

Jordan detects two coronavirus variant cases: Minister

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AMMAN: Jordan on Sunday confirmed two cases of a particularly infectious coronavirus variant in a man and his wife who had arrived from Britain. Health Minister Nazir Obeidat said the Jordanian couple traveled to the kingdom on December 19 and were found to be infected with the new strain of the virus after being tested and isolated.

The couple were still in quarantine and being monitored by medical experts according to virus protocols, Obeidat said, adding they were both in "excellent health" condition.

The new strain of the virus emerged earlier this month in Britain and has already reached several European countries, as well as Japan and Canada. The new strain, which experts fear is more contagious, prompted more than 50 countries to impose travel restrictions on Britain.

Jordan was among them and has barred flights from the UK since Monday, with the ban to be enforced until January 3.

The Middle Eastern country has officially recorded more than 286,356 cases of the novel coronavirus and over 3,729 deaths.

In mid-December, Jordan announced it had approved emergency use of the Pfizer-BioNTech coronavirus vaccine.

Obeidat said last month that vaccines would be distributed free of charge to Jordanians as well as foreign residents.

Since the virus first emerged earlier this year, Jordan has imposed strict restrictions, with schools and universities still closed and a night-time curfew imposed nationwide.



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Jordan launches COVID-19 vaccine registration website Jordan continues cross-border goods transport with Saudi Arabia despite new virus restrictions

[How Dubai defied the odds to bounce back from the coronavirus crisis](#)

Sun, 2020-12-27 21:08

DUBAI: Few global cities will look back fondly back on 2020, the year of COVID-19 lockdowns and travel bans. Many found themselves facing budgetary shortfalls and compelled to shut their gates to visitors. For most, the recovery is likely to be slow and painful, if warnings by experts are any guide. But Dubai, a city founded on trade, aviation and hospitality in a region reliant on hydrocarbon revenues, may be making a comeback sooner than predicted.

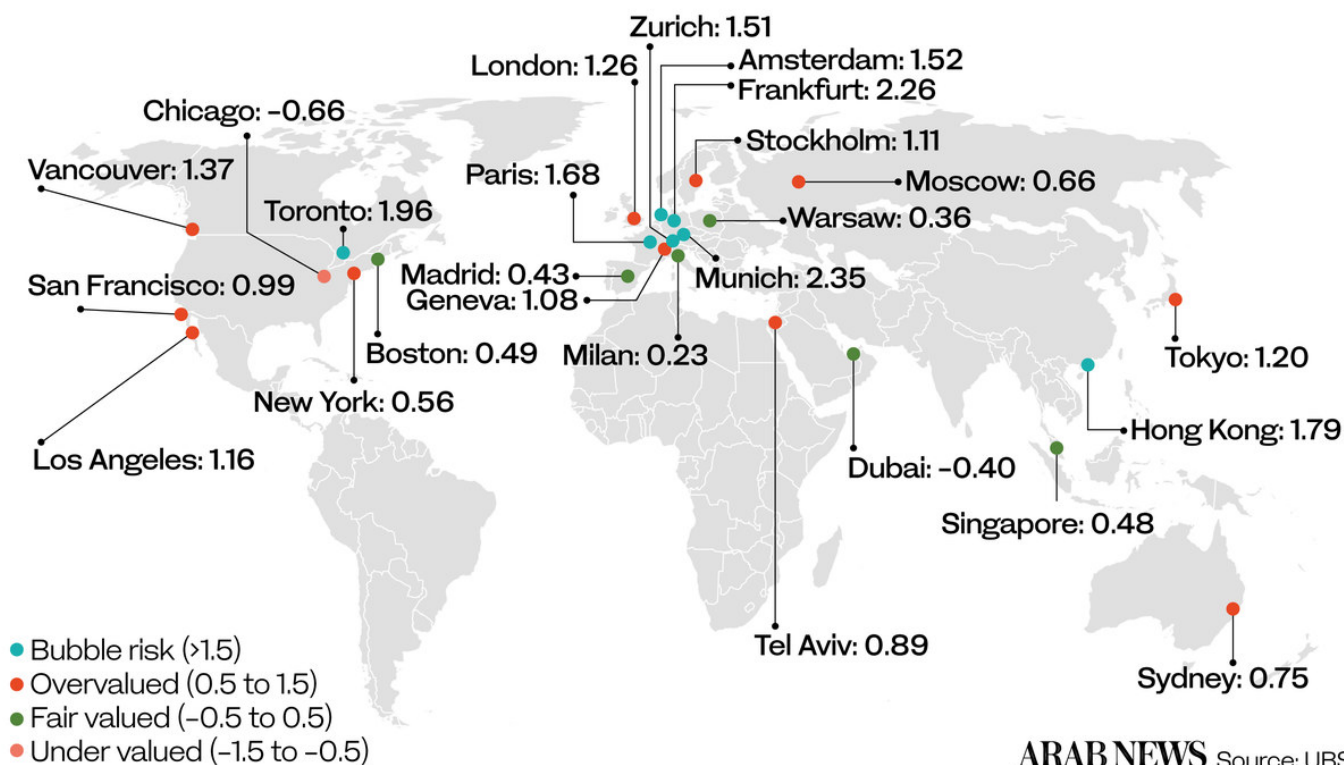
How the UAE's commercial capital keeps defying critics is a complex story

