



# Christmas in Palestine



By Lucy Hishmeh

Christmas is near! In Palestine this feast has a special flavor. After all, Palestine is home to Bethlehem, the town that is the focus of Christmas celebrations worldwide, the place where Jesus Christ was born two millennia ago. Some Christians celebrate Christmas Eve on December 24, following the Gregorian calendar; Eastern Christians, however, celebrate Christmas on January 6, following the older Julian calendar.

Palestinian Christians – who, in the first half of the twentieth century, represented roughly 20 percent of the population – have dwindled in numbers in recent years. Today, Palestinian Christians total a mere 50,000 persons in the West Bank and some 150,000 in Israel. But large numbers of Christian tourists celebrate Christmas in Palestine together with local Christians and non-Christians, as it was declared a national holiday by President Mahmoud Abbas years ago.

Christmas in Palestine is marked by religious services and social celebrations that encompass family events and social gatherings, gift giving, parades, and Santa Claus and Christmas dinners. The social festivals start with large events that are attended by thousands and organized around the lighting of Christmas trees in the centers of the major Christian cities in the West Bank, first in Bethlehem and then in Ramallah and other cities. In recent years, each parish has begun to celebrate the lighting of its Christmas tree. Both the social and religious activities fill Palestinian Christian towns and villages with Christmas spirit.

Whereas by nature Christmas is a reason for joy, for some people it is also a time of sorrow. Many live below the poverty line, and Christmas can cause stress and social anxiety because some families simply do not have the extra money required to buy presents for their children, extended family, and friends. Many are saddened, missing loved ones who are in Israeli prisons or grieving over relatives who were killed by Israeli forces. Therefore, along with the religious preparations for Christmas that start during Advent season, parish volunteers prepare various social activities that include Christmas parties, Santa festivals, and Christmas bazaars; they gather donations from individuals or companies and from institutions, such as banks, in order to raise funds that allow them to help people in need. In addition to material support, volunteers also arrange social visits to isolated individuals and families, hoping to enable them to experience the joy of Christmas.

In Bethlehem, moreover, Christmas provides an example of how Palestinians persevere and insist on enjoying festive occasions while living under the Israeli military occupation that imposes severe hardships on people, restricts their freedom



Bethlehem's Christmas Tree with the Church of the Nativity in the background.

of movement, affects their livelihoods, and diminishes their economic and social well-being. Sadly, the occupation and its policies have turned Bethlehem into a ghetto, around which Israel continues to tighten the noose with the encroachment and development of settlements, restricted access to roads, and the setting up of security zones, checkpoints, and military installations.

But despite the difficult situation, on Christmas Eve, Christmas lights and banners are hoisted all around Bethlehem. Christmas carols can be heard everywhere on the crowded Manger (Nativity) Square. The city gets ready for a two-hour parade, where scouts walk while playing Christmas music on drums, bagpipes, horns, and bugles. Local Palestinians, pilgrims, and tourists rush to Manger Square to celebrate the patriarch's entry into the Church of the Nativity, bringing the Holy Light from the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, accompanied by scout troops from all over Palestine playing Christmas carols. The midnight mass in the Church of the Nativity is broadcast live throughout the world on various satellite channels and in different languages.

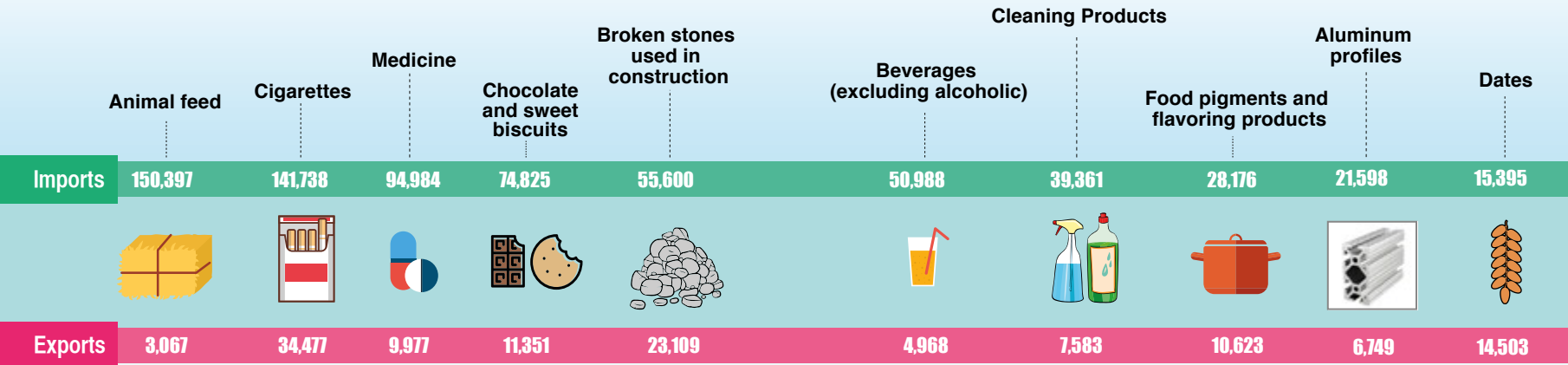
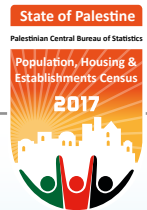
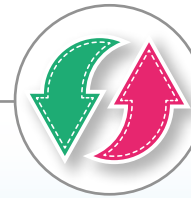
In Palestinian cities on Christmas Eve, one can see families leaving church after evening mass, greeting each other, and heading to their houses to add the final touch to Christmas dinner – and why not? Christmas is the time for family reunions; people chat, eat, and

**Bethlehem welcomes you to live and explore the uniqueness of Palestinian Christmas: Enjoy scout parades, listen to choirs in public squares, attend the Midnight Mass at the Church of the Nativity together with national and international dignitaries and diplomats, and experience new tastes, new flavors, and different cultural and traditional celebrations of Christmas. You are invited to take part in this unique spirit by *Being There!***

drink as they wait for Santa to bring his gifts. Christmas has its own flavor, with special food, cookies, chocolates, and coffee. Christmas creates a unique atmosphere, with people exchanging visits with relatives and friends; it is an occasion for people who are usually busy with their daily routines throughout the year to gather and meet. Christmas is what we make of it!

*Lucy Hishmeh holds a BA in English literature and an MA in methods of teaching English from Birzeit University. With many years of managerial experience, Lucy has been director of public relations at Al-Quds Open University for nine years and has recently joined the academic staff as a lecturer.*

# Value of **IMPORTS** and **EXPORTS** of commodities that can be substituted, 2016



Value (in US\$ thousands)

## Top Ten Countries **EXPORTS** from Palestine, 2016

Value (in US\$ thousands)

Israel	770,812
Jordan	51,479
United Arab Emirates	23,268
Saudi Arabia	18,336
Kuwait	10,906
United States of America	10,426
Qatar	9,959
United Kingdom	6,175
Netherlands	5,189
Turkey	3,468

## Top Ten Countries **IMPORTS** to Palestine, 2016

Value (in US\$ thousands)

Israel	3,123,190
Turkey	476,687
China	382,679
Germany	185,947
Jordan	131,525
Italy	76,439
Saudi Arabia	70,168
Spain	68,366
France	68,111
Egypt	65,191