

Godfather of the Assad regime takes Rafik Hariri secrets to the grave

Author:

Wed, 2020-04-01 00:24

PARIS: The warning from Abdul-Halim Khaddam to Lebanese prime minister Rafik Hariri was unequivocal: "Beware of these crazy people ... they can harm you."

As the man who served for 30 years in the upper echelons of the Syrian state under President Hafez Assad and then his son Bashar, Khaddam knew what he was talking about; in February 2005, Hariri was assassinated in Beirut by terrorists linked to the Syrian regime.

Khaddam, the former Syrian vice president who died from a heart attack early on Tuesday at the age of 88, recounted the story to Saad Hariri when the murdered man's son visited him in his Paris residence a few months after the assassination.

In May 2015 Khaddam openly accused Hezbollah and Syrian regime members of the assassination. Officials from the tribunal investigating Hariri's murder also visited Paris to question Khaddam.

For three decades in Syria, no one was closer to the Assad family than Khaddam, the Sunni Syrian Baathist from a middle-class family in the Mediterranean resort town of Baniyas.

Once seen as a possible successor to Hafez, instead he helped Bashar tighten his grip on power after he took office in June 2000.

In the days following the elder Assad's death, Khaddam pushed through decrees elevating Bashar's military rank to general and making him commander of the armed forces – key moves in the uncertain process of succession.

A lawyer by training, Khaddam was foreign minister for 14 years before becoming vice-president in 1984. He also took part in shaping Syrian policy in Lebanon. A former French ambassador to Syria, Jean Claude Cousseran, told Arab News Khaddam was the hard-line politician closest to Assad's father, and a hard-liner also on the Lebanese question. Many Lebanese detested Khaddam because he represented the Syrian occupation and all its tragic consequences.

Yves Aubin de la Messuziere, another former French ambassador who headed the Middle East desk at the French Foreign Ministry, told Arab News he remembered Khaddam accompanying Bashar Assad on a state visit to Paris in 2000, when president Jacques Chirac had invited him after the death of his father.

De la Messuziere, an Arabist, recalled waiting in a side room of the Elysee Palace with an angry and impatient Khaddam while the two presidents had their one-to-one meeting. "Why is it taking so long, what are they doing?" he asked, in a loud voice.

In 2005, Khaddam was a vocal critic of both the Hariri assassination and

Syria's foreign policy in general, and he resigned from the Baath party.

Khaddam moved to Paris in December 2005, claiming that he needed medical treatment, and established a residence on the exclusive Avenue Foch, where his home was guarded round the clock by French police.

In 2011 he became one of the most prominent opponents of Bashar Assad and his war against his own people. From his Paris base, Khaddam tried to carve out a role in the opposition to Assad but struggled to win the trust of other dissidents because of his decades of work in the Baath party. As the uprising continued, Khaddam said Syrians would have to take up arms in self-defense unless the world intervened to protect them, and he accused Assad and his family of instigating sectarian strife.

Khaddam's presence in Paris was not popular with French public opinion, and criticized by many French officials who opposed his policy in Lebanon. Nevertheless, his vocal opposition to Bashar Assad had to some extent rehabilitated him.

Khaddam will be buried in France, where his funeral will be organized by the Paris municipality. His son Jihad is stranded in Turkey by the coronavirus pandemic, and his other son Jamal is recovering from open heart surgery in Paris.



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Hezbollah names Beirut street after Rafiq Hariri assassin
Iran militias assassinated Lebanon's Rafik Hariri: Saudi Deputy Defense Minister

[Oman reports its first death from coronavirus -state TV](#)

Author:

Reuters

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Tue, 2020-03-31 20:10

CAIRO: Oman's health ministry reported on Tuesday its first death from coronavirus, a 72 year-old Omani man, state TV said on Twitter.

Oman reported as of March 31, 192 coronavirus cases in the sultanate.



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Saudi Arabia's Hajj and Umrah minister tells Muslims to wait for coronavirus clarity on pilgrimage

Lebanon's coronavirus crisis spurs race to tackle looming ventilator shortage

Tue, 2020-03-31 19:35

DUBAI: As the coronavirus pandemic sweeps the world, many countries are finding themselves in dire need of a machine that until now was used to support the odd patient with severe respiratory conditions.

