

# Security Council members approve choice of new UN envoy to Libya

Sat, 2021-01-16 04:12

NEW YORK: Security Council members on Friday approved the appointment of veteran Slovak diplomat Jan Kubis as the UN's special envoy to Libya.

It came as UN officials said significant progress has been made in Geneva this week during the inaugural meeting of the advisory committee for the Libyan Political Dialogue Forum (LPDF).

Secretary-General Antonio Guterres nominated Kubis to be his envoy, a position that has been vacant since early March last year, when Ghassan Salameh resigned due to stress after less than three years in the job.

A number of replacements were suggested but members of the Security Council failed to agree on one. In December they overcame their differences and approved the choice of Bulgarian diplomat Nikolai Mladenov – only for him to surprise everyone by turning down the offer for “personal and family reasons.”

Kubis is currently the UN's Special Coordinator for Lebanon. He previously held similar positions in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Meanwhile Guterres's spokesman Stephane Dujarric hailed what the UN Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) described as significant progress during the first meeting of the LPDF's advisory committee, which began in Geneva on Jan. 13 and concludes on Jan. 16.

“The mission hopes shortly they will be able to narrow down the major differences and reach near consensus on many of the contentious issues concerning the selection-mechanism proposals,” Dujarric said.

The formation of the advisory committee was announced on Jan. 3. Its 18 members, including women, young people and cultural figures, were chosen to reflect the country's wide geographical and political diversity.

The secretary-general's acting special representative for Libya, Stephanie Williams, had indicated that the main task for the committee would be to deliberate on the contentious issues that have plagued the selection of a unified executive authority. The aim is to develop solid recommendations the LPDF can consider in line with the political roadmap agreed by its 75 members during their first round of talks in Tunis last year.

This roadmap represents a rights-based process designed to culminate in democratic and inclusive national elections Dec. 24 this year. The date is also that of Libya's 70th Independence Day. The elections will mark the end of the transitional phase for the country and chart a new way forward.

“This unwavering achievement, this date to return the sovereign decision to

its rightful owners, is our top priority," said Williams in her opening remarks at the advisory committee meeting in Geneva this week.

She also rejected claims that UNSMIL will have any say in the selection of the new executive authority. "This is a Libyan-Libyan decision," Williams said, adding that the interim authority is intended to "shoulder the responsibility in a participatory manner and not on the basis of power-sharing, as some believed."

She added: "We want a participatory formula where there is no victor, no vanquished; a formula for coexistence for Libyans of various origins for a specific period of time until we pass on the torch."

UNSMIL spokesman Jean Alam said the Geneva talks have already overcome some major hurdles. This builds on the political accomplishments since the Tunis meeting at which a consensus was reached on the political roadmap, the eligibility criteria for positions in the unified executive authority, and the authority's most important prerogative: setting a date for the elections.

He also reported "very encouraging progress" in military matters since the signing of a ceasefire agreement in October by the 5+5 Joint Military Commission (JMC), the members of which include five senior officers selected by the Government of National Accord and five selected by the Libyan National Army.

"This includes the recent exchanges of detainees conducted under the JMC's supervision, as part of wider confidence-building measures; the resumption of flights to all parts of Libya; the full resumption of oil production and export; as well as the proposed unification and restructuring of the Petroleum Facilities Guards, in addition to the ongoing serious talks on the opening of the coastal road between Misrata and Sirte, which we hope will take place very soon," said Alam.

He also hailed "promising developments" relating to the economy, including the recent unification of the exchange rate by the Central Bank of Libya, a step that requires the formation of a new authority for it to be implemented.

"The recent meeting between the ministries of finance was an important effort to unify the budget and allocate sufficient funding to improve services and rebuild Libya's deteriorating infrastructure, particularly the electrical grid," Alam said.

"All of these reforms are steps that will bring national institutions together to work in establishing a more durable and equitable economic arrangement."

Williams added that without a unified executive authority, it would be difficult to implement these steps.



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[UN Support Mission in Libya \(UNSMIL\)](#)

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## [Sudan schoolbook picture sparks angry reform debate](#)

Author:

Sat, 2021-01-16 02:07

KHARTOUM: As Sudan's transitional government shifts the nation from the Islamist rule of ousted strongman Omar Bashir, a new schoolbook has sparked controversy for reproducing Michelangelo's iconic "Creation of Adam." Khartoum's government has embarked on deeply controversial reforms in a bid to boost its international standing and rescue its ailing economy – but bringing it into a confrontation with those who see changes as anti-Islamic. The offending picture, in a history textbook for teenagers, has become a flashpoint in the argument. "It is an ugly offense," said Sudan's Academy of

Islamic Fiqh, the body ruling on Islamic law, which issued an edict banning teaching from the book.

