

How tech became the perfect travel companion in the Middle East

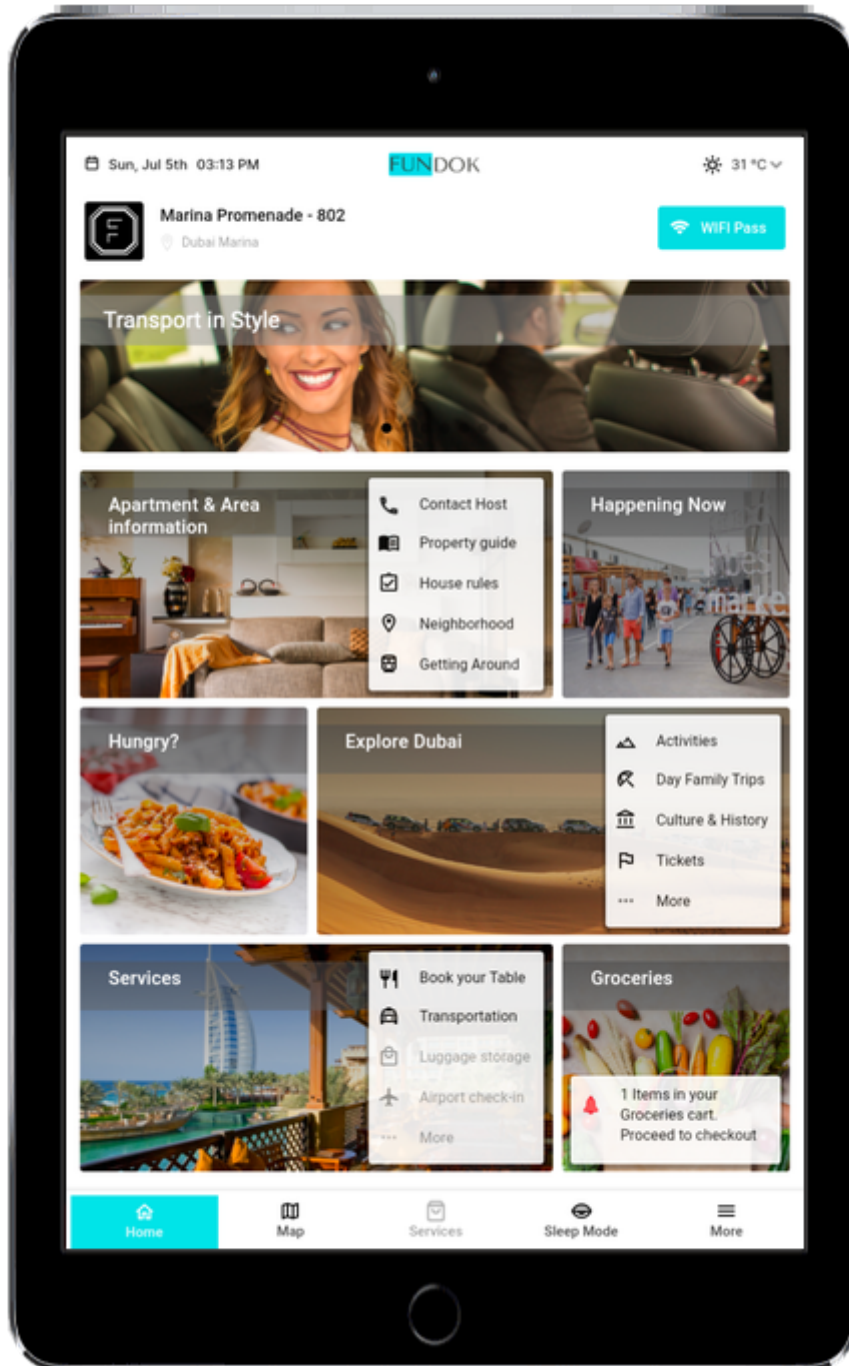
Fri, 2021-07-16 20:44

CAIRO: Travel has been one of the most severely affected sectors during the coronavirus pandemic. With many countries closing their borders and introducing lockdown measures to contain COVID-19, the industry witnessed its worst performance in decades.

Between January and March 2021 destinations around the world welcomed 180 million fewer international arrivals compared with the first quarter of last year. Asia and the Pacific continued to suffer the lowest levels of activity with a 94 percent drop, followed by Europe (-83 percent), Africa (-81 percent), the Middle East (-78 percent) and the Americas (-71 percent).

This all follows on from the 73 percent fall in worldwide international tourist arrivals recorded in 2020, making it the worst year on record for the sector, according to UN World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) figures.

Yet, there are signs of recovery, with many in the travel tech sector already adapting to the changing needs of travelers and some even thriving in the new normal.



