

Egyptian startup prepares MENA students for a post-pandemic world

Author:

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DUBAI: Connecting the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region to educational opportunities is set to become even more vital in the coming months as the world adjusts to post-pandemic circumstances. That's where MARJ3, an Egyptian social enterprise co-founded by Sami-Al Ahmad and Ahmed El-Gebaly, will prove to be a beacon of hope and opportunity.

MARJ3 connects the MENA youth to scholarship opportunities, universities and courses globally. "I got my first scholarship from the University of Delaware, funded by the US government," said Ahmed. "I studied in three universities – Delaware, San Diego, and California – for six weeks. They really affected my life, and I learnt a lot.

"That's why we launched MARJ3 – to help MENA region students learn. Now we're the leading platform in the MENA region for education purposes."



In 2016, Ahmed and Sami, who is originally from Syria, met in Egypt while they were both studying as final year students. The social entrepreneurs decided they wanted to connect more young people like them to the sort of opportunities that drastically changed Ahmed's life for the better.

“We started as a normal startup and didn’t have a lot of money,” said Sami. “We started with 26 opportunities and shared them on social media and Facebook pages and began to invest our own money to start doing marketing and ads.”

The idea spread quickly on social media, and within a year MARJ3 gained over 250,000 likes on Facebook. Nowadays, the numbers are even more compelling. They currently have over 10,000 opportunities on their platform and get 2.4 million visitors per month.

But the aim of MARJ3 is not to just improve and inspire individuals, but also to effect change across the region through education. “Around 95 percent of scholarships ask you to come back to your home country and benefit your country for at least two years,” said Ahmed.



“They ask that you should transfer this information that you’ve learnt from other countries that you study abroad in.”

“Even if students go to study at Harvard, they usually come back (to their home country) to work at multinational companies, startups, NGOs or the government sector.”

An enterprise like MARJ3 is a huge operation which relies on many components to ensure that it is successful, such as a workforce that believes in its mission. The company currently employs 10 people but also works with 174 interns, who are tasked with helping to source global opportunities to help fulfil the ambitions of MENA’s promising youngsters.

In return, they too benefit from access to scholarships. “If you look at the revolutions in the MENA region, it was young people who started it, they are people who want to learn more and develop their country,” said Ahmed.

“We wanted to work more with this sector because they have a lot of power.

They learn fast, they're ready to change and develop themselves. The education sector needs people like this."



Since its launch in 2016, MARJ3 has been successful in helping many students across the region, from Tunisia to Palestine, find scholarships and access funding through its fellowship program. Even the coronavirus pandemic has not slowed its momentum as the organization has restructured its program to make it completely online.

The journey has not always been straightforward, and Sami believes that perseverance is vital if a social enterprise is to succeed.

"One of the key things you need to build a start-up is persistence," he said. "It's a long and hard journey. You will have a lot of ups and downs; some stuff that makes you excited and some stuff that puts you in a very bad mood. You need to try again and again."

• This report is being published by Arab News as a partner of the Middle East Exchange, which was launched by the Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum Global Initiatives to reflect the vision of the UAE prime minister and ruler of Dubai to explore the possibility of changing the status of the Arab region.







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A startup sees Kuwait's property-rental industry ripe for disruption
startups inject tech savvy into Saudi Arabia's entertainment scene

[A startup sees Kuwait's property-rental industry ripe for disruption](#)

Fri, 2020-12-25 21:56

KUWAIT: An expat landing in the Gulf for the very first time will surely find it a melange of unique experiences. Trying to lock down a rental deal is one of them. In a market with one too many expats and too many options to choose from, the challenge is as real as it gets.

Even if one does achieve the seemingly impossible and finds a place to call home, outdated payment systems can prove to be another thorn in their side. This endless dilemma inspired Shaheen Al-Khudhari back in 2016 to find a definitive tech-based solution. Thus, he became the founder and CEO of Ajar, a property management and rent collection startup.

"The idea sprung when I moved into a new apartment and started facing issues with rent payments, chasing for receipts, withdrawing and safekeeping large chunks of cash for payment, worrying about missing out on the payment if I was not in the country and so on," Al-Khudhari shares.

Having identified key issues in Kuwait's real estate market, Al-Khudhari launched Ajar to provide the ultimate convenience to landlords and tenants. The former get a full-fledged property management service in real time, while the latter get to pay their rent without breaking a sweat.

