

Iran says coronavirus deaths top 11,000

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TEHRAN: Iran's death toll from the novel coronavirus passed 11,000 on Thursday, the health ministry said, as the country struggles to contain the Middle East's deadliest outbreak of COVID-19.

Official figures have shown a rising trajectory in fatalities and new confirmed cases in recent months, after Iran reported a near-two month low in daily recorded infections in early May.

"In the past 24 hours, we lost 148 of our compatriots due to infection with COVID-19," health ministry spokeswoman Sima Sadat Lari said on state TV.

That brings Iran's overall death toll to 11,106, she added.

She also raised the country's coronavirus caseload to 232,863, with 2,652 new confirmed cases in the past day.

"Unfortunately, the number of hospitalizations is increasing in most of the country's provinces," Lari said.

The resurging overall numbers have seen some previously largely unscathed provinces classified as "red" – the highest level on Iran's color-coded risk scale – with authorities allowed to reimpose restrictive measures if required.

They include Bushehr, Hormozgan, Kermanshah, Khuzestan, Khorasan Razavi, Kurdistan, and West and East Azerbaijan, all located along Iran's borders.



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Iran behind attacks on Saudi oil sites, UN report finds Saudi envoy calls for extension of UN arms embargo on Iran

[WHO: Middle East at 'critical threshold' in coronavirus numbers](#)

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Wed, 2020-07-01 19:59

CAIRO: The World Health Organization warned Wednesday the Middle East was at a decisive moment in the fight against the coronavirus, with cases surging as countries ease lockdown measures.

"We are at a critical threshold in our region," the WHO's Middle East head, Ahmed Al-Mandhari, said in an online press conference.

According to figures published by the global health body on Wednesday, the 22 countries from Morocco to Pakistan had recorded 1,077,706 novel coronavirus cases and 24,973 deaths.

Mandhari said passing a million infections marked a “concerning milestone” and urged countries to strengthen their health care systems.

“The number of cases reported in June alone is higher than the total number of cases reported during the four months following the first reported case in the region on 29 January,” he said.

He attributed the rise in confirmed cases to increased testing, the easing in recent weeks of lockdown measures and weakened health infrastructure in conflict-hit countries.

Over 80 percent of all deaths in the region were reported in five countries – Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia – according to the WHO.

Iran, which has been struggling to contain the Middle East’s deadliest outbreak, on Monday recorded its highest single-day COVID death toll of 162. It now has a recorded a total of 230,211 infections and 10,958 deaths.

Official figures have shown a rising trajectory in new confirmed cases since early May, when Iran hit a near two-month low in daily recorded infections.

The Islamic republic gradually lifted restrictions from April to try to reopen its sanctions-hit economy.

In neighboring Iraq, authorities have refused to reimpose strict lockdown measures, even as hospitals across the country, battered by years of war, have been swamped in recent weeks.

While the virus had spread relatively slowly for months, on Wednesday the number of recorded cases surpassed 51,000 including more than 2,000 deaths. Egypt, the Arab world’s most populous country with 100 million inhabitants, has officially reported 68,000 cases and around 3,000 deaths from the COVID-19 disease.

On Wednesday, authorities reopened the famed Giza pyramids after a three-month closure, a day after resuming international flights as part of efforts to restart the vital tourism industry.

Lebanon, battling an economic crisis and public unrest alongside the novel coronavirus, reopened the Beirut airport after months of closure.

The small eastern Mediterranean state has recorded some of the lowest infection and mortality rates in the Middle East: 1,800 cases and just 34 deaths.

In contrast, neighboring Israel saw a jump of about 15 percent in case numbers in the last week to over 25,500 on Wednesday, according to government figures.

The West Bank too was hit by a sharp spike in infections, with the Palestinian Authority on Wednesday announcing a five-day lockdown across the territory.

Total confirmed coronavirus infections in the territory more than doubled within a week to 2,636 following the easing of previous restrictions.

In Qatar, residents cautiously returned to beaches on Wednesday as the Gulf nation, with one of the world’s highest per-capita infection rates and tough penalties for failing to wear masks in public, continued to reopen.