Fundok, a newly launched digital solution platform for the hospitality sector, expanded its offerings to meet the changing needs of today's traveler. (Supplied)

The pandemic has brought about significant changes in the way people move about. Rana Dababneh, founder of Pomalo Travel, said that although she sees far fewer travelers today, those who do travel want to go to safe and remote destinations.

“Even from early on in the pandemic, we could see that the face of travel will change,” she said. “We started looking at destinations that offer natural isolation, and are full of wilderness and nature experiences, away from cities.”

For this boutique travel agency in Amman and Dubai, the Maldives was the top destination in 2020 because of its remoteness and natural appeal. However,

with countries frequently updating their travel restrictions, people are becoming wary about taking a journey.

“It’s also about trust in the system,” said Dababneh. “If I travel, I need to know that I can come back. It’s not only about COVID-19 but about things not getting complicated.”

Indeed, according to a recent survey across 12 countries, respondents in the UAE were concerned about border closures while traveling and having to quarantine in their destination. In fact, they were more worried about having to quarantine than the risk of catching the virus, either on a flight or while abroad, the survey found.

INNUMBERS

*** 73 percent – Drop in worldwide international tourist arrivals in 2020.**

*** 78 percent – Drop in tourist arrivals in Middle East destinations.**

While the pandemic hit the industry severely, it also prompted travel tech startups to turn to technology in this new age of travel.

Trift, a travel platform that encourages sustainable destination experiences, launched virtual tour guides during the pandemic for people to preview destinations from the comfort of their homes.

“We have used this downtime to pivot to a new offering that will help people plan better for their next holiday after the pandemic,” said co-founder Tarun Krishna.

“We also wanted to support our community of local guides and travel content creators by launching ‘Virtual Experiences,’ an interactive travel discovery and planning experience available in both on-demand and live formats.”

As a result, Krishna recently piloted a project with the Institute for Development of Bonito in Brazil to digitally support tourism in the country. The venture makes natural experiences accessible to everyone while also paving the way for paid on-demand virtual experiences to support local tour guides.



At a time when contactless interactions are preferred and guests want less contact with people, digital solutions are proving valuable. (Supplied)

Meanwhile, Fundok, a newly launched digital solution platform for the hospitality sector, expanded its offerings to meet the changing needs of today's traveler. In addition to providing destination insights and content, it recently developed a range of digital services, including check-ins/check-outs, room guides and concierge services.

All are available on tablets in rooms and apartments as well as on guests' mobile phones. "We moved from service-based to holistic experience solutions," said Mohamed Nassar, the platform's co-founder.

At a time when contactless interactions are preferred and guests want less contact with people, these digital solutions are proving valuable. So far, the startup has boosted its portfolio by about 300 percent and recently expanded to Cairo.

Nassar is optimistic about the future. "There has been much said about the doom and gloom, but we are all still here. Businesses are much more resilient and adaptive to the current environment than we think. Nothing is easy, but we're hopeful for 2021," he said.



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Startup of the Week: Firnas Aero; Advancing toward modern technology, one drone at a time

[Dozens injured in Lebanon as protests turn violent amid rising tensions](#)

Fri, 2021-07-16 20:01

BEIRUT: Riots left more than two dozen people injured in Tripoli on Friday, including 10 soldiers, as tensions continued to rise in Lebanon.

“The situation seems to be getting worse, and things are about to escalate because we are facing a difficult political and social fate,” said Lebanese Armed Forces Commander Gen. Joseph Aoun as he inspected army units deployed

to the Bekaa Valley.

Meanwhile the international community continued to call for progress in the country's stalled political process. France, the EU and the US have urged Lebanese politicians to form a new government as a matter of urgency, and an international conference is being planned to support the efforts.

"All concerned parties need to work with urgency to put in place a government that's able to implement reforms immediately," US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Thursday night in a message posted on Twitter.

The Arab League said its secretary-general, Ahmed Aboul Gheit, and his UN counterpart, Antonio Guterres, had agreed during a meeting in New York that the situation in Lebanon is going from "bad to worse."

The former said he hoped that "the international community will succeed in helping the Lebanese overcome the crisis."

As he inspected his forces on Friday, Aoun told them: "Our responsibility is great at this stage. We are required to preserve the security and stability of the homeland and prevent chaos."

BACKGROUND

The Arab League said its secretary-general, Ahmed Aboul Gheit, and his UN counterpart, Antonio Guterres, had agreed during a meeting in New York that the situation in Lebanon is going from "bad to worse."

He said he considers the military to be "the only institution that is still active," and added: "The army is the deterrent to chaos. I know that you will not allow anyone to invade our land, and you will not allow these circumstances to make you lose your sense of belonging to your homeland, your identity and your land.

"What we are experiencing today is a temporary crisis and it will pass."



Private companies and institutions allowed employees to leave work early on Friday so that they could get home before roads were blocked.