The next step was to convince potential clients to use Ajar services, which was not as big of a challenge as it may seem.

"With my experience as an IT manager in a real estate company, I was able to reach out to many potential landlords that I knew had problems keeping track of their real estate performance. Once those joined, it was a word-of-mouth and network effect that really got Ajar up and running, reaching our first 10,000 units in quite a short time."

After the astounding success in Kuwait, the next logical step for Ajar was to expand to the Gulf's biggest real estate market – Dubai. The company later moved its headquarters there. "The UAE's real estate market is international, with a global mindset, but the practices for rent collection are very

unfriendly to the tenant and rather outdated,” Al-Khudhari said. “Rent payment in Dubai didn’t match the (progressive) vision for the city.”

From there on, Ajar exponentially grew in popularity and number of users, which in turn attracted investments that amount to \$7.5 million to date.

The onset of the pandemic in March 2020 brought fresh opportunities to Ajar. In a world suddenly left with no choice but to seek contactless transactions and remote management, the company was perfectly equipped to overcome the challenges brought forth by Covid-19. In fact, it has generated more business during the pandemic than in any year since its inception.

“During the lockdown, when banks were closed and people couldn’t step out of their houses, we were the only solution provider for property management and rent collection that was actively collecting rent,” said Al-Khudhari.

“We also learnt from this experience how crucial it is to have a team with a strong mindset that doesn’t get affected by negative media coverage – a focused, knowledgeable and dedicated team can get any company to be the best in its field.”

Today, Ajar is exploring more expansion opportunities to eventually cover most GCC markets in the next few months. Of particular interest are Bahrain, Qatar and Saudi Arabia, but the company does not plan to stop there. “We’ll then be heading to more virgin markets which need to digitize their solutions, like Malaysia,” said Al-Khudhari.

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A startup sees Kuwait's property-rental industry ripe for disruption

[UAE confirms 1,230 new COVID-19 cases, 6 deaths](#)

Author:

Fri, 2020-12-25 21:35

DUBAI: The UAE on Friday recorded 1,230 new COVID-19 cases and six virus-related deaths.

Officials from the Ministry of Health and Prevention said the total number of cases since the pandemic began had reached 199,665. The death toll is 653.

It was also announced that 1,386 people had recovered from the virus in the past 24 hours. The total number of recoveries is 175,865.

On Thursday the Dubai Health Authority (DHA) was recognized by the International Hospital Federation's "Beyond the Call of Duty for COVID-19 Programme" for its response to the pandemic, along with over 100 hospitals from 28 countries.

It was honored for the "proactive and swift measures" it implemented back in January to minimize the spread of the virus and introduce mass testing of the population.

[.@DHA_Dubai](#), Rashid & Latifa Hospital receive international recognition for their Covid-19 response <https://t.co/m0F9pBaEAX>
<pic.twitter.com/w9sxMarluG>

– Dubai Media Office (@DXBMediaOffice) [December 25, 2020](#)

"The DHA's Dubai Shield Programme was recognized at the Beyond the Call of Duty for COVID-19 Programme for proactively responding with outstanding and innovative actions in facing the COVID-19 pandemic," said a statement from Dubai Media Office. "Additionally, DHA's hospitals – Rashid and Latifa Hospital for Women and Children – were recognized for their outstanding COVID-19 response action plan."

Dubai Economy on Thursday issued warnings to two establishments for failing to adhere to COVID-19 precautions. Inspectors found 688 other businesses to be compliant.

Elsewhere, Kuwait recorded 260 new COVID-19 cases, bringing its total to 149,277. The death toll remains 926.

تعلن [#وزارة_الصحة](#) عن تأكيد إصابة 260 حالة جديدة، وتسجيل 232 حالة شفاء، ولم تسجل أي حالة وفاة جديدة بـ [#فيروس_كورونا_المستجد](#) COVID-19 ، ليصبح إجمالي عدد الحالات 149,277 حالة pic.twitter.com/SyLUGd2oz8

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Saudi Arabia records 9 COVID-19 deaths, 178 new cases
UAE expats thankful to enjoy Christmas away from tough COVID-19 lockdowns

Morocco's king, Israel's Netanyahu discuss bilateral relations

Fri, 2020-12-25 21:51

LONDON: Morocco's King Mohammed VI held a phone call with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on Friday, the kingdom's state news agency MAP reported.

