

# [Algeria's Tebboune returns after COVID-19 treatment, state media says](#)

Tue, 2020-12-29 22:12

ALGIERS: Algerian President Abdelmadjid Tebboune has returned after weeks away being treated for COVID-19 in Germany, state television reported on Tuesday.

Tebboune's absence since the end of October has fuelled speculation over his ability to finish his first term.

"It is hard to be far from one's country," Tebboune said, according to footage broadcast after he arrived from Berlin at around 6 p.m. local time.

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Algeria's Abdelmadjid Tebboune says needs up to 3 weeks to recover from COVID-19  
Algeria says President Tebboune's COVID-19 treatment nearing

completion

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## [How the coronavirus crisis has shifted priorities for Arab cities](#)

Tue, 2020-12-29 22:01

WASHINGTON, DC: If you are looking for something new in human history, look no further than mass urbanization. Large, bustling, urban metropolises with millions of residents have become such a common feature of our world today that it's easy to forget how new they are.

To wit: in the year 1800, roughly 3 percent of the world lived in cities and, by 1900, that number had risen to only 15 percent.

Today, some 55 percent of humans on our planet live in cities, and we are headed for two out of three people on earth as urban dwellers within a generation.

Cities are vital to our well-being. They are centers of innovation and job-creation, and generate some 80 percent of global GDP. It is no exaggeration to say that our global economy is a collection of city economies.



Arab region's cities have fared poorly compared with their counterparts in East Asia, but have kept pace with other cities in the developing world. (AFP)

According to some estimates, over the past three decades, some 2 billion people have moved from countryside to city.

If one were to paint an iconic image of our times, it should involve a newly arrived migrant to a city, preferably an Asian city with a dramatic skyline, airplanes in the sky, high-speed trains in the distance, the drumbeat of globalization in the background.

Most of the world's rapid urbanization over this time has taken place in Africa and Asia, including, of course the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). In the MENA region in the 1960s, roughly 35 percent of the population lived in cities.

Today, almost two out of three people from the region live in cities – higher than the global average. If we can point to one defining long-term trend over the past four decades in the MENA region, it should be rapid urbanization.

Now, the city itself, of course, is not new. In fact, the first agglomeration of peoples that came together in what we might call cities grew in the fertile crescent region of Iraq some 7,000 years ago.

Middle Eastern cities take their place among the ancient and medieval worlds as great civilizational centers: Cairo, Baghdad, Damascus, Aleppo, Istanbul, Isfahan.

Recent archaeological evidence also shows that several Arabian Peninsula coastal cities from Aden to Dubai played a vital role in Silk Road trade routes, and advanced civilizational networks.

But what of the Arab world city today? How has the region fared in this historic trend of mass urbanization, and how have the region's cities handled the COVID-19 pandemic?

Broadly speaking, with a few exceptions in the GCC states, the Arab region's cities have fared poorly compared with their counterparts in East Asia, but have kept pace with other cities in the developing world.

Let's take a look at the biggest city first: Cairo. With a metro area population of more than 20 million, Cairo is the Arab world's only megacity, defined as an urban agglomeration of 10 million or more people.

There are some 33 million megacities in the world today, mostly in East and South Asia.

Megacities are centers of growth and innovation, prosperity and knowledge, but they also present myriad challenges from pollution and congestion to income inequality and massive infrastructure needs.





Cairo “has continuously failed to capitalize on the agglomeration benefits afforded by its population size.” – Karim Elgendy and Natasha Abaza. (AFP)

Cairo’s population is roughly the same size as Beijing, but its GDP is roughly a quarter of the Chinese capital, according to a McKinsey study.

Cities with large populations might benefit from a demographic gift or be weighed down by a demographic burden.

In Cairo’s case, according to a study of regional cities by Karim Elgendy and Natasha Abaza, the city “has continuously failed to capitalize on the agglomeration benefits afforded by its population size.”

Egypt’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic has been poor. In a dispatch from Cairo by Declan Walsh of the New York Times, he writes that as patients came streaming through hospitals, “resources were alarmingly scarce. Doctors lacked protective equipment, often making do with a single mask for a 24-hour shift. Testing kits were in short supply.”

National testing has been extremely low in Egypt, far behind Iraq, Jordan or even war-torn Libya. Still, anyone who has visited Cairo will understand one basic fact: its people have often been ingenious, inventive, and remarkably entrepreneurial in difficult conditions.