In the Middle East, the problem is especially acute given the region's history of conflict, instability and weak governance.

Buying ventilators in large numbers (at a rate of \$25,000 per unit) was never a priority for governments with long, pressing to-do lists.

But now, suddenly, across the Arab region people face a choice between waiting and watching, or doing something on their own before coronavirus cases overwhelm their country's health system.

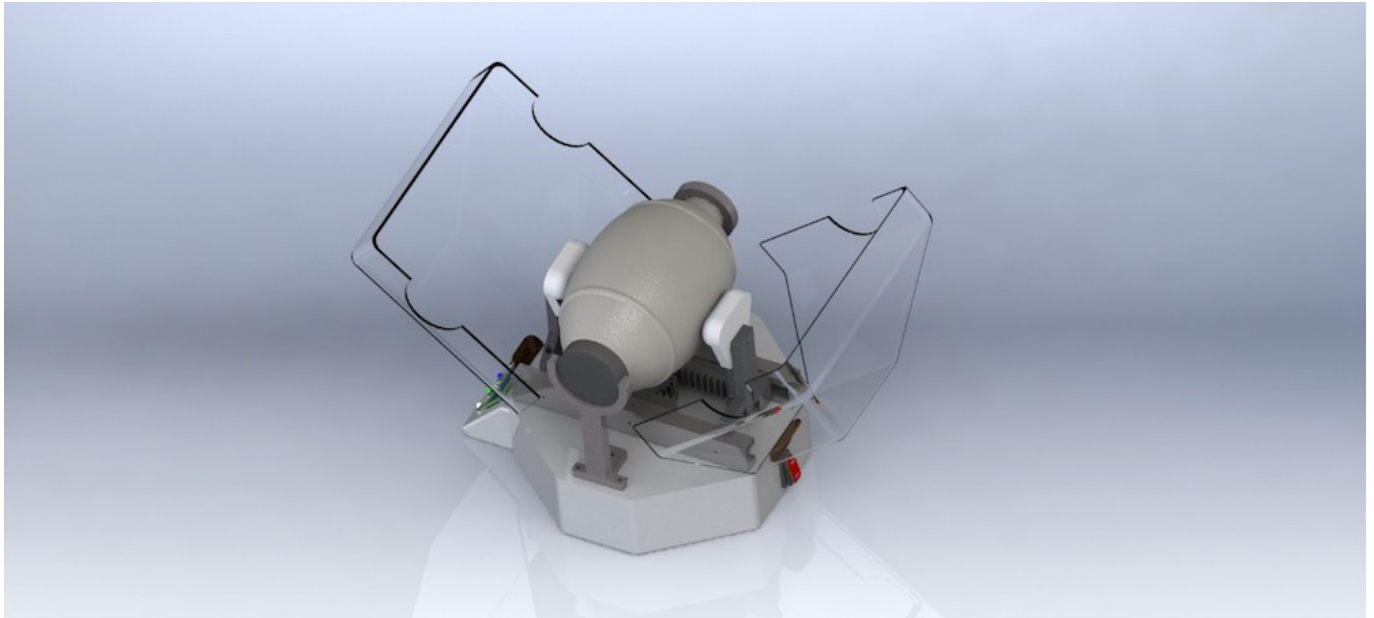
In Lebanon, several groups of people have taken the second option. Their objective is straightforward: To build an affordable ventilator, a machine that mechanically assists a patient in the exchange of oxygen and carbon dioxide by a process of artificial respiration.

One of the initiatives is the brainchild of Dr. Hussein Al-Hajj Hassan, 30, who launched a Facebook drive to create an artificial ventilator entitled "A Breather for All Lebanon."

Together with two alumni of the Lebanese University's Faculty of Engineering, Hisham Issa and Hussein Hamdan, both engineers currently working abroad, Hassan has made it his mission to manufacture the machine.

"We might not be capable of serving everyone in hospitals, but there's a possibility of manufacturing the machine here," Hassan, who holds a Ph.D. in engineering from IMT Atlantique in France, told Arab News.

"So we conducted a study on the expertise we needed, whose results I posted on my Facebook page. The post went viral and people started calling me."



