

# How the Arab world can tackle the invisible mental-health pandemic

Thu, 2021-04-01 22:29

DUBAI: Of the Arab world's many problems exacerbated by the coronavirus pandemic, mental health is easily among the most insidious.

Fortunately, one young Arab has made it his life's mission to help lead the conversation in the region and address the latent stigma surrounding feelings of depression and anxiety.

The story begins a few years ago when Ally Salama, a 24-year-old Egyptian athlete, moved to Toronto, Canada, to pursue a university degree in entrepreneurship and innovation.

Following a blissful childhood spent in Cairo and Dubai, Salama says, the move led to a dramatic change in his cultural surroundings, which left him feeling isolated and alone.

"I made my first friend four and a half years after attending my first day of university," he told Arab News.

"It was very hard. We're very culturally intelligent, but I didn't want to let go of my values. I could neither mix nor mingle. As a result, I lost my identity and my mind in a year and a half. I felt completely different physically, mentally and psychologically. It caused a lot of issues for me in university."

Depression quickly set in. He recalls not being able to get out of bed or managing to take care of his basic psychological needs.



The estimated annual global economic cost of mental health disorders stands at \$2.5 trillion. (Shutterstock/File Photo)

“Smoking and drinking weren’t my thing, which is what created the biggest gap in university life,” he said.

After reluctantly seeking help from his university counsellor, Salama found the tools he needed to cope, and has since sought to help others.

“It takes a lot for a man to admit that,” Salama said. “It’s very difficult, and I’m here to make that awareness very visible. I didn’t have someone who’d been through this to tell me it was OK. That’s when I realized there are so many people who feel like me but who don’t have the courage to go through with it.”

His healing journey changed the way he views human strength – no longer in terms of physical fitness alone, but rather as a combination of physical and mental.

So when a university project came along about entrepreneurial problem solving, he used the opportunity to launch an online platform called Break the Silence Egypt.

Overnight, 180 people anonymously submitted testimonies revealing their deepest and darkest feelings, in English and Arabic. “It made me realize this is bigger than me,” Salama said. “Mental health is an issue.”



A man wearing a facemask walks past a mural painted as part of the Cities of Hope festival in Manchester and highlighting the effects of mental health as the number of cases of the novel coronavirus COVID-19 rises in 2020.  
(AFP/File Photo)

Upon graduating in 2019, he did a short stint as a banker in Canada before realizing he was sitting on the wrong side of the desk.

In parallel, he developed a mental health magazine for the Middle East called EMPWR. The first issue came out in March 2019, during his final year of university.

In July that year, Salama's mentor Dr. Nasser Loza, president-elect of the World Federation for Mental Health and a World Health Organization consultant, recommended him to speak at a UN workshop in Sharm El-Sheikh on the role of media in destigmatizing mental-health issues.

"I spoke about people's perceptions and why the media's work hinders people's quality of life," Salama recalled.

"That experience changed my life. Depression and mental illnesses aren't rational – you don't even want to get better. It's irrational."

### **Mental HealthIn Numbers**

**\* \$2.5 trillion – Estimated annual global economic cost of mental health disorders.**

**\* 38% – Percentage of Arabs who know someone suffering from mental-health issues.**

**\* 56% – Percentage of Arabs who say quality mental-health care is difficult to access.**

**\* 48% – Percentage of Arabs who say seeking mental-health care is viewed negatively in their country.**

***Source: Arab Youth Survey 2020, WHO***

It was only a matter of time before EMPWR became a leading mental-health magazine in the region, from its base in Canada.

“The biggest issue with Arabs is that no matter how much they read online (about psychological issues), it’s not culturally relevant to our relationships, our marriages, our cultures, our homes and our thoughts,” Salama said.

“A big thing about success in psychological support is having a rapport with the person in front of you and understanding where they’re coming from. I understood because of my experience.”

Soon the project expanded into podcasting with the launch of Empathy Always Wins. “Podcasting is quite educational – 70 percent of listeners have a higher education degree,” Salama said.

“We got New York Times bestselling authors, the world’s No. 1 squash player, and businessmen who people really respect, to speak.”

With over 100,000 downloads last year and a rank in Harvard’s top seven social initiatives in 2019, the podcast’s success led Salama to launch the Art of Podcasting School with Microsoft for Start-Ups.