Rather than giving the “Person of the Year” honor to a predictable choice like President-elect Joe Biden, Time magazine should have honored the frontline medical worker in developing countries from Cairo to Karachi who have battled this deadly disease with little national government support.



The recent Kearney Global Cities Report and Index – a comprehensive study that ranks cities across 29 metrics of global connectivity – ranks Dubai 27th globally, the only regional city to make the top 30. (AFP)

What of other MENA cities? How have they fared in the pandemic and, more broadly how have they fared in our contemporary world.

It has become axiomatic to point to Dubai and Abu Dhabi as leaders. The recent Kearney Global Cities Report and Index – a comprehensive study that ranks cities across 29 metrics of global connectivity – ranks Dubai 27th globally, the only regional city to make the top 30.

Of particular note this year has been the meteoric rise of Abu Dhabi. The UAE capital ranked seventh this year in Kearney’s Global City Outlook Index, ahead of major cities like Amsterdam, San Francisco, Berlin and New York.

The Outlook report focuses on “cities on the rise” and Abu Dhabi’s leap from number 20 to 7 within a year has been “driven by long-term investments in economic performance and diversification.”

The UAE has been a leader worldwide in handling the coronavirus pandemic through its comprehensive national testing programs, contact tracing, and healthcare infrastructure response. The Australia-based Global Response to Infectious Disease Index ranked the UAE among the top 10 countries worldwide in its response to COVID-19, on par with the likes of New Zealand, Singapore, Norway, Japan and Taiwan.

A key lesson to Dubai and Abu Dhabi’s success has been the relentless building of infrastructure. According to AT Kearney, the two UAE cities



topped the world in the infrastructure metric. Riyadh also deserves mention here. The Saudi capital has been rapidly growing its infrastructure.

Riyadh's first metro lines are on course to open in 2021, and major infrastructure projects to decongest roads and grow the airport suggest a transport-oriented urban policy that will serve the capital well over the long term.



Riyadh ranks as one of the top five largest cities in the region, while Jeddah metropolitan area makes the top 10. (AFP)

With a metro area population of roughly 7.2 million, Riyadh ranks as one of the top five largest cities in the region, while Jeddah metropolitan area makes the top 10. Both cities would benefit from a simultaneous drive of decongestion (of roads) and expansion (of global trade networks).

A recent report by Euromonitor International points out that the next regional megacity could be Baghdad. Unfortunately, Baghdad, like other historically rich and cosmopolitan cities like Beirut or pre-war Damascus, has largely lagged in its provision of services and infrastructure for its people.

Like Egypt, however, these countries are rich in human resources that can – if allowed to grow – can unleash tremendous innovation.

Following infrastructure, this leads us to the second “I” word – innovation. Any city of the future must be relentlessly innovative.

The global geostrategist Parag Khanna told me: “Even at the height of the pandemic, it’s become clear that several cities – notably those in the Gulf – have the resources and strategic willpower to invest in their future infrastructure and areas of innovation. There are very few such places in the world today.



Some 55 percent of humans on our planet live in cities, and we are headed for two out of three people on earth as urban dwellers within a generation. (AFP)

Cities of the future must embrace the three “I”s – investment, infrastructure and innovation. Cities need to invest in education, healthcare, human resources, capacity, technology and a whole host of other sectors to build resiliency.

Perhaps most importantly, cities must invest and target infrastructure and innovation. Large-scale infrastructure projects are costly, but when planned well, they reap benefits for generations.

As for innovation, regional cities should create the right mix of regulatory policies that would allow the region’s natural entrepreneurs to flourish.

In fact, author and geo-economic strategist Michael O’Sullivan told me that the MENA region should ride the wave of the growing e-commerce economy fueled by the pandemic by investing more in fintech and medtech, and other e-commerce industries.

This is sound advice, one rooted in history. After all, the great cities of the region have historically been on the cutting edge of trade and innovation networks.



There is really no “secret sauce” to building more vibrant, prosperous, resilient cities.

The difference today will be between those who can execute their plans, and those who, for reasons of inertia or mismanagement or corruption, fail to deliver for their people.