To ensure its suitability for use by hospitals, the ventilator will be fabricated as per the specifications contained in a nine-page document issued by the UK's Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency (MHRA). "We're working to meet the MHRA specifications," Hassan said. "We're working in an incremental way, setting milestones and going forward toward each of them."

According to the three engineers, although their ventilator is now in an advanced stage of development, they are struggling with the lack of availability of key components in Lebanon.

"If you want a perfect medical device, you need medical equipment, which isn't available here, so we're trying to find alternatives," said Hassan. Once the team has fabricated a successful prototype, ramping up production to meet the shortage of ventilators should not be a problem, he added. "What's important is that the prototype meets all the requirements," he said. Hassan believes the Arab region is aware of the dangers of a shortage of ventilators at this time, pointing to countries such as Jordan, Palestine, Morocco, Algeria and others that have contacted him.



Employees of a private company spray sanitising liquid around a bank in a bid to limit the spread of the coronavirus Covid-19, in the Lebanese capital Beirut. (AFP/File Photo)

“It’s nice to see that people are aware,” he said. “Lebanese people are skilled and full of energy. This, coupled with their determination, will enable them to achieve their goal.”

Another Lebanese innovator who is not counting on divine providence is Jad Berro, who said it became obvious to him about two weeks ago that the coronavirus pandemic was not going to spare Lebanon.

He began working in mid-March on a prototype of a basic automated bag valve mask.

“Lacking enough medical information at the time on mechanical ventilation, the general thought was that something simple could solve the imminent problem of ventilator shortage,” he told Arab News.

FASTFACT

800,000

Number of ventilators needed globally

“I make a living out of making products and prototypes, so we had a basic ventilator running (within a few days). This was a record by any standards.” Elaborating on the contraption, Berro said: “The prototype can control the

tidal volume, breaths per minute and the inhale-to-exhale ratio, with monitoring of excess pressure and internal self-tests to guarantee that the mechanism is functioning normally at all times.” But the functions are “very basic” and cannot be a replacement for a ventilator, he admits.

Berro said he halted production out of “ethical and moral concerns” as using it would have meant hooking patients to a device that had not been properly tested and did not offer any guarantee it would work for extended periods of time.

“What’s needed is a unified basic design that’s proven and tested, after which it might be possible to actually manufacture the machine,” he said.



Employees of a Lebanese public health company pose with their protective gear in Beirut March 24, 2020. (AFP/File Photo)

“Numbers in Lebanon show that we have close to around 600 ventilators. The absolute worst-case surge requirement would be around 2,800. The crisis is global and the deficiencies are the same worldwide.”

It is estimated that worldwide, about 10 percent of patients with COVID-19 infection need ventilators.

Reports say about 880,000 more ventilators will be needed to deal with the demand caused by the global coronavirus pandemic.

Berro said efforts are being made to technologically enable one ventilator to service multiple patients of similar lung capacities.

“As global manufacturers are gearing up production of ventilators and medical devices, we can expect a slight relief,” he added.

