” said the sticker applied to passports at Dubai airport, where employees wore hazmat suits and vending machines offered personal protective equipment.

Italian tourist Francesca Conte said on arrival she was worried up until the last minute that her flight would be canceled.

“When I saw passengers queueing at the gate, I thought today we are not leaving, since the trip to Dubai had already been skipped three times,” Conte said.

She said she felt sad “seeing empty spaces” on the plane and stewards and hostesses “dressed like nurses and doctors,” in their lab coats.

The reopening Tuesday came as the number of COVID-19 cases in the United Arab Emirates climbed to 52,600 included 326 deaths, with millions of foreign workers living in cramped accommodation particularly hard hit.

Incoming tourists are required to present a negative test result taken within four days of the flight. If not, they can take the test on arrival, but must self-isolate until they receive the all-clear.

Tourism has long been the lifeline of the glitzy Gulf emirate, one of the seven sheikhdoms that make up the UAE.

High season starts in October when the scorching heat of the Gulf summer starts to dissipate.

Dubai welcomed more than 16.7 million visitors last year, and before the pandemic crippled global travel, the aim had been to reach 20 million arrivals in 2020.

“We are ready to receive tourists while we take all necessary precautions,” said Talal Al-Shanqiti of Dubai’s General Directorate of Residency and Foreigners Affairs in a video message tweeted on Sunday.

With scant oil resources compared to its neighbors, Dubai has built the most diversified economy in the Gulf, boasting a reputation as a financial, commercial and tourism hub despite an economic downturn in recent years.

The city-state is known for its mega malls, high-end restaurants and five-star hotels and resorts.

But all have taken a severe hit during the coronavirus outbreak, and Dubai's GDP in the first quarter of 2020 contracted 3.5 percent following two years of modest growth.

Dubai-based airline Emirates, the largest in the Middle East, has been forced to slash its sprawling network and is believed to have laid off thousands of staff.

Before reopening to international tourists, authorities launched social media campaigns and deployed hundreds of social media "influencers" to tout Dubai's attractions.

As the hospitality business works out how to create an environment that follows strict hygiene rules but is still worth the hassle for potential foreign clients, hotels are offering Dubai residents "staycation" and "daycation" deals to offset the slump.

Restarting hospitality by "primarily targeting the domestic market is an important first step in our phased approach toward restoring normalcy in the tourism industry," said Issam Kazim, CEO of the Dubai Corporation for Tourism and Commerce Marketing.

And key to the effort are health and safety measures at hotels to "reassure guests and travelers that Dubai is one of the world's safest destinations," he said in a statement last month.

Boosting domestic tourism is also part of the strategy of the UAE's other main destination, the oil-rich capital Abu Dhabi, which welcomed a record 11.35 million international visitors in 2019.

The UAE's capital is home to top attractions including an F1 circuit and the Louvre Abu Dhabi museum, which in late June opened its doors to masked, gloved visitors after a 100-day closure.

But the emirate does not share Dubai's enthusiasm about opening doors to foreign tourists just yet, although those with negative test results are now allowed to enter.

"Plans have changed and we are not expecting to have the same numbers of 2019 this year definitely. It would take another two to three years," said Ali Al-Shaiba, executive director of tourism and marketing for the Abu Dhabi Department of Culture and Tourism.

"As of today, I can say domestic tourism is what is in our plan. We believe domestic tourism is key now and we don't see us opening for international travelers very soon," he told AFP on Monday.



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[Iraqis mourn expert on armed groups killed by unknown gunmen](#)

Tue, 2020-07-07 18:17

BAGHDAD: Iraqi mourners and relatives on Tuesday carried the body of a respected analyst shot and killed the previous night in Baghdad after receiving threats from Iran-backed militias. Many Iraqis expressed their shock over the slaying.

Hisham Al-Hashimi, 47, was gunned down on Monday night outside his home in Baghdad's Zeyouneh neighborhood. His casket, draped in the Iraqi flag, was

taken to his family home before being driven to the burial site. Al-Hashimi, a leading expert on Daesh and other militant organization, was a regular fixture on Iraqi television and his expertise was often sought by government officials, journalists and researchers.

