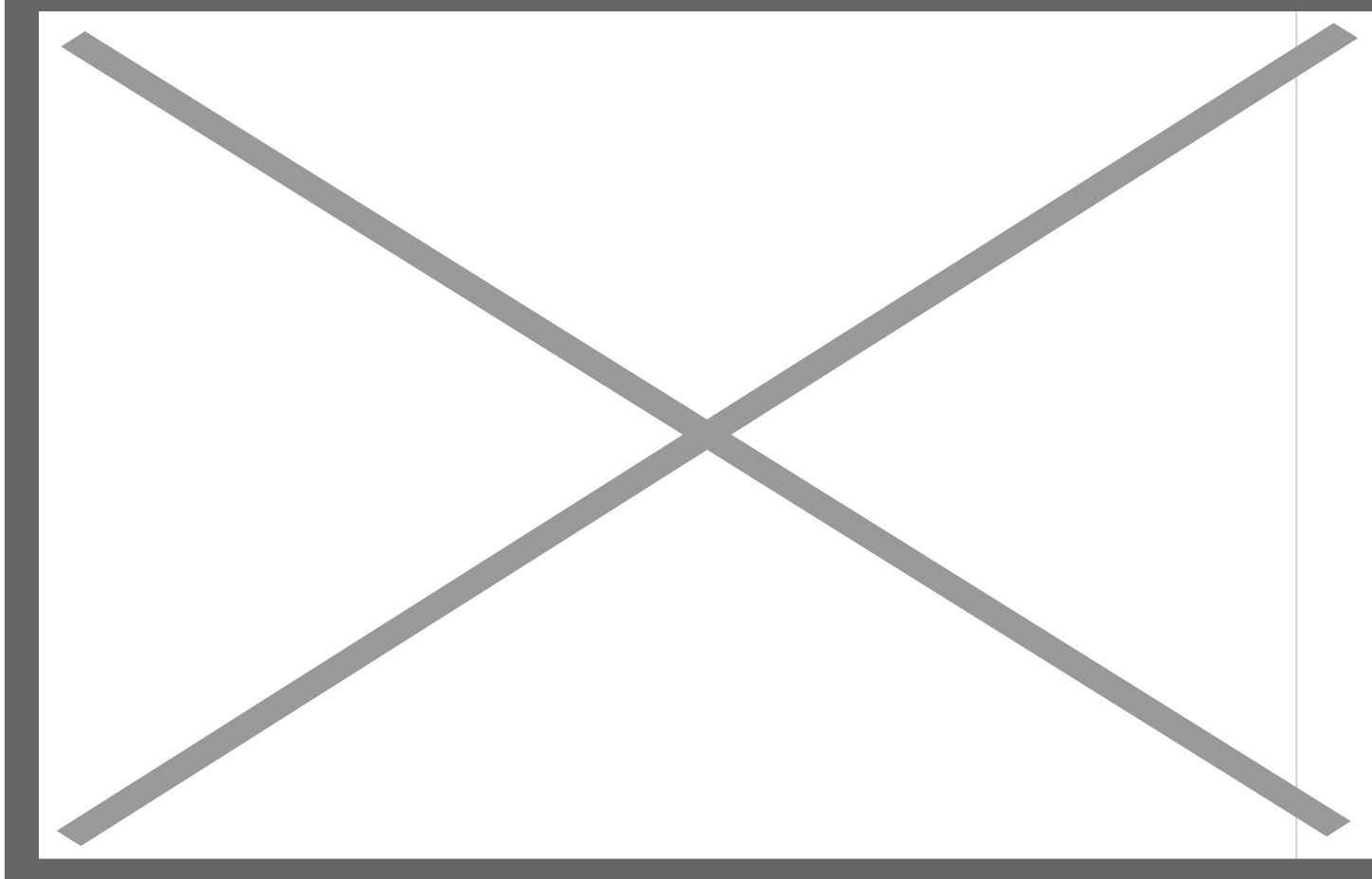


Palestinians cancel Christmas; no holiday joy during war of aggression against Gaza

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Christian Palestinians in the U.S. are muting their holiday celebrations as they mourn the ongoing suffering in Gaza

****** Closeup of Baby Jesus doll wrapped in Palestinian keffiyeh in the rubble manger ******

A nativity scene at the Lutheran Church in Bethlehem in the occupied West Bank [Munjed Jado/Al Jazeera]

Washington, December 14 (RHC)-- Huwaida Arraf's house is usually the most brightly decorated in her Michigan neighbourhood at Christmastime. But this year, with war raging in Gaza, the Palestinian American human rights lawyer is hanging only one sign in her front yard: "Bethlehem canceled Christmas because Israel is slaughtering Palestinians #GazaGenocide."

Like many Palestinian Christians, Arraf is not celebrating the holiday this year. As the death toll in Gaza soars past 18,600, she and others Al Jazeera spoke to are struggling to enjoy the holiday season. Flashes of happiness — if they come — are often drenched in guilt.

"There is really no joy right now — no joy to be had, no joy that can be had," Arraf, a mother of two who lives in the Detroit area, said.