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## [US will not be held hostage to 'nuclear blackmail': Pompeo](#)

Author:

Tue, 2020-12-29 21:34

LONDON: US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said Washington would not be held



hostage to “nuclear blackmail” by the Iranian regime in a tweet on Tuesday.

Pompeo tweeted a video titled “US Policy on Iran Sanctions, Explained” with which he also said Iran had “sown instability and terror” since coming to power in 1979 and continued to threaten the US and its allies.

The Iranian regime has sown instability and terror, threatening the U.S. and our allies. The [@realDonaldTrump](#) Administration didn't accept the status quo and re-imposed sanctions, initiating a campaign of maximum pressure. America will not be held hostage to nuclear blackmail. [pic.twitter.com/z4JQTN0Und](https://pic.twitter.com/z4JQTN0Und)

– Secretary Pompeo (@SecPompeo) [December 29, 2020](#)

“The Trump administration didn't accept the status quo and reimposed sanctions, initiating a campaign of maximum pressure. America will not be held hostage to nuclear blackmail,” he added.

In the video, State Department spokeswoman Geraldine Gassam Griffith said Tehran had, for decades, been the world's largest state sponsor of terrorism and continued to funnel money and weapons to proxies around the Middle East, such as Hamas and Hezbollah.

Griffith also said that Iran had carried out assassinations on five continents and attacks on vital installations such as Saudi oil facilities and Iraqi bases.

Referencing the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) nuclear deal, which President Trump pulled the US out of in 2018, Griffith also said the deal had given Iran access to \$150 billion to fund its proxies.

With Tehran continuing its malign behavior, the spokeswoman said Washington

had no choice but to restore strict sanctions and maximum pressure on the Iranian regime.



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## [Turkish foreign minister slams US, Western sanctions threat over military links with Russia](#)

Tue, 2020-12-29 21:10

ANKARA: Turkey's foreign minister on Tuesday slammed the threat of further US and Western sanctions on Ankara over its military cooperation with Russia as going "against our sovereign rights."



And Mevlut Cavusoglu was joined by his Russian counterpart, Sergei Lavrov, in vowing to press ahead with strengthening links between the two countries.

The comments came as the two ministers met in the Russian resort city of Sochi to discuss regional and international issues ahead of a planned meeting of presidents Vladimir Putin and Recep Tayyip Erdogan under the high-level Russian-Turkish Cooperation Council.

Among bilateral issues, such as the construction of a nuclear power station and further development of the TurkStream gas pipeline, military cooperation with Ankara was praised by Moscow – despite US sanctions under Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA), a 2017 law targeting Russian defense industry exports.

Lavrov branded American sanctions over Turkey's purchase and activation of the Russian S-400 air defense system as an "attempt to promote the interests of the US industry with help of unfair methods," and claimed that Turkey and Russia faced Western sanctions for simply pursuing independent policies.

"It (sanctions against Turkish defense industries) is against our sovereign rights. We will not give up on our intentions," said Cavusoglu.

Increased military ties between Turkey and Russia in defiance of NATO pleas, risk causing an unprecedented rift with the alliance. However, Cavusoglu pointed out that the partnership between Turkey and Russia would not interfere with the NATO alliance.

Both Washington and NATO are concerned that Turkey's activation of the Russian defense system could give the Kremlin an insider look at the alliance's defense capabilities in the region.

Over the past year, Erdogan and Putin have talked about 15 times, and according to Oxford University Middle East analyst Samuel Ramani, NATO will be displeased about the Russia-Turkey meeting, especially as both sides had pledged to expand their military cooperation.

"On Syria and Libya, it is impossible to know what was discussed, but there is nothing to suggest that Russia would green-light a Turkish expansion in either country," he told Arab News.

Lavrov was on Wednesday expected to meet Mohammed Syala, foreign minister of the Tripoli-based Government of National Accord (GNA), to discuss regional and Libya-related issues.

On the Libyan conflict, Lavrov said both sides would "continue to facilitate normalization of the situation in Libya in every possible way via a comprehensive intra-Libyan dialogue."

Ramani said that defiance of Western sanctions was a core tenet of Russian foreign policy which Moscow saw as a means of subverting the independent foreign policy of states opposed to the US interests.

"Russia and Turkey share this view of US sanctions policy more broadly. They

extend this logic to US sanctions on Iran and Venezuela, which both Russia and Turkey see as punishments for Tehran and Caracas' anti-American actions," he added.