WHO officials at the virtual meeting urged governments to prepare more intensive care beds and emergency wards.

Mandhari urged individuals to be “cautious and vigilant” as lockdowns and curfews were eased, and to follow protocols recommended by health

authorities.

“Easing of lockdowns does not mean easing of the response or easing of social responsibilities,” he said, warning cases could rise as public spaces reopen “even in countries where the situation now seems to be stabilizing.”

He also called for global solidarity.

“We have to face this pandemic as one government and one community,” he said.



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How coronavirus crisis has changed business in the Middle EastWill coronavirus pandemic intensify or defuse Middle East conflicts?

[With foothold in Libya, Erdogan's Turkey eyes influence and energy](#)

riches

Wed, 2020-07-01 20:44

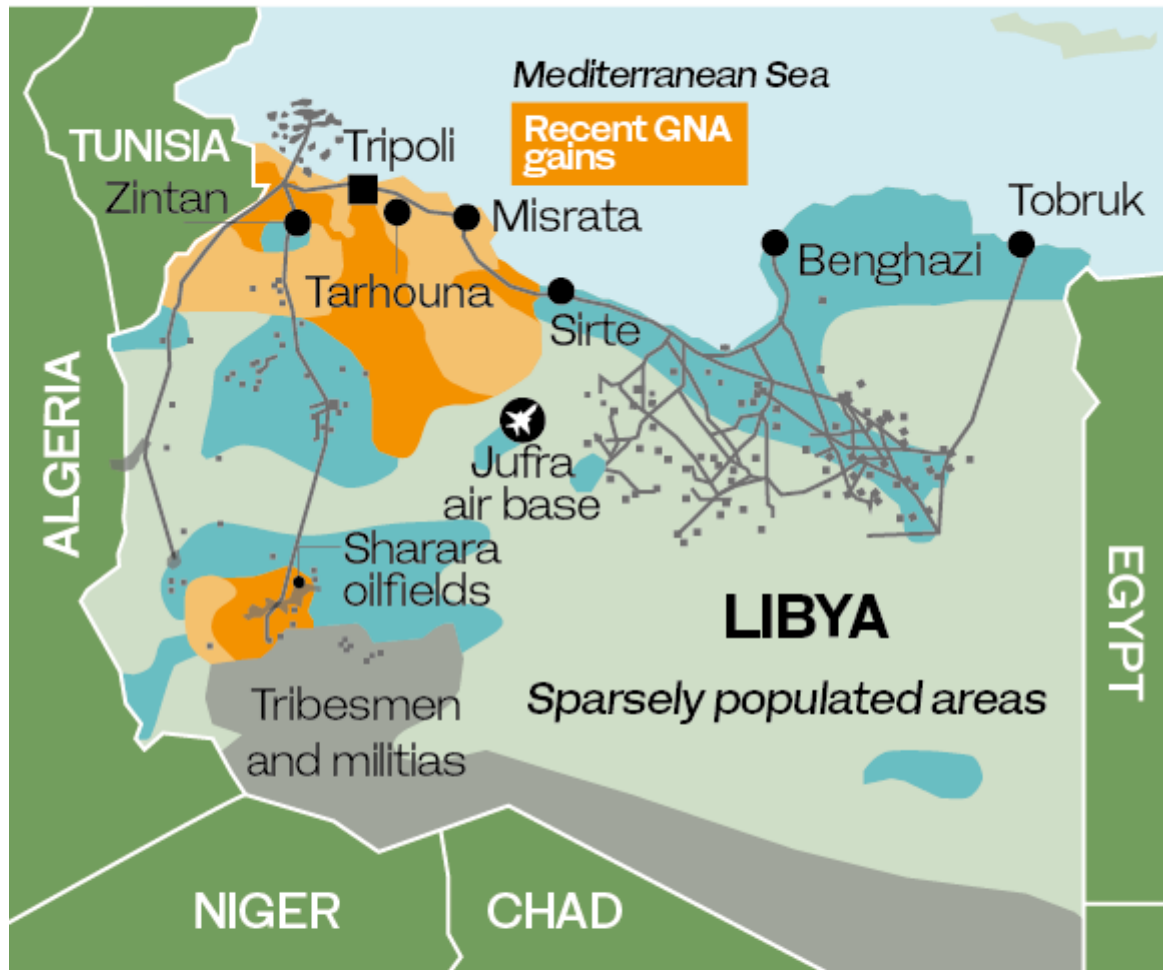
MISSOURI: The Libyan imbroglio remains at least as complicated as the mess in Syria. In both civil wars, one factor seems to remain constant: Turkey's decisive support to Islamist forces.