involving many different factors. But when all is said and done, Dubai appears once again to be back on its feet even as many of the world's great metropolises struggle with the debilitating effects of repeated lockdowns. The "City of Life" has not only survived the worst year in recent memory but looks all set to thrive in the new year, when it also hosts the World Expo from Oct. 1.

Since Dubai reopened to international travelers on July 7, it has witnessed a steady uptick in visitors, who have given the city's numerous hotels and beachfront resorts a timely cash-flow boost. Restaurants, bars and even nightclubs have reopened. Hotels that weathered the downturn have hiked room rates as bookings soar during what has always been the city's busiest tourist season.

HOW DUBAI COMPARES WITH OTHER BIG CITIES

Global Real Estate Bubble Index of 2020 rates Dubai's properties as fair valued



Peace dividend has done its bit. The UAE's normalization of relations with Israel, announced in a joint statement in August, could not have happened at a more opportune time. Hebrew, the everyday language of Israel, can now be heard at hotels and restaurants throughout Dubai. A recent report in The Times of Israel said more than 50,000 Israelis have already visited the UAE since the Abraham Accords peace agreement was signed on Sept. 15.

There are now a number of daily direct flights between Tel Aviv and Dubai, and both countries have declared each other "green zones," meaning quarantine is not required on arrival or return. Nearly 200 hotels and restaurants in the UAE now serve kosher meals.

A report issued by STR, a hotel management analytics firm, in December said the key hotel markets in the UAE had reached or surpassed 50 percent

occupancy due to strong domestic and recent international demand, with Dubai at 65 percent occupancy for the week of Nov. 30 to Dec. 6.

“The UAE is probably one of the nimblest countries in the world with the ability to move at such an incredible pace,” Philip Wooller, STR’s area director for the Middle East and Africa, told Arab News.

“Decisions are made in hours that in many countries might take months, or more likely, years. With all emerging economies, there will be ups and downs, but if we focus on the hospitality sector, Dubai’s pace of growth has been nothing short of sensational.”

Wooller wrapped up the emirate’s progress thus: “Just a few short years ago, Dubai had only a handful of hotels and a handful of visitors. Pandemic aside, the same Dubai is now the world’s fourth-most visited city with one of the largest hotel markets and a growing list of world-class venues.”

To be sure, social-distancing rules are still in force, mask-wearing is required even on beaches, and there are restrictions on gatherings of more than five people except for members of the same family. The precautionary measures are likely to remain in place for as long as the authorities in Dubai consider them necessary.

INNUMBERS

Dubai

- * **200,000** – Travelers visiting emirate for Christmas, New Year holidays.
- * **30%** – Rise in share prices of Damac Properties Dubai Co. in December.
- * **2021** – City to host World Expo from Oct. 1.

If a recovery is indeed underway, it’s still early days. Even before the pandemic hit, Dubai was experiencing a general slowdown in economic activity. The pace of expatriate departures had quickened as many shops, businesses and companies struggled to stay afloat in a city that had grown accustomed to continuous growth almost since the discovery of oil.

Reports of even longtime residents returning to their home countries augured badly for the future of an economic model built on the presence of expats, who comprise about 90 percent of Dubai’s population.