He describes his podcast as an all-inclusive, uninhibited exploration of personal vulnerabilities, with the aim of making the ability to share and understand one another’s feelings a sign of strength.

“Empathy is the key winning component for every man and woman,” he said. “Empathy always wins in life.”



Bayda Othman, a psychologist from the NGO Premiere Urgence, consults a patient at the mental health centre of the Bajet Kandala camp for displaced Yazidis near Dohuk, 430 kilometres (260 miles) northwest of the Iraqi capital, by the border with Syria, on November 18, 2020. (AFP/File Photo)

Although the magazine's content is English-only right now, Salama plans to launch an Arabic version soon. And there certainly seems to be an appetite for the subject.

When he began posting on his Instagram account in Arabic as well as English, he saw his following jump from 5,000 to 73,000 in just six months.

"There's a need for faces to be vulnerable – people connect with people, not with logos," he said, describing the positive role of influencers and ambassadors like himself. "This is how you get the message across. People need to be vulnerable to lead."

Today, Salama is working closely with schools, universities and corporations to help them kick-start programs around mental health.

So far, 40 schools in Canada have benefited, along with Microsoft, the Capital Club and Heriot-Watt University in Dubai.

"It's about awareness and empowering other people to seek that help," Salama said. "I'm just an enabler. But it's my biggest passion when I speak to young children. The more shame, guilt and burden we carry, the more psychologically disturbed, distressed and traumatic we live our lives."

Now he wants to bring the same message to the Middle East, where he believes

millions can benefit from his experience. He wants every Arab home to be discussing mental health and wellbeing.

For younger Arabs, he feels the time has come to tackle such issues, especially as life has become increasingly unsettled in the wake of the pandemic.



With no let-up in COVID-19 infections in many countries, a steady uptick in distressing news and statistics, and unprecedented challenges at home and in the workplace, it is only natural that people are feeling overwhelmed.  
(Shutterstock/File Photo)

“Whether you like it or not, you won’t feel at peace at any point because we’re being bombarded, which can cause stress,” Salama said.

With no let-up in COVID-19 infections in many countries, a steady uptick in distressing news and statistics, and unprecedented challenges at home and in the workplace, it is only natural that people are feeling overwhelmed, anxious and stressed.

Experts say there are many ways to maintain a good mental balance during these uncertain times.

Among them are the benefits of establishing a good routine, focusing on the things you can control such as exercise and healthy eating, keeping living spaces tidy and limiting news consumption.

“People are feeling so alone, especially during COVID-19, more than ever,” Salama said. For him, taking good care of one’s mental health is the same as

stretching before a workout to prevent physical injury.

“We don’t wait until we get injured in sports to warm up,” he said. “We warm up so we perform at our best.”

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Saudi campaign highlights 'shadow pandemic' of mental health

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[\*\*Syrian man admits killing Lebanese\*\*](#)

# father after refusing marriage to his daughter

Thu, 2021-04-01 21:06

BEIRUT: A Lebanese father was murdered by a Syrian man after he refused to allow him to marry his daughter, Lebanese security forces said on Thursday. The 26-year-old and his accomplice, also Syrian, were arrested on Tuesday for shooting the mechanic dead in Beirut on Feb. 7.

The father died in a hail of bullets outside a cafe in the Al-Ouzai district after the two men had tracked him for two weeks leading up to the ambush.

"Following thorough interrogations and onsite investigations the Syrian duo were identified as F.K., 26, and A.I., 25, as the killers of the Lebanese victim Y.M., 44," the Internal Security Forces' (ISF) said.

"The suspects admitted to murdering Y.M. for disallowing F.K. to marry his daughter."

A special police team placed the suspects under surveillance before raiding their hideout in Beirut's southern suburbs and arresting them.

The officers confiscated the machine gun used to fire 30 bullets at Y.M.'s car at 3 a.m. near Beirut International Airport's perimeter fence.

The suspects admitted renting a Hyundai car, removing its number plate to avoid being identified and committing the murder.

A senior security officer told Arab News that the suspects were identified and tracked down through the getaway vehicle.

"CCTV cameras available around the crime scene helped recognize the rented car and the culprits' details were obtained through the data information system," the officer said. "They were placed under observation before they were arrested in a swift raid on Tuesday."