FASTFACT

10%

Percentage of COVID-19 patients who need ventilators

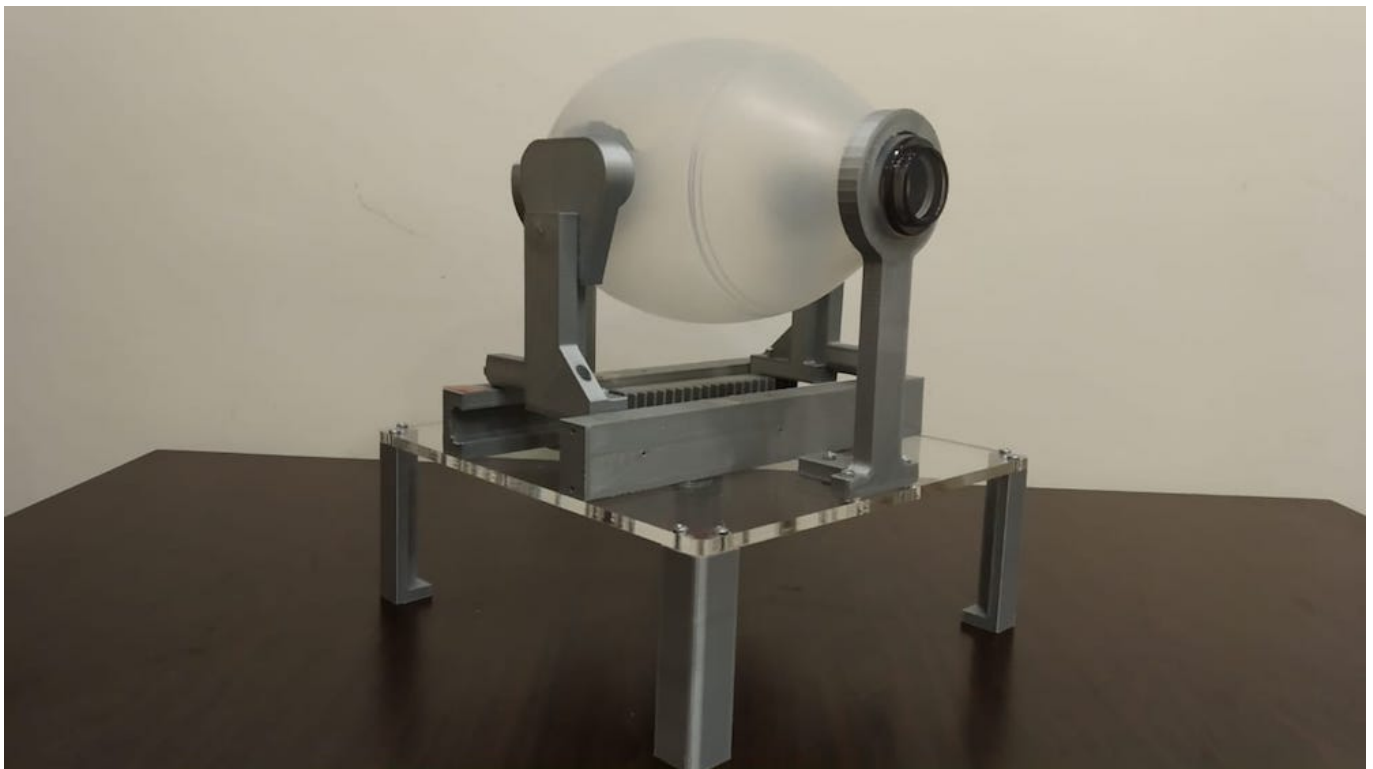
“China seems to have successfully flattened the curve and might be able to send ventilators and medical supplies to other parts of the globe. A used ventilator is certainly better than a makeshift one.”

Another Lebanese ventilator prototype has been unveiled by MP Nehmat Frem two weeks after he initiated a project in collaboration with a group of specialized engineers and doctors.

The machine, targeted for use in intensive care units (ICUs) in Lebanese hospitals, is being built to high specifications, incorporating the latest technological features developed by Phoenix Co., an affiliate of Lebanon’s INDEVCO Industrial Group.

“We decided to fight with all our means in Lebanon,” said Frem, who is also the group CEO. “We wouldn’t have accepted the prospect of dying without doing anything, so we decided to put in all our efforts and strength, and it’s starting to yield results.”

Clinical trials of the ventilators are estimated very soon, he said, adding that plans are simultaneously afoot to manufacture face masks.



“We still need some progress on the human-to-machine interface, which is the design,” he told Arab News.

“We’re fabricating the most complicated version of the ventilator – that is, the one used in ICUs.”

Phoenix Co.’s project had kicked off with a six-hour briefing by doctors,

which was followed by the creation of a small taskforce comprising doctors, suppliers and biomedical engineers.

The challenge for Lebanon and other Arab countries, according to Frem, will be in purchasing material used to build ventilators in the needed quantities. "I presume the coronavirus crisis will add stress on suppliers in Europe, the US and the Far East," he said.

"So we're now in sourcing mode – to locate what's available, starting with our main suppliers."