With the onset of the pandemic came an oil price plunge, as collapsing energy demand worldwide resulted in crude prices hitting two-decade lows. Finance ministers of the Gulf countries sounded the alarm and central bank chiefs went for broke in anticipation of another global recession. The international

media was filled with reports of blue-collar South Asian and Filipino workers leaving on repatriation flights.

For Dubai, the existing economic problems were exacerbated by the impact of the coronavirus crisis on the global travel and tourism industry, which came to a shuddering halt. A strict 24-hour lockdown implemented in April forced businesses with already bruised balance sheets to close or lay off staff.

Foreign migrant workers bore the brunt of the cost-cutting measures, with many seeing their salaries slashed, delayed or frozen. Oxford Economics estimated that as many as 900,000 jobs could be lost in the UAE and 10 percent of its residents uprooted.

Anxiety bubbled away just beneath the surface in Dubai, a cosmopolitan city known for its entrepreneurial energy, boundless ambitions and unlimited shopping opportunities. And after March, two of the emirate's biggest strengths – the aviation and hospitality sectors – proved to be its greatest weaknesses amid a pandemic blamed on a highly transmissible and deadly virus.



This picture taken on July 8, 2020 shows an aerial view of the Atlantis The Palm, luxury hotel resort located at the apex of the man-made Palm Jumeirah archipelago off the Gulf emirate of Dubai. (AFP/File Photo)

Now, with the launch of the UAE's COVID-19 vaccination campaign, those grim days could soon be regarded as a forgettable page in Dubai's history. Hotels are busy adjusting their business strategies to cope with the new influx of

visitors. The Jumeirah Group, which manages the world-famous Burj Al-Arab hotel, has established a series of pop-up experiences, including SAL – a chic new pool and beach club that is regarded as a cutting-edge concept.

“Dubai’s nature is to be entrepreneurial and radically adaptive to changing environments, and these characteristics have allowed it to navigate the crisis and come out stronger,” Danielle Wilson Naqvi, owner of boutique travel agency Unique Family Travels, told Arab News.

It is not just the big companies who are betting on a brighter future. Anecdotal evidence of green shoots of recovery can be found in the upbeat mood of many small business owners who experienced stress and uncertainty during the lockdowns.

“Despite a challenging few months before the summer, footfall to Cassette has been the strongest we have ever had,” said Haider Madani, owner and co-founder of Cassette DXB, a cafe-restaurant that opened in February 2019.

“Thanks to our higher number of customers, we have been able to increase the size of the team, helping a lot of great talent in the market looking for work, as well as expand our food and drink offering.”



A picture taken with a fish-eye lens on July 19, 2020 shows Dubai’s Burj Khalifa, the tallest structure and building in the world ahead of the launch of the UAE “Hope” Mars probe. (AFP/File Photo)

While only time will tell how deep the recovery is, if it is real then Dubai has pulled it off just when the outlook could not have been bleaker. “Pre-pandemic Dubai faced economic challenges – its real estate and hotel sector

were perhaps oversupplied,” said Wooller. “In some ways, the pandemic has allowed Dubai to take stock of the situation and provided an opportunity to change direction where needed.

“I think it is too early to talk about a second boom, but Dubai feels pretty good at the moment. The handling of the pandemic has also been a credit to Dubai, and I fully expect the city to go from strength to strength in 2021.”

In the last two months, the UAE government has adopted a raft of measures aimed at boosting the economy and attracting skilled talent from around the world. These include a groundbreaking amendment to the UAE Companies Law that permits 100 percent foreign ownership within the onshore jurisdiction of the UAE, which previously required 51 percent Emirati ownership in businesses operating outside the free zones.

In November, a major overhaul of the country’s personal laws allowed unmarried couples to cohabit and loosened alcohol restrictions. For its part, Dubai launched in October a remote working program that makes it possible for digital nomads and their families to relocate to the emirate on an annual basis for just \$287 plus medical insurance costs.



A recent report in The Times of Israel said more than 50,000 Israelis have already visited the UAE since the Abraham Accords peace agreement was signed on Sept. 15. (AFP/File Photo)

The amended legislation followed the approval in October by Dubai of an extra \$136 million (AED 500 million) economic stimulus package to support the local economy, which brought the year’s total stimulus measures to \$1.8 billion.