However, recently developed avenues of cooperation between Russia and the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) are likely to draw the ire of Ankara.

On the day of the meeting between the two foreign ministers, an SDF official confirmed more observation points would be built around the Syrian town of Ain Al-Issa by the Russian military. The move falls under an agreement between Russia and the SDF to decrease attacks from Turkish-controlled areas nearby.

But Turkey expects Syrian Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) to withdraw from the city completely. Turkey also blocks the Syrian regime's efforts to retake the rebel bastion of Idlib despite Russian support to Syrian President Bashar Assad's forces.

Rauf Mammadov, resident scholar at the Middle East Institute, told Arab News that NATO would most probably continue to monitor the complex web of relations between Moscow and Turkey, covering the geography that now stretches from Libya to the South Caucasus.

"Ankara's nascent assertive and independent foreign policy has certainly raised eyebrows in the transatlantic community. Still, it has failed to yield any concrete actions mainly due to the disunity among the pact members.

"This, in return, emanates from the conflicting interests of some NATO members concerning Turkey's actions in Libya and other places," he said.

In stark contrast to Syria, where Russia has unequivocally backed the Assad regime, Mammadov noted that Moscow had shown latent support to Libyan strongman Khalifa Haftar, commander of the Tobruk-based Libyan National Army, by oscillating between Tobruk and Tripoli.

"It was Ankara's active engagement in Libya that drove the Kremlin's opposition against the GNA. Thus, Moscow is expected to continue to counteract Turkey's expansion in Libya, especially given the significance of oil and gas-rich southern regions," he added.

Some experts pointed out that recent US sanctions approved by outgoing President Donald Trump's administration put Erdogan to the test for identifying his allies and acting accordingly in 2021.

Ozgur Unluhisarcikli, Ankara office director of The German Marshall Fund of the US, said it was not surprising that Russia would like to use US sanctions against Turkey as an opportunity to further draw a wedge between the Turks and NATO.

"At this point, Turkey will need to decide whether to escalate the tension with the US in reaction to the recent imposition of CAATSA sanctions or de-escalate with the goal of finding a solution," he added.





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## [Fission accomplished: El-Sisi hails progress of Egypt's first nuclear plant](#)

Author:

Tue, 2020-12-29 20:53

CAIRO: The historic development of Egypt's first nuclear power plant has been discussed in a Cairo meeting between Egyptian President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi and Director-General of ROSATOM Alexey Likhachev.

ROSATOM, the Russian state's nuclear energy agency, is working with Cairo to construct the El Dabaa Nuclear Power Plant.

Spokesman for the Egyptian Presidency Bassam Rady said El-Sisi received Likhachev to discuss developments in the construction of the plant.

El-Sisi said Egypt is “looking forward” to the “new edifice” that will add to the achievements of joint Egyptian-Russian cooperation throughout history.

He added that the Egyptian people will cherish the plant as a symbol of Egyptian-Russian friendship.

The Egyptian leader expressed his confidence in Russia’s nuclear energy experience. He said Russian expertise will be reflected in the “highest technical standards” of the plant.

Likhachev said he was keen to strengthen Egyptian-Russian relations at various levels. He also praised the economic conditions and investment climate in Egypt for development projects.

He said that the availability of common political will is one of the most important factors in the success of the El Dabaa project, and is a priority for Russia.

Likhachev also highlighted the role of Egyptian construction companies that are taking part in the construction of the plant.

Head of the Nuclear Power Plants Authority Amjad Al-Wakeel said a permit is expected to be issued in 2021 to establish a site in El Dabaa that will allow construction on the nuclear reactor to begin.

“An approval for construction permission was issued in January 2019 to start the construction of the nuclear plant at El Dabaa with a capacity of 4,800MW,” Al-Wakeel said.

He added that the Nuclear and Radiation Control Authority will issue construction approval to begin laying concrete bases for the first 1200MW reactor of the plant.

Al-Wakeel said that the work of contractors at the El Dabaa site “has nothing to do with reactor construction” and is instead focused on administrative building.

“The authority is waiting to obtain permission to start building nuclear reactors to generate electricity in cooperation with the Russian ROSATOM company that is responsible for construction of the plant,” he added.

Al-Wakeel also said that a maritime berth and global information center in the El Dabaa area will also feature alongside the nuclear plant.





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