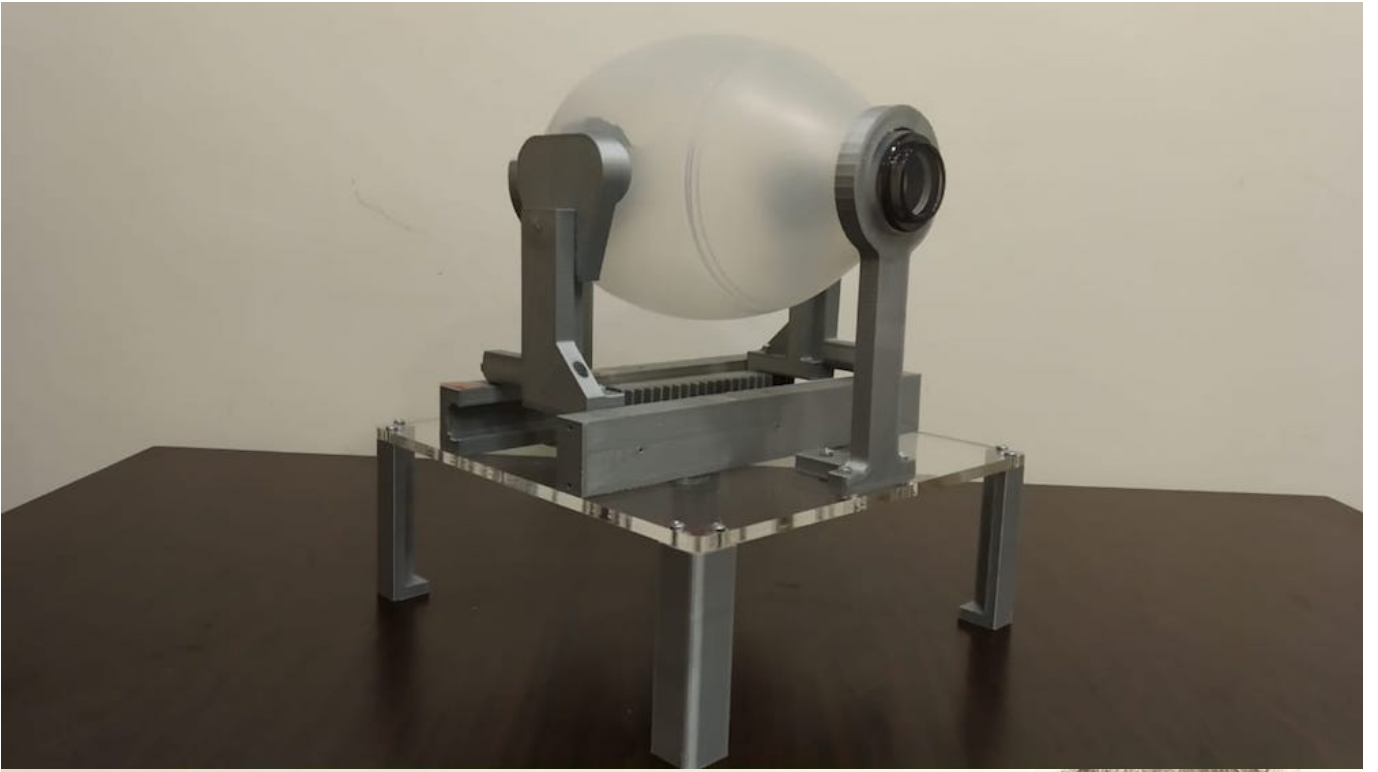
Frem feels Lebanon is not prepared for a sharp spike in COVID-19 cases, noting that at the current rate, "we'll have big numbers in 50 days, which is worrying."