Angry crowds took to the streets for a second consecutive day to protest against fuel shortages and the continuing steep rise in the dollar exchange rate on the black market.

Demonstrations had broken out across the country on Thursday, immediately after Prime Minister-designate Saad Hariri announced his resignation after nine months of failed wrangling with President Michel Aoun over the formation of a new government.

The previous government resigned in August last year amid protests in the aftermath of the devastating explosion at Beirut's port.

The Lebanese currency hit new lows in the wake of Hariri's announcement, with dollars changing hands on the black market at a rate of more than 22,500 Lebanese pounds on Friday. The official government rate is just over 1,500 pounds.

The protests grew more fierce and violent on Friday, especially in poorer areas of Tripoli, such as Jabal Mohsen. Protesters destroyed property and burned tires. The army intervened, firing shots to disperse them.

According to the Lebanese Red Cross, dozens of civilian protesters were wounded as the army fired rubber bullets and rocks were thrown. Al Jazeera photographer Khaled Habshiti was injured by a grenade in Jabal Mohsen. The Red Cross said it sent three teams to help treat and move the wounded.

The angry activity and chaos on the streets stood in stark contrast with the state of inertia and anticipation that prevails on the political scene.

President Aoun has not yet set a date for parliamentary consultations to choose new prime minister designate to replace Hariri and resume the efforts to form a government. They are not expected to take place until after the Eid Al-Adha holiday next week.

Aoun said on Friday that "he will overcome the difficult circumstances." He added that "nothing can bring the Lebanese down, even with all the hardships they are going through," and he promised to "make all efforts to resolve the successive crises."

Joanna Wronecka, the UN's special coordinator for Lebanon, described the stalemate between Hariri and Aoun as a "setback" and expressed deep regret over "the inability of Lebanon's leaders to reach agreement on the formation of a new government that is urgently needed to address the challenges."

Adding that "there is no more time to lose," she called for "swift measures to ensure the designation of a new prime minister, in line with constitutional requirements."

Wronecka also stressed the need to form a government able to implement the reforms required to put Lebanon on the road to economic recovery ahead of free and fair elections in 2022.

The US State Department expressed concern over Hariri's resignation. It said: "The political class need to put aside partisan differences, instead of trading blame, to form a government capable of addressing this concerning situation."

The EU's foreign policy chief, Josep Borrell, said he regrets "the ongoing political gridlock in the country and the lack of progress in the implementation of the urgent reforms."

The National Federation of Employees' and Workers' Trade Unions in Lebanon called on "workers, farmers and low-income members to form local committees whose mission is to prepare for civil disobedience."

The federation described this as "the perfect, and only, option to bring the political class down and hold it to account in the streets."

It added that politicians are responsible for "the lowest points of the economic collapse: starvation, death, poverty, unemployment, and a salary lower than \$30."

The volatile dollar exchange rate caused chaos in Lebanese retail markets. Many shop owners decided to close their stores because they were unable to set a stable price for goods. Other sellers put the sale of their products on hold avoid losses.

A black-market money changer told Arab News: "Trade has been limited to selling dollars, as people are eager to make profits."

He added that he has been surprised by the "continuous increase of the dollar exchange rate, controlled by the electronic platforms, despite the low demand

for it.”

The protests continued on Friday night and were not limited to pro-Hariri Sunni areas; they also took place in communities that traditionally support Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri and his party, the Amal Movement.

An Amal supporter in Zokak Al-Blat told Arab News: “Aoun considers himself victorious. This must not persist.” He added that the president “must know that the resentment of the people is really great. He previously destroyed the country in order to remain president and what happened then? The same thing will happen now. He must not think, even for a second, that he is capable of controlling everything.”

A number of people in Beirut told Arab News that “the promise the president made to us has become true: we are living in hell.”

Tony, who owns a bakery, said: “If the situation persists, my family and I will starve. I laid off an employee because I was no longer able to pay him. The dollar exchange rate on the black market has reached 25,000 pounds and there is not one official that feels what we are going through.

“They told us we were headed to hell. They were right. This is hell. But what is next? Are there no solutions?”

Nadia, a Lebanese woman who was standing outside a public institution, said: “They all claim that they are worried about the country’s fate and that they are defending their sects and their interests.

“We do not want anything from them. Let them leave us alone. We cannot take it anymore.”

Mohammed, the owner of a barber shop, said: “The country is divided into two groups. The first group of people can take it because they are getting paid in fresh dollars. The second group, the one I belong to, is not even capable of leaving this cursed country.

“Politicians only care about their interests. The president is insisting on his son-in-law as the next president and Hezbollah controls us.”