I cant believe it. A strikingly bright mind and a true gentleman, Hisham al-Hashimi, was assassinated today. A major loss and an unforgivable crime. RIP. pic.twitter.com/bK4SGcXAGW

– Fanar Haddad فنر الحداد (@fanarhaddad) [July 6, 2020](#)

No one immediately claimed responsibility for the killing, which comes weeks after he confided to close friends that he had received threats from militia groups. The slaying also coincides with a spate of rocket attacks targeting US interests that has been blamed on Iran-backed armed groups. Authorities launched a raid last week in Baghdad, in which they detained 14 members of the powerful Kataib Hezbollah group, suspected of orchestrating the attacks. All but one detainees were released days later. Prime Minister Mustafa Al-Kadhimi said Iraqi security forces would “spare no effort” in pursuing Al-Hashimi’s killers.

Video shows how Iraqi Security Researcher Hisham al-Hashimi was assassinated after retiring home from a nearby TV studio. pic.twitter.com/CUVkFARd6x

– ZaidBenjamin (@ZaidBenjamin5) [July 6, 2020](#)

Hours after Al-Hashimi’s killing, authorities fired the top police officer for Zeyouneh and launched an investigation into his activities, according to an order from the prime minister’s office, seen by The Associated Press. Condemnations from Iraqi officials poured in as shock reverberated across the country at the news of Al-Hashimi’s killing.

Horrifying video of the assassination today of [#Iraq](#) security expert Hisham al-Hashimi. Washington Post reports about threats al-Hashimi had received from [#Iran](#)-backed militia groups recently. 1/2 pic.twitter.com/nJFuSNXeio

– Jason Brodsky (@JasonMBrodsky) [July 6, 2020](#)

Nechirvan Barzani, president of the semi-autonomous Kurdish region in northern Iraq, said “authorities must find the perpetrators of this terror act and bring them to justice,” in a tweet on Tuesday.



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Iraqi analyst Hisham Al-Hashimi killed in Baghdad after pro-Iran militia threats
Iraq partially reopens Iran trade crossing

[Syrian, Russian airstrikes in Idlib amount to war crimes, as do extremist attacks – UN](#)

Author:

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Tue, 2020-07-07 12:00

GENEVA: Syrian and Russian planes have carried out deadly aerial strikes amounting to war crimes on schools, hospitals and markets in Idlib province, UN investigators said on Tuesday in a report that also condemned attacks by

extremist fighters.

They said that “indiscriminate bombardment” by pro-government forces, ahead of a March cease-fire brokered with Turkey, claimed hundreds of lives and forced nearly one million civilians to flee, which may amount to a crime against humanity.

The UN Commission of Inquiry on Syria also accused Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham (HTS), a extremist group that controls part of northwest Syria, of firing artillery into civilian areas “with no apparent legitimate military objective.”

Fighters from HTS, a group formerly known as Nusra Front, have tortured and executed detainees, it added.

“What is clear from the military campaign is that pro-government forces and UN-designated terrorists flagrantly violated the laws of war and the rights of Syrian civilians,” Paulo Pinheiro, chairman of the UN panel, said in a statement.

The report, covering Nov. 2019 until June 2020, was based on overflight data and witness testimony.

It examines 52 “emblematic attacks” in northwest Syria, including 47 attributed to the Russian-backed Syrian government.

Russian warplanes were solely implicated in a deadly March 5 strike on a poultry farm near Marat Misrin that sheltered displaced people and in three strikes next to a hospital damaged in the rebel-held town of Ariha on Jan. 29, the report said. Russia denies involvement in the latter attack, it said. The region is home to a mix of Islamist militant and opposition groups, many of which fled other parts of Syria as President Bashar Assad, with Russian backing, seized back territory from them.

“The Commission has reasonable grounds to believe that pro-government forces committed the war crimes of deliberately attacking medical personnel and facilities by conducting airstrikes,” it said.

Karen Koning AbuZayd, a panel member, said: “Women, men and children that we interviewed faced the ghastly choice of being bombarded or fleeing deeper into HTS-controlled areas where there are rampant abuses of human rights... “The acts by HTS members amount to war crimes.”



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