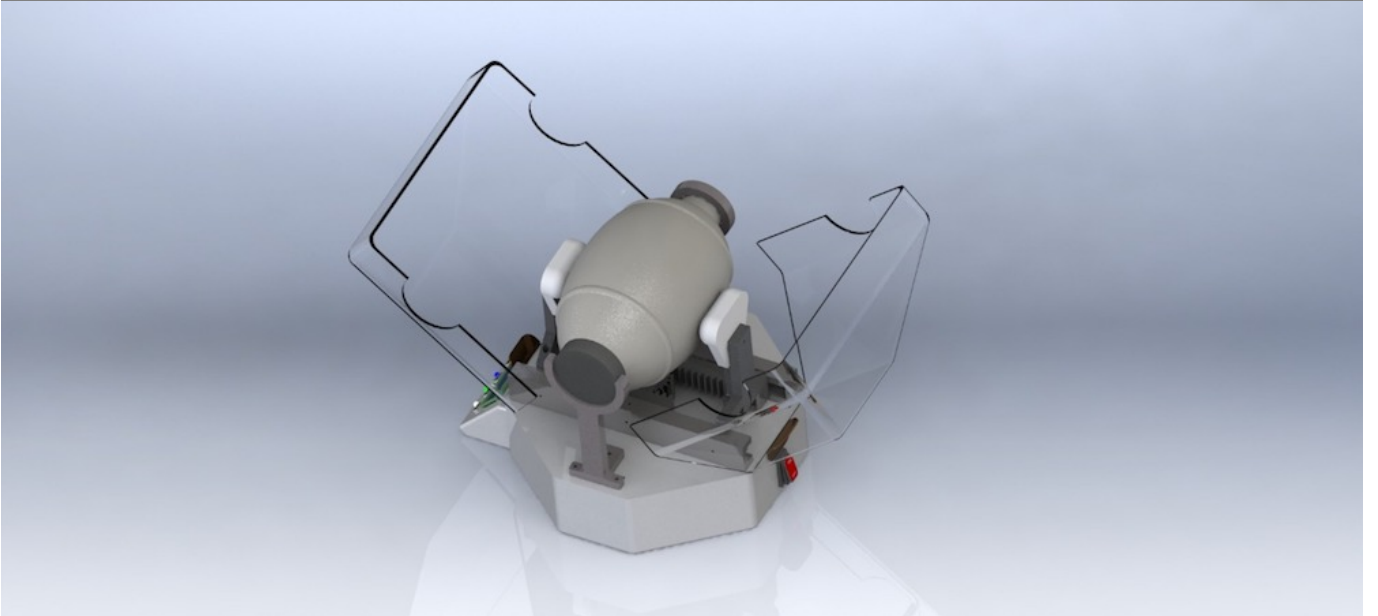
Nevertheless, "it's encouraging to see the fantastic work of startups and engineers," he said. "We have to get rid of this 'can't do' attitude in the Middle East once and for all. We'll never surrender."

Berro offered a similar take on the looming ventilator shortage amid the regional coronavirus crisis.

"Arabs survive on imports in times of prosperity as well as in times of crises," he said. "This isn't acceptable and needs to change."













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Lebanon may extend virus curbs as death rate rises
Lebanon faces virus peak within days, doctors warn

[Tunisia releases 1,420 prisoners over coronavirus](#)

Author:

Reuters

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Tue, 2020-03-31 14:28

TUNIS: Tunisia's President Kais Saied on Tuesday ordered the release of 1,420 prisoners in an amnesty to combat the spread of the coronavirus in prisons, a presidency statement said.

Tunisia has declared a general lockdown to slow infection rates, and has confirmed 362 cases of the coronavirus, with nine deaths.

The government said in a separate statement that it would provide food assistance to thousands of families in their homes, starting Friday, for a period of about two months.

Saied last week ordered the army to deploy in the streets to force people to respect the lockdown.



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VIDEO: Robots enforce Tunis street COVID-19 lockdown, stopping curfew breakers
Tunisia gets 250 mln euros from EU to tackle coronavirus impact

Egypt announces death of doctor due to coronavirus

Author:

Mon, 2020-03-30 19:23

CAIRO: Egypt has announced the first death of a doctor due to coronavirus in the country.

Spokesman for the Egyptian Health Ministry Khaled Megahed confirmed the death of Dr Ahmed Al-Lawah, a professor of clinical pathology at Al-Azhar University, from Port Said Governorate, who tested positive for Covid-19.

Megahed said that as soon as it was reported that Lawah's status was critical and positive for coronavirus, he was transferred to El Tadamon Specialized Hospital in Port Said.

The reception room in the emergency department was equipped with a respirator and ready to receive the physicist, the spokesman said.

After his condition stabilized, Lawah was transferred to an isolation hospital.

Lawah showed signs of improvement last night, however, he suddenly deteriorated and passed away today, the statement said.



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Egypt sets limits for withdrawals and deposits from banks due to coronavirus