

Nov 04, 2016 by **Gordon Robison**

Getting into the Seasonal Spirit ^[1]

Amman, Jordan

This weekend I did something I've never done before: I bought an artificial Christmas tree. For someone who grew up in New England this was a big step. There have been Christmases (like that one in Saudi Arabia back in the '80s) when I did without, or made due with a scruffy bush. But it was a source of pride that I had never before permitted a fake tree inside my home.

On the whole I've always enjoyed spending the Christmas season in the Middle East. The combination of tourists and a local Christian minority is enough to give cities like Cairo, Beirut and Amman a satisfyingly Christmasy feel without the sense of being assaulted on all sides that I often get by, say, December 10 in the United States. December always offers a strangely eclectic set of images, and this year has been no exception. In the last week I've seen the vendors who usually hawk newspapers and religiously-themed Islamic calendars at Amman's traffic lights selling Santa hats. A few days ago I spotted a Santa-suited toddler being led around a department store by his demurely veiled nanny. The atrium at Amman's largest and most modern shopping center is graced by a 40 foot, snow-white artificial Christmas tree flanked by huge banners reading: "We wish you a Happy Christmas and a Prosperous New Year -- Mecca Mall"

Which brings us back to the tree. I figured in any place so imbued with Christmas spirit a real tree would not be too difficult to find. Egypt is a lot less sold on Christmas than Jordan, but getting a real tree in Cairo was always a breeze.

"Real trees are illegal," an American with more than a decade in Amman under his belt told me.

"What?"

"Illegal. It's against the law to cut down trees." He went on to explain that one can only buy a real tree if it is still alive, sitting in a huge pot, for example. So I set off to find potted trees and, in the process, discovered the dark underbelly of Jordan's nursery industry.

The first shop I entered looked promising -- but the large Christmas tree I spotted from the road turned out to be artificial. I pointed to it and told the clerk I wanted something like this, but real. There was a pause as she eyed me for a long moment.

"I can get you a Christmas tree," she said. "How big?"

"About my height, two meters. But I don't see any real trees in here."

"It can be arranged."

"How much is this going to cost?"

"Two meter tree? Two hundred dinars. Perhaps two-fifty. You wait here. I will call Mahmoud. He will tell me what we can get, and, in an hour, he will come with your tree."

I wasn't sure which was more off-putting: the fact that she could not have been more conspiratorial if I had asked to buy crack, or the prospect of paying \$300-plus for a six-foot tree, sight unseen. I said I'd think about it. "Mahmoud can get you a good tree. Good trees are difficult," the woman said quietly as I turned to leave.

The next place had half a dozen of the sickest-looking trees I'd ever seen. Though potted and, technically, alive these legal trees were almost as expensive as the black-market variety. I glanced at one more nursery without even getting out of the taxi and told the driver to head back to my neighborhood, where one of the supermarkets had a large selection of Christmas decorations for sale.

So now I have a tree. It looks decent enough. From six feet or so away it is not even obviously fake. I'm still on the right side of the law, and finally getting into the Christmas spirit.

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