He said there were no "political motives" behind the murder and no connection to the killing of Shiite anti-Hezbollah activist Luqman Slim.

Slim was found dead in his car on Feb. 4 after he was shot several times, with many blaming the militant group for his killing.

Because the murders happened within days of each other, rumors appeared on social media that they were linked.

ISF officers seized hashish, the murder weapon and counterfeit US dollars and Syrian pounds when they raided the killers' home.

The two men have been referred to the public prosecution.





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## [World powers, Iran to hold virtual nuclear talks Friday](#)

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Thu, 2021-04-01 17:55

BRUSSELS: World powers and Iran will meet by videoconference Friday to discuss the possible return of the United States to the Iran nuclear deal, the European Union announced.

Representatives of China, France, Germany, Russia, the United Kingdom and Iran – the countries still party to the agreement after the US left – will attend.

“Participants will discuss the prospect of a possible return of the United States to the JCPOA, and how to ensure the full and effective implementation of the agreement by all sides,” the statement said, referring to the deal by its initials.

The meeting brings together the body that oversees the implementation of the JCPOA, which has been under threat since former US president Donald Trump pulled out in 2018 and Iran began to resume nuclear activities it had scaled back.

The online meeting will be chaired by senior EU diplomat Enrique Mora on behalf of EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell.

Trump denounced the 2015 accord, which saw Iran granted relief from international sanctions in exchange for accepting limits on its nuclear program, which Western powers feared would lead to it acquiring an atomic weapon.

But new US President Joe Biden has promised to rejoin the agreement on the condition that Tehran first returns to respecting the commitments it dropped in retaliation for Trump’s decision.

Earlier this month, supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei said Iran may return to full compliance if Tehran deems Washington has honored its commitments.

The agreement was signed by Iran in Vienna in 2015 with the major powers United States, China, Russia, Germany, France, United Kingdom, under an EU chair.

It was designed to prevent the Islamic Republic from acquiring a nuclear arsenal by imposing strict limits on its nuclear program and force it to remain exclusively civilian and peaceful.



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## [Saudi fuel grant to Yemen will address power cuts, save millions of dollars, officials say](#)

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Wed, 2021-03-31 23:55

AL-MUKALLA: The \$422 million Saudi fuel donation for power stations in Yemen would save millions of dollars and help reduce long power cuts that have been blamed for fueling unrest in hot and humid Yemeni cities, officials and analysts said on Wednesday.

Anwar Mohammed Kalshat, Yemen's minister of electricity, told Arab News that the Saudi donation came just in time as the Yemeni government was frantically searching for funds to buy fuel to keep power stations functioning.

"This is a big boost to the power sector and would significantly stabilize electricity services. It would alleviate the suffering of the people during these days and in summer," the minister said, thanking the Saudi leadership for standing by Yemenis during the current "difficult times."

"We would like to thank our brothers in Saudi Arabia for this support and donation," Kalshat said.

Shortly after Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman announced the grant, the Yemeni riyal began rebounding against the dollar and other hard currencies.

Mainly due to a chronic shortage of fuel, power cuts in some Yemeni cities, including the port city of Aden, currently reach 18 hours a day.

The Yemeni government has long complained that fuel bills for power stations consume the nation's meager revenues and the country is unable to fund vital projects in other important sectors such as health and education.

In September last year, Aden Gov. Ahmed Hamid Lamlis said that local authorities in Aden spent more than \$1 million a day on buying fuel for power stations. The Saudi fuel donation will also stabilize fuel supplies to oil stations across the country and end long queues outside oil stations, Yemeni officials said.

Khaled Salman Al-Akbari, director of the Yemeni Oil Company in Hadramout, a government body responsible for importing fuel for power grids and the local market, told Arab News that supplying local power stations with the Saudi-funded fuel would alleviate pressure on the Yemeni company and help divert fuel to the local market.

The shortage of oil has led to unrest and long queues outside oil stations in Yemen.

"This is a big relief to the Yemeni people in all provinces and to the Yemeni company that has been placed under huge pressure to supply power stations and the local market with fuel," Al-Akbari said, noting that the funds saved from fuel bills would be allocated to vital projects.

Long power cuts in the Yemeni cities, mainly in extremely hot and humid cities such as Aden and Al-Mukalla, have triggered unrest and large demonstrations over the past several years.