During the call, the king recalled the strong and special ties that bind the Jewish community of Moroccan origin to the Moroccan monarchy.

He also "reaffirmed the kingdom's steadfast and unchanging position on the Palestinian issue, as well as its pioneering role in promoting peace and stability in the Middle East."

King Mohammed commended the reactivation of diplomatic ties and restoration of communication between the two countries.

Netanyahu told the king he was determined to implement all commitments made according to their specific timetable.

An Israeli statement issued said both leaders spoke about moving forward with a US-brokered agreement announced earlier this month to normalize bilateral ties.

It added that Netanyahu also thanked King Mohammed for hosting an official Israeli delegation this week and invited the king to visit the Jewish state. Israel and Morocco agreed on Dec. 10 to normalize relations in a deal brokered with US help, making Morocco the fourth Arab country to set aside hostilities with Israel in the past four months.

It joins the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Sudan in beginning to forge deals with Israel, driven in part by US-led efforts to present a united front against Iran and roll back Tehran's regional influence.

Prior to that only Egypt and Jordan had official ties with Israel, signed in 1979 and 1994 respectively.

(With Reuters)



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Israeli envoys, Jared Kushner visit Morocco after establishing relationsMorocco, Israel to seal normalization with first direct flight

[Strip searches of women prisoners sparks anger in Turkey](#)

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Fri, 2020-12-25 20:11

ANKARA: Claims that Turkish police routinely strip search women detainees have sparked a war of words between the government and opposition MPs. Pro-Kurdish People's Democratic Party MP Omer Faruk Gergerlioglu recently said that female suspects and detainees had been subjected to humiliating strip searches by police in provinces across Turkey. Recently a group of female prisoners in the Aegean province of Usak claimed they had been forced to undress before being searched. However, Turkish Interior Minister Suleyman Soylu has denied the allegations and accused Gergerlioglu of being a "terrorist."

"The person who casts such an aspersion on the Turkish police without proof is a rascal, dishonorable and low. Gergerlioglu is a terrorist," Soylu said. But Gergerlioglu, a member of parliamentary human rights investigation commission, said that he was being attacked for revealing the truth. "I stand against sexual harassment of women, men and children," he said. The MP's allegations have been supported by thousands of prisoners who told dissident media outlets about their experiences of systematic sexual violence at the hands of police. Among the claims are that children of women detainees have had their diapers checked for contraband items. An investigation was launched on Dec. 23 after women shared accounts on social media of being strip searched. Meanwhile, Turkey's prisons and detention authority has defended its controversial use of strip searching – or what it calls a "detailed search" – at its jails, calling it a "necessary" and "exceptional" practice to prevent the smuggling of forbidden items into prisons. Strip searches are permitted under Turkish legislation if the detainee is believed to be carrying weapons or knives. According to the Human Rights Association of Turkey, almost 170 women have been beaten in the past year after refusing to be searched. Mustafa Yeneroglu, deputy chair of the DEVA Party, a breakaway from the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP), said that he has been following up similar claims in recent months. "The interior minister makes baseless allegations, and defends silencing Turkish people and subjecting them to ill-treatment. He even terrorizes the judiciary as he sees the rule of law as a burden for the government," he told Arab News. Yeneroglu, who was previously the chair of the parliamentary human rights committee, said that the government should have investigated the allegations and "done whatever is necessary if there is a crime." He claimed that four women recently had been subjected to a strip search before being admitted into a detention facility in Usak province. "If you brand these people terrorists, all such practices are being legitimized. They only search the bodies of political prisoners, not those convicted of drug dealing, for example" he said. Some women from conservative family backgrounds needed psychological support afterwards, Yeneroglu claimed. "They couldn't even confess this traumatic experience to their own families. They cannot sue the authorities because they are also going through a terror investigation," he said. Yeneroglu described strip searches as "dehumanizing" and "a serious act of humiliation."

“It is a violation of human dignity and now has become common practice on political prisoners,” he added.

The hashtag “don’t stay silent to strip searches” remained among trending topics on Twitter.

During his weekly parliamentary group meeting on Dec. 22, Kemal Kilicdaroglu, leader of the main opposition Republican People’s Party, also said that he believed the claims were genuine.

A dissident female journalist, Aslihan Gencay, could spend an additional year in prison after objecting to a strip search when she was due to be transferred to another facility. She was placed in solitary confinement for three days and now faces a prison investigation.



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Turkey welcomes EU-Britain Brexit deal