Property dealers are hoping that small fluctuations in the Dubai real-estate

market are the harbinger of an eagerly awaited recovery. According to the UBS Global Real Estate Bubble Index, every major city experienced price rises except Dubai in 2020, whose market went into decline during the pandemic due to a lack of liquidity and is therefore “fair valued” from an investment standpoint.

“This was on top of an already undervalued real estate market,” Taufiq Rahim, an UAE-based senior fellow at the New America Research Institute, told Arab News. “Dubai’s assets were already at a low and it had to adjust to a low base. Now you have an increase in visitors, in people looking for property and for residency.”



This picture taken on July 8, 2020 shows an aerial view of the Dubai Frame landmark in the Gulf emirate of Dubai. (AFP/File Photo)

At the end of November, the Dubai Land Department (DLD), in cooperation with Property Finder, launched the seventh edition of Mo’asher, the emirate’s official sales price index. It showed that demand for villas and townhouses was at an all-time high, with growth of over 500 percent since May 2020.

More good news arrived last week in the form of the first batch of Pfizer-BioNTech-manufactured COVID-19 vaccines flown into the UAE by Emirates SkyCargo for Dubai Health Authority. Praising the “effective management of the pandemic by Dubai’s visionary leadership,” Nabil Sultan, a senior executive of the carrier, said: “By transporting COVID-19 vaccines across our extensive network, we look forward to helping people around the world get back on their feet after the devastating impact of the pandemic.”

The emirate’s current mood is one of cautious optimism and confidence. “You need to be very brave to take on Dubai,” Wooller, of the hotel-management analytics firm STR, told Arab News. “It is a city that is extremely quick on

its feet.”

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Dubai ruler approves \$15.5bn budget for 2021 as economic recovery seen
Dubai sees surge in bank financing, new fintech firms in 2020

[French authorities to question Carlos Ghosn in Lebanon](#)

Author:

Sun, 2020-12-27 21:01

BEIRUT: A French judicial security mission is set to question former Nissan CEO Carlos Ghosn, who has Lebanese and French nationality.

The mission will arrive in Lebanon on Jan. 18 to question the 66-year-old fugitive.

A judicial source told Arab News: "The Cassation Prosecutor, Judge Imad Kabalan, is the one who will interrogate Ghosn, and the French delegation has the right to participate in the interrogation."

The source added that the interrogation is part of the French case against Ghosn regarding an alleged misuse of Renault funds in a birthday party he hosted for his wife, Carole, in the Palace of Versailles.

Ghosn is one of the most important and senior executives in the global auto industry. He saved Nissan, one of Japan's largest car companies, from bankruptcy in 2000.

He chaired the Renault-Nissan-Mitsubishi Alliance, the largest of its kind in the automotive industry. Japanese authorities arrested Ghosn in 2018 for financial offenses and he was imprisoned for 130 days. He moved to Japan in the late 1990s and revolutionized the practice of corporate management.

In March 2019, after Ghosn was placed under house arrest in Japan, he fled the country and entered Lebanon through Istanbul. Lebanese authorities faced criticism over a refusal to hand Ghosn over to Japanese authorities. But officials claimed that, because he is a Lebanese citizen, he should be tried on Lebanese soil by the Lebanese judiciary.

Authorities in France have started at least two investigations related to Ghosn, one of which is related to suspicious transactions in Renault, in addition to suspicious payments for trips and special events paid by the Renault-Nissan holding company, based in the Netherlands. The second investigation is focused on the misuse of company funds to pay for the Versailles party.

Lebanon's courts previously denied a lawsuit brought against Ghosn by Lebanese activists that claimed he entered Israel – an enemy state. The judiciary said that his entry to Israel was "outdated."



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Hundreds of Syrians flee as refugee camp torched in Lebanon
Lebanon lockdown possible if COVID-19 cases increase

[Turkish parliament approves controversial oversight law](#)

Sun, 2020-12-27 20:53

ANKARA: Turkey's parliament on Sunday approved a controversial law approving the oversight of associations and foundations, which critics say will stifle NGOs and damage civil society.

It gives the state the power to replace the boards of NGOs with trustees, as well as suspending their operations and having civil servants carry out annual monitoring.

The assets and online donation campaigns of NGOs could be blocked after inspections as a way to prevent money laundering and prevent terrorism financing.

Dunja Mijatovic, who is the Council of Europe's commissioner for human rights, last week voiced her concerns about the legislation. She said it would allow the state to restrict civil society activism in the country and target critical voices.