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US calls resignation of Lebanon PM-designate 'disappointing'

[Abu Dhabi issues stay-at-home order starting July 19 for sterilization program](#)

Thu, 2021-07-15 21:51

ABU DHABI: Abu Dhabi emirate has issued stay-at-home orders starting July 19 for between midnight and 5 a.m. for the launch of a sterilization program, a media office tweet said on Thursday.

Sterilization will take place daily between those times and, during these hours, the movement of traffic and the public will be restricted and there will be no transportation services, it said.

The Abu Dhabi Emergency, Crisis and Disasters Committee has launched the National Sterilisation Programme in the Emirate of Abu Dhabi, starting from Monday 19 July as part of efforts to protect public health and prevent the spread of Covid-19.
pic.twitter.com/xZ5Ui8JKCi

– مكتب أبوظبي الإعلامي (@admediaoffice) [July 15, 2021](#)

The public must stay at home unless it is absolutely necessary to go out, or to get essential supplies, such as food and medicine and must apply for a movement permit in Abu Dhabi emirate, the announcement added.

The UAE, as of Thursday, had recorded 656,354 cases of the coronavirus with 1,885 deaths, while 634,272 people had recovered from the disease.



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Abu Dhabi hotel occupancy at highest since start of pandemic Latest sterilization technology used to ensure quality and safety of Zamzam water

[Yemeni government scores fresh military gains in Marib province](#)

Author:

Thu, 2021-07-15 19:33

ALEXANDRIA: Yemeni troops and local tribesmen seized control of the headquarters of a key district in the central province of Marib, scoring major gains in the area for the first time in years, an army spokesperson said Thursday.

Maj. Gen. Abdu Abdullah Majili said that government troops controlled the center of Rahabah district after heavy clashes with Houthis, who retreated to

neighboring areas. The army had killed, wounded and captured dozens of rebel fighters during the latest clashes in Marib, he added.

“The battles will continue until we take full control of Rahabah district.”

Local tribesmen first announced the liberation of Rahabah on Wednesday afternoon, shortly after dozens of fighters stormed a building that hosted government offices.

Combatants posed for pictures outside the building as other armed men retrieved weapons and vehicles abandoned by the Houthis, witnesses said.

Backed by massive air support from the Arab coalition, the Yemeni army and tribesmen have applied defensive and attrition tactics in Marib since earlier this year to push back a major Houthi offensive on the oil-rich city.

Thousands have been killed in battle, with the rebels failing to make major advances toward Marib.

Local army officials and experts said the liberation of Rahabah would put troops closer to Sanaa province and enable them to send military reinforcements to neighboring Al-Bayda.

Pushing the Houthis from Rahabah, which sits along a key road that links Sanaa with Marib, would help the army cut the militia's supply lines to fighters in Marib's Serwah district.

Local media on Thursday reported that the Houthis had amassed troops nearby, preparing for a counterattack to recapture Rahabah and other liberated areas in Jabal Murad district.

Majili said that government troops pushed back many assaults by the Houthis in Al-Mashjah and Al-Kasara, west of Marib, as the rebels pressed to break the army's defenses. He hailed the coalition's warplanes for destroying dozens of Houthi fighters, military vehicles, and weapons.

Experts said the army should now focus on securing liberated areas in Marib from predicted counterattacks by the Houthis and defuse landmines instead of pushing into new areas.

Troops suffered major defeats in Al-Bayda after the Houthis recaptured Al-Zaher district through a brief counterattack.



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Fighting outside Marib simmers as Houthis take heavy casualties Houthi offensive in Marib is exacerbating Yemen's humanitarian crisis: US State Dept.

[France threatens sanctions for Libyan groups blocking political process](#)

Thu, 2021-07-15 18:40

NEW YORK: Those jeopardizing the Libyan political process could face sanctions, the French foreign minister has warned.

Jean-Yves Le Drian presided over a UN Security Council meeting on Thursday on Libya's roadmap out of years of conflict.

A ceasefire agreement reached last year led to a transitional government and elections scheduled for December. But progress has faltered with the different sides failing to agree on a legal framework for the polls.

Le Drian said real threats were hanging over the political process and they must be dispelled, starting with respecting the electoral calendar.

He said those who jeopardized the political process could be subject to sanctions.

The minister also called for all foreign fighters to leave the country as was agreed in the ceasefire deal.

The UN special envoy to Libya Jan Kubis said many Libyan officials appeared unready to commit to the elections timetable and that some parties were using various tactics to obstruct holding the vote.

Prime Minister Abdul Hamid Dbeibeh told the meeting that Libya's security and economic situations have become more stable.

But he warned that the presence of mercenaries and foreign fighters on Libyan soil is one of the most important obstacles to stability.

He called on the international community to support Libya in unifying the military and security institutions.



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Roadmap to end Libyan conflict in jeopardy as delegates fail to agree on election proposals
Libya sees progress on removal of foreign mercenaries at Berlin talks