In the Libyan case, the Islamist camp is the UN-recognized Government of National Accord (GNA) in Tripoli. The GNA's main backers, Turkey and Qatar, always emphasize the "UN-recognized" aspect when justifying their support and condemning the backers of the rival Libyan National Army (LNA), led by Khalifa Haftar and based in the country's east.




LNA supporters – mainly Egypt, Russia and the UAE – retort that the GNA is controlled by extremist Islamist militias. Why would the UN recognize a GNA that is run by extremist militias and is in control of less Libyan territory than the LNA?

WHO CONTROLS LIBYA?

The Tripoli-based GNA has been shored up by Turkey's expanded military presence and import of Syrian fighters



Areas of control as of June 2020

-  Government of National Accord (GNA) and militias
-  National Army led by Khalifa Haftar
-  Oil and gas fields/pipelines

Sources: The Economist, OCHA, Liveuamap



UN recognition stemmed from a 2015 peace deal and attempt at forming a unity government in Libya. After the peace deal, however, the GNA quickly incorporated extremist elements into its apparatus and reneged on key promises regarding power sharing and other matters.

The GNA is not, in fact, the recognized government of Libya since the Tobruk-based House of Representatives (HoR) reacted to these breaches by voting not to recognize the GNA in 2016. Efforts at reconciling the GNA and the HoR government and the LNA, including promised elections in 2018, repeatedly failed.

This summer, things were finally heading toward another kind of resolution when Haftar's LNA advanced on Tripoli and some of the last pieces of territory controlled by the GNA. Backed by Russian mercenaries and armaments from Arab allies, Haftar's forces occupied the suburbs of Tripoli until just a few weeks ago.



Turkish deminers search and clear landmines in the Salah al-Din area, south of the Libyan capital Tripoli, on June 15, 2020. (AFP)

Turkey's decisive intervention on behalf of the GNA reversed the situation. Turkey sent in its own soldiers, some 2,000 of its Syrian rebel proxy forces, weaponry and money. The GNA repaid Ankara for its support by signing, among other things, maritime agreements that buttress Turkish claims to much of the Mediterranean.

Turkey and Qatar would like to see the Muslim Brotherhood-style parties of the GNA, and other Sunni Islamist groups within its fold, cement their power in oil-rich Libya. Egypt, the UAE, Saudi Arabia and most other Arab states, in contrast, remain quite averse to a takeover of Libya by Islamist forces.

Egypt may even prove willing to intervene with its own troops should Haftar's LNA suffer too many setbacks in the next few weeks.



Supporters of Libyan military strongman Khalika Haftar carry placards as they take part in a demonstration in the coastal city of Benghazi in eastern Libya, against Turkish intervention in the country's affairs on February 14, 2020. (AFP/File Photo)

At the moment, it looks like Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has succeeded once again in getting his way through the deployment of military force. Libya offers him a route to influence in much of energy-rich North Africa, and Turkish forces may remain there for quite some time.

If the 1974 Turkish occupation of northern Cyprus serves as an example, occupied parts of northern Syria may likewise be using the Turkish lira for a long time to come. Even northern Iraq now appears vulnerable to Turkish military occupation of indeterminate duration.

Although France in particular appears quite alarmed by the Turkish moves in the region, Ankara's other NATO allies have stayed inexplicably quiet about these developments. As for the US, important voices in the White House and State Department still seem to think Turkey could prove useful for containing Iran and various Islamist extremists in the region.