She tweeted on Dec. 22: "The Turkish Parliament should discontinue attempts to introduce legislation further restricting legitimate NGO activities, including replacement of NGO leaders facing investigations under anti-terror laws with gov-appointed trustees and restrictions on fund-raising activities."

The new law also allows the interior minister to replace members of organisations who are being investigated on terror charges.

However, terror charges in Turkey are often arbitrary and target dissidents as a way to quash civil society activists, journalists and politicians. Hundreds of NGOs launched a petition to prevent the bill from passing, warning that it would "destroy civil society" in Turkey.

Turkish philanthropist and civil society figure Osman Kavala was acquitted earlier this year of terror-related charges for allegedly organizing and financing anti-government protests in Gezi in 2013. But he was quickly re-arrested over alleged links to a failed coup attempt in 2016 and military espionage.

Lawmaker Alpay Antmen, from the main opposition People's Republican Party (CHP), said the new legislation went against several articles of the constitution, especially regarding the right to privacy and the right to property, as well as against several international conventions that Turkey was a signatory to.

"Here the main target is to get the authority to appoint trustees to all dissident civil groups. It is crystal-clear," he told Arab News.

Antmen said the law would give civil servants the power to close NGOs without waiting for the judicial process to be completed.

"The courts are generally giving politically motivated rulings without respecting the constitution. Turkish rulers keep branding all dissident figures as terrorists just because they don't support them. Opposition women's rights associations, human rights groups and all similar civil society groups can now be closed with just one signature. As the trials will endure for years, their assets will be frozen for long years."

Antmen, who is a lawyer by training, believed that Turkey's handful of democratic, secular and progressive civil society actors had lost all judicial guarantees to maintain their once vibrant existence in the country thanks to this new law.

"It is unfortunately the beginning of the end for the civil society presence in Turkey."

A European ruling that was critical about the jailed Kurdish politician

Selahattin Demirtas and ordered his release led Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan to say that the government did not abide by the rulings of the European Court of Human Rights, even though the country has been a member of this court for decades.

“The ECHR could not pass judgment in the place of Turkish courts,” he said on Dec. 23.



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Turkey warns Libya's Haftar and supporters against attacking its forces
Eastern Turkey shook by 5.3 magnitude earthquake

[Top Egypt officials visit Libya capital for first time in years](#)

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Sun, 2020-12-27 16:38

TRIPOLI: Senior Egyptian security officials visited the Libyan capital Tripoli for the first time in years on Sunday and held talks with officials from the Government of National Accord (GNA), the Libyan interior ministry said.

The visit was the first for senior Egyptian officials to Tripoli since 2014 when the country entered a civil war between the GNA, based in the capital, and the eastern-based Libyan National Army (LNA), led by Khalifa Haftar. Tripoli's government is backed by Turkey while LNA is backed by Russia, the United Arab Emirates and Egypt.

Libya descended into chaos after the NATO-backed overthrow of leader Muammar Qaddafi in 2011, and Egypt is concerned about instability in its neighbor and Turkey's support for Tripoli forces.

GNA Interior Minister Fathi Bashagha and Head of the Intelligence Service Emad Trabelsi discussed "ways to support the cease-fire agreement and discuss the outputs of the 5+5 committee" with the Egyptian delegation, the Libyan interior ministry said in a statement.

It was referring to a truce agreed on in late October between Libyan warring factions and the so-called 5+5 meetings, involving five senior officers appointed by each side.

Bashagha, who visited Cairo last month, said on twitter that the meeting was "fruitful and constructive" and described the relations with Cairo as "very important."

The Egyptian delegation includes deputy head of the intelligence service and top officials from the foreign and defense ministries, an Egyptian intelligence source told Reuters.

The delegation also met GNA Foreign Minister Mohamed Taher Siala and promised to reopen the Egyptian embassy in Tripoli "at the earliest time," said Mohamed Elgeblawi, the GNA foreign ministry spokesman on Twitter.

The visiting officials would inspect the Egyptian embassy in Tripoli which has been closed since 2014, Egyptian state newspaper Ahram reported.

The two sides also agreed on taking steps toward resuming Libyan flights to Cairo, Elgeblawi said.



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Turkey warns Libya's Haftar and supporters against attacking its forces
Turkish defence minister in Libya to discuss cooperation