On Tuesday, a protester was killed when security forces in Hadramout's Mayfa used force to disperse crowds of angry people who blocked a road to demand

electricity.

The killing of the protester sparked outrage in the province, prompting the governor of Hadramout to ban large gatherings to contain the unrest.

In Aden, the interim capital of Yemen, hundreds of people have taken to the streets to demand that the government import services, including electricity.

Yemen political analysts believe that the stabilization of the electricity service will ease growing anger against the government due to crumbling basic services.

Saleh Al-Baydani, a Yemeni political analyst, advised the government to “rationally” benefit from the Saudi donation and to find sustainable solutions to long power cuts and other problems in its territories.

“These demonstrations and tension in the streets would naturally diminish if citizens saw a tangible improvement in the (electricity) service,” Al-Baydani said.

Following the Saudi grant, the Yemeni riyal began to rebound against the dollar and other hard currencies.

The Yemeni riyal, which had dropped greatly over the past couple of months, recovered against the dollar, reaching 850 on Wednesday compared to 880 on Tuesday.

Yemeni economists said that the Saudi grant would curb the growing demand for the dollar by fuel and goods traders, the main reason behind the fall of the riyal.

Mustafa Nasr, director of the Economic Media Center, told Arab News that demand for the dollar would temporarily decrease during the distribution of the Saudi grant as the country would not import much fuel.

“One of the reasons for the fall of the riyal is buying hard currencies from the market for importing fuel. The injection of almost half a billion dollars from the Saudi grant would ease the demand for hard currency,” Nasr said.

“But this is a temporary solution to the problem. The government should look for sustainable solutions to the devaluation of the currency such as resuming exports,” he said.



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## [US-backed Syrian Kurdish forces detain 71 militants in raid](#)

Author:

By SARAH EL DEEB | AP

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Wed, 2021-03-31 18:39

BEIRUT: Syria's Kurdish-led forces arrested 71 suspected militants, including a religious leader and a militant recruiter, in an ongoing security sweep at a sprawling camp that houses families and supporters of Daesh, a spokesman said Wednesday.

The campaign, which started Sunday, is assisted by the US-led coalition and aimed at curbing the escalating violence and killings inside Al-Hol camp. The Kurdish-led forces have put the number of killings there since the start of 2021 at nearly 50 but US officials say it's more than 60.

Many fear the camp, which initially housed refugees and is now home to 62,000 people from more than 50 countries, is becoming a breeding ground for the next generation of Daesh militants. Kurdish and US officials have called for countries to repatriate their citizens languishing in the camp.

Ali Al-Hassan, spokesman for the Kurdish-led internal security forces, said

the sweep is still ongoing. Those arrested so far include a Daesh religious leader inside the camp, a recruiter, a communications expert and a security officer. All of them are Iraqi, aged between 18 and 62. He said more details on the nationalities of those arrested would be made public later, not ruling out that they include foreign nationals.

"The (Islamic State) group is trying to reorganize through active cells in the camp," Al-Hassan said in a WhatsApp message.

The religious leader, a native of Iraq's Anbar province, had joined militants long before IS was formed in 2014 and later became a judge with a self-styled Daesh tribunal. He continued his work with Daesh after hiding among residents of the camp, the Kurdish-led forces said. Al-Hassan said he was issuing religious edicts on who is to be killed inside the camp.

Al-Hol's residents include wives and children of Daesh members, most of them held there since 2019 as the final coalition-led push against the militant group unfolded. At the time, family members and Daesh supporters holed up in areas once controlled by the group fled or were evacuated to Al-Hol and other camps.

The Syrian Kurdish-led forces and the US-led coalition announced victory against Daesh in March 2019, after the militants lost all their territorial holdings. Thousands escaped into the desert while others were detained and held in detention facilities.

About 5,000 troops took part in Al-Hol sweep, which also uncovered an underground tunnel under construction.

More than 80% of the camp's residents are women and children, two-thirds of them under the age of 12. The majority are Syrian and Iraqi but about 10,000 are from 57 other countries. Conditions in the squalid camp have been described as dire, with sparse basic services and poor health care. Malnutrition is high among children.



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Kurds say 53 Daesh members arrested in Syria's Al-Hol camp