A fighter loyal to Libya's UN-recognised Government of National Accord (GNA), poses for a group picture while celebrating in the town of Tarhuna, about 65 kilometres southeast of the capital Tripoli on June 5, 2020, after the area was taken over by pro-GNA forces from rival forces loyal to strongman Khalifa Haftar. (AFP/File Photo)

For Washington's non-Qatari Gulf Arab allies and Egypt, however, Ankara's region-wide muscle-flexing is extremely worrisome. Turkish support for various Sunni Islamist currents threatens regional stability just when the Arab world seemed to finally be getting a lid on the problem.

Ankara has even recently increased its activity in Yemen, perhaps seeking to gain a strategic foothold there as well. With both Turkey and Iran projecting power and cultivating proxies all over the Middle East, and cooperating as often as not in the process, leaders in many Arab capitals worry that both countries have renewed their imperialist appetites of the not-so-distant past.

Both Turkey and Iran may lack the wherewithal to sustain their ambitions, however. Iran's economic problems and sanctions have caused significant domestic unrest and severely limit its ability to support proxies and allies abroad. Turkey's economy, although much stronger than Iran's, also appears on the brink.



Members of the self-proclaimed eastern Libyan National Army (LNA) special forces gather in the city of Benghazi, on their way to reportedly back up fellow LNA fighters on the frontline west of the city of Sirte, facing forces loyal to the UN-recognised Government of National Accord (GNA), on June 18, 2020. (AFP)

One of Turkey's vulnerabilities thus probably resides in Europe. If European states grow sufficiently alarmed by Ankara's growing military bravado over gas in the Mediterranean and its cultivation of Islamist proxies across the region, they could push Turkey's economy over the edge with even minor sanctions. Turkey would in turn threaten to flood Europe with migrants, of course, which will give pause to decision-makers in Brussels.

New leadership in Washington might also offer a promising tool to constrain Turkish ambitions and military adventurism in the region. While US President Donald Trump seems to care little about Turkish designs on the Mediterranean and the Arab world, and to enjoy a good personal relationship with Erdogan, the same cannot be said for Democratic candidate Joe Biden.

Biden's Senate voting record on Turkey was mostly negative for Ankara. He refers to Erdogan as "an autocrat." Biden has also spoken on the record about supporting opposition parties in Turkey in an effort to effect democratic change there.



People wave flags of Libya (R) and Turkey (L) during a demonstration in the Martyrs' Square in the centre of the Libyan capital Tripoli, currently held by the UN-recognised Government of National Accord (GNA), on June 21, 2020. (AFP)

Perhaps most alarmingly for leaders in Ankara, Biden even recently said the Turks must “understand that we’re not going to continue to play with them the way we have.” With regard to the eastern Mediterranean, he said the US should “get together with our allies in the region and deal with how we isolate his (Erdogan’s) actions in the region, particularly in the eastern Mediterranean in relating to oil and a whole range of other things.”

If a Biden-led US were to pressure Ankara economically, the resultant pain in an over-extended Turkey could prove severe, possibly even severe enough to constrain what for the moment looks like unrestrained ambition in the region.

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France freezes role in NATO Libya force amid Turkey tensions
Turkey slams France's 'destructive' approach to Libya conflict

[UAE-based company plans to triple face-mask production](#)

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Wed, 2020-07-01 20:35

DUBAI: ViroMasks is producing half a million of its reusable face masks each month to guard against COVID-19, the UAE-based company said. It plans to increase production to 1.5 million masks by August by automating

some of the production process, partner Usman Khalid told Arab News. The company's masks combine various technologies that "neutralize COVID-19 within 30 minutes of exposure, whereas in regular fabric (the virus) can last from 48 hours to a week or so," Khalid added. The masks are produced in the UAE by AMCO, which also manufactures uniforms for other sectors, such as military and security. The venture so far is "self-funded," Khalid said.