"How can the world really celebrate Christmas and celebrate the birth of the prince of peace, when in the very homeland and the very place that he was born, there's such atrocious crimes against humanity taking place and nothing is being done to stop it?"

Arraf is hardly alone. In the United States, activists and Palestinian Americans are taking cues from Palestine, where many churches and Christian communities have nixed their Christmas celebrations to honour the dead and protest the continuing Israeli violence.

Even Bethlehem, considered the birthplace of Jesus in the occupied West Bank, has seen quiet streets and dimmed decorations where ordinarily there would be revellers and light. The Lutheran Church in the city is displaying a nativity scene that shows Jesus as a child born in the rubble to reflect the destruction in Gaza.

"If Christ were to be born today, he would be born under the rubble and Israeli shelling," Reverend Munther Isaac told Al Jazeera last week. "Bethlehem is sad and broken," he added, reflecting on the sense of helplessness he and other residents feel as bombs continue to rain down on Gaza.

Thousands of miles away, in the United States, many Palestinian and Arab Americans share that anguish and pain. "There's no joy. There's no celebration. It's hard to celebrate when we have a lot of family and friends and countrymen who are suffering a genocide. It's just kind of incongruent," said Nabil Khoury, a physician from southeast Michigan.

"So, unfortunately, no Christmas tree this year, and no big gatherings. It's just very muted."

Christmas traditions are intimately tied to Palestine. The area is home to some of the holiest places in Christianity, including the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem and the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in annexed East Jerusalem.

For decades, Palestinians have drawn on that history — and the imagery of Jesus — to protest the Israeli occupation of their territories, particularly around Christmastime. Leading human rights groups like Amnesty International have compared Israeli treatment of Palestinians to "apartheid", noting a pattern of unlawful killing, detention and discrimination.

Some Palestinians note, for example, that if Jesus were born today in Bethlehem, the three wise men who visited him in the Biblical story would have to traverse a towering concrete "separation" wall that Israel built, dividing the city from nearby Jerusalem.

The majority of Palestinians are Muslims, but throughout the past century, Palestinian Christians have played a decisive role in shaping and advancing Palestine's struggle for liberation. Khoury, the Michigan physician, said sectarianism does not fracture the Palestinian national identity, and Palestinian Christians do not view themselves as separate from their Muslim brethren.

"We're part of the Palestinian society, and our faith in our future is with our countrymen," he said.

Husam Marajda, a Palestinian American who grew up in Bethlehem, also said he does not differentiate himself from other Palestinians because of his Christian faith. An organiser with the U.S. Palestinian Community Network (USPCN) in Chicago, Marajda echoed the profound sense of loss many are feeling this holiday season.

“It’s cold in Chicago, so you usually get your Christmas sweaters. It’s a festive season: You’re with family, going gift-shopping, putting up decorations. But this year, nothing. We didn’t feel anything. We don’t feel any happiness. We don’t feel any joy, any festivities,” he told Al Jazeera. “It’s just going to be another season, another day, another month.”

But Lexis Zeidan, a Palestinian American activist in Detroit, said that, despite the pain, she is not making major changes to the way she is observing Christmas. To her, the holiday is about giving, not commercialised celebrations.

“My parents have always instilled in me that Christmas is about faith and family,” Zeidan told Al Jazeera. “And that’s what we should always ground ourselves in. It’s about caring for others and doing for others and really trying to reignite the spirit of what it means to love your neighbor.”

Still, Zeidan said she is feeling “angry” and “sad” about the continued violence, which has obliterated large parts of Gaza, levelling schools, homes, hospitals and libraries. “I just can’t help but continue to question: Why? Why are leaders not putting a stop to the bloodshed? Why is it that we, as a country, have elected leaders that are blatantly showing us they care more about their political power than they do for human life?” Zeidan said.

Despite well-documented Israeli abuses against Christians in Palestine, large segments of the Christian political movement in the United States — particularly those who follow the evangelical faith — support Israel for religious reasons. Some link the present-day conflict to biblical prophecies heralding the apocalypse and the second coming of Jesus Christ.

But Zeidan decried that theological interpretation, saying that what Israel is doing to Palestinians goes against basic Christian tenets.

“Jesus died on the cross for our sins, and to kill is to sin,” she said. “And so for me, how can you root [for] what’s happening in Palestine when your religion literally states, ‘Thou shalt not kill’ and ‘Thou shalt love thy neighbour’?”

Arraf, the human rights lawyer, also rejected using religion to justify injustices against Palestinians. “That’s not the Christianity and the Jesus that I grew up learning about,” she told Al Jazeera. Arraf stressed that she does not distinguish between Muslim or Christian victims of Israeli atrocities.

“We are all human beings. But if they [evangelical leaders] see some kind of supremacy in their religion that they want to distinguish, they’re also justifying the oppression of Christians,” she said. “Coming upon the Christmas season where we sing about the prince of peace and peace on earth, you can’t have peace with violent occupation, with settler colonialism, with apartheid.”

As Arraf was speaking, her 9-year-old daughter Mayaar interrupted the phone interview. “My daughter whispered in my ear that I should tell you: Peace on earth means peace in Palestine,” Arraf said.

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