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Japan shoppers crash website for face masks
Coronavirus-hit Iran to make masks compulsory from next week

[The billionaire who rose from humble roots in Syria to conquer the business world in France](#)

Wed, 2020-07-01 20:03

PARIS: Syrian-born French billionaire Mohed Altrad was in the news recently for having stood for the office of mayor in Montpellier, a southern French

city popular with artists and tourists. Though he lost the election, his story is literally one of rags to riches. He emerged from the most humble, and distressing, of origins to achieve levels of success most people only dream of.

He made the bulk of his fortune while living in Montpellier. The tale of how a former Syrian became involved in the local politics of Montpellier is a genuine success story.

Despite his wealth and success in business, this 72-year-old self-made man – the founder and owner of the Altrad Group, who was named World Entrepreneur in 2015 by Ernst and Young – continues to walk among the citizens of the city with no bodyguards.

Altrad was born in 1948 into a Bedouin tribe in the desert area of Raqqa in Syria. His mother was very young, only about 14 years old. He describes the tragic circumstances of his birth in a matter-of-fact way.

“My mother, who was about 13, was raped twice by my father, who was much older and the chief of the tribe,” he said. “The first rape resulted in my brother, Mayouf, who died very young because of mistreatment by my father. I was the result of the second rape.

“My father was the chief of a bedouin tribe and he had all the power. The tribe used to move from place to place with its herds of goats and camels so I was unable to go to school.”

Fortune nonetheless smiled on the youngster when a distant cousin of his father’s, who lived a less nomadic lifestyle in a village but had no children of his own, offered to take him in and send him to elementary school.

“My father did not want me to go to school but I went anyway, without the means to buy pencils, books or clothes,” said Altrad. “I loved school and was a good student.”

The fates were once again in his favor and he was able to remain in education through high school, from which he graduated with a baccalaureate, with the help of another man of limited means.

“I stayed in his house for three years and passed all my exams,” he said. “That year the Syrian government decided to give a scholarship to the best student in each region to study abroad and I was first in Raqqa.

“That is how I arrived in Montpellier in France in 1970, where I studied French at university. Then I earned a degree at the Scientific University of Montpellier, and from there I went on to Paris where I obtained a Ph.D. in Information Technology.”

While studying for his doctorate in 1975, Altrad worked at Thompson-CSF which specialized in military electronics. Then he joined the telecoms company Alcatel, before moving to the UAE where he spent four years working for the Abu Dhabi National Oil Company.

"I left (Abu Dhabi) because my wife, who is French, wanted our son to be educated in France so we came back in 1980," said Altrad. "I founded a company which made one of the first portable computers. I sold that business very quickly because it was growing rapidly and I wanted money."

At that time, he owned a country house in a village called Florensac, between Montpellier and Beziers, and while staying there, one of his neighbors asked if he would be interested in buying his scaffolding company.

"That was the first time I had heard of scaffolding but I bought the company and liked the work very much," said Altrad. "It was very different from IT, and I enjoyed the construction business and public works."

"The company was in deficit but I managed to correct that and began making profits, which enabled me to buy other companies. At present I have 200 subsidiaries all over the world, with 42,000 employees and a turnover of 400 million euros."

"Only a quarter of the companies are in France because I wanted to build an international group and I have plenty of business in Abu Dhabi and Saudi Arabia in the oil and gas construction sector."

He has written three books on management and three novels. His first novel, "Badawi," published in 1994, was well received and chosen by the French Ministry of Education to be studied in schools. It is largely based on his life story, with a hero named Mayouf after the brother he lost. There are many messages and life lessons in the pages of the book, but perhaps the main one is the notion that time passes all-too quickly and so it is important to do good for other people and one's country.

Altrad is immensely grateful to France, and Montpellier in particular, for enabling him "to achieve all that I, regretfully, could not have achieved in my country."

As for how he feels about the current situation in Syria, he said he has only distant memories of the country and no longer feels connected to it. His mother died at a young age and he no longer has any family or other links to the land of his birth. Instead, he focuses on showing his gratitude to his adopted country by donating to a number of charitable and medical associations in France.







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Syria donors gather as virus, economic chaos deepen crisis
With little aid, Syria's Raqqa struggles to revive schools