Michelangelo's fresco, depicting the Biblical story of God reaching out with his hand to give life to Adam, is a flagship piece of 16th century Renaissance art that forms part of the Sistine Chapel's ceiling in Rome. "The book glorifies Western culture in a way that makes it the culture of science and civilization – in contrast to its presentation of Islamic civilization," the Fiqh academy added.

## BACKGROUND

**In a viral video, a preacher broke down as he waved the book during Friday prayers, accusing it of promoting 'apostasy' and 'heresy.'**

Furious Muslim clerics have railed against the book and other changes to the school curriculum.

In one video widely shared on social media, a preacher broke down as he waved the book during Friday prayers, accusing it of promoting "apostasy" and "heresy."

Another urged followers to "burn the book."

But others defended the changes, saying they were part of necessary education reforms.

"The picture is not in a religious book," teacher Qamarya Omar said.

"It is in a history book for the sixth-grade under a section called European Renaissance, which makes it placed in context."



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Sudan says it signed 'Abraham Accords' with US  
Ethiopian envoy says Sudan border issue must be resolved 'amicably, urgently'

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## Sparse trees and little work for woodcutters in squeezed Gaza

Author:

Sat, 2021-01-16 02:03

GAZA CITY: With a chainsaw in his car, Ahmed Abdelal tours the Gaza Strip, asking around for people wanting to cut down trees, regrow orchards or make way for construction.

One of the few remaining woodcutters in the Palestinian territory, Abdelal, who learned woodcutting from his father, is struggling to scratch out a living in a traditional job that is less and less in demand.

Job opportunities are rare in this Palestinian enclave wedged between Israel, Egypt and the Mediterranean Sea, and so are green spaces. Rapid population growth – more than 2 million people are crammed in a 360-square-km strip – comes at the expense of arable land.

Israel maintains a 300-meter wide buffer zone along its frontier with Gaza. At the height of the second Palestinian uprising in the early 2000s, its military bulldozers leveled large swaths of citrus groves in the border areas.

In more recent years, Gaza has suffered under a blockade imposed by Israel and Egypt after the Hamas group seized control of the territory from the Palestinian Authority in 2007. Israel says the restrictions are needed to prevent Hamas from upgrading its weapons. The Palestinian Authority, or PA, holds sway in the West Bank.

The blockade and the rift between Hamas and the PA have weakened Gaza's energy sector. As a result, residents are put on a rotating electricity schedule of eight-hours on, followed by an eight-hour blackout. Here, woodcutters like Abdelal find an opportunity.

The unreliability of the power supply drives up the demand for wood in winter. So Abdelal and other Gaza woodcutters look to expand their clientele from the traditional buyers of logs, residents of rural areas who bake bread on woodfire ovens and tribal councils who keep the Arabic coffee pots warm near a wood fire.

Among Abdelal's favorite clients are small kitchens that cook food in ovens dug under the ground.

In these pits, the wood is burnt to coal before chicken, lamb shoulders and shanks are tossed in and left to cook for hours. The cooking technique is getting popular. The olive and citrus wood logs also go to a burning site in east Gaza City where they are turned into charcoal.

Abu Ashraf Al-Hattab, who has been a charcoal burner for decades, says the business has declined in recent years because the local supplies of wood have shrunk and people have turned to cheaper, imported charcoal.

In his gift shop, Muhanad Ahmed wanted to offer environmentally friendly items and drop the excessive amount of plastic that's seen on the shelves of other shops, he says. So, he buys the logs and shapes them into wood sculptures.



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Gaza man with disabilities conquers karate Israeli firm in Gaza extracts drinking water from air

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## [UAE confirms 3,407 new COVID-19 cases, 7 additional deaths](#)

Author:

Sat, 2021-01-16 00:44

DUBAI: The UAE recorded 3,407 new cases of COVID-19 on Friday, the fourth day in a row that the daily total has hit a new high. An additional seven people

have died of virus-related causes.

Officials from the Ministry of Health and Prevention (MoHAP) said the total number of cases has reached 246,376, and the death toll stands at 733. A further 3,168 people recovered from the virus in the preceding 24 hours, bringing the total number of recoveries to 218,988.

The ministry attributed the sharp rise in the number of cases over the past few days to “intensified investigation and examination procedures and an increase in testing at the state level.”

Officials said that more than 138,000 people were vaccinated in the past 24 hours, bringing the total number that has received the first of the two doses that are required to about 1.66 million. Authorities in the UAE have said that they plan to vaccinate 50 percent of the population by April, with priority given to those over the age of 60 or suffering from chronic diseases.

[#Dubai](#) Health Authority (@DHA\_Dubai) continues its free vaccination drive, rolling out the Pfizer-BioNTech Covid-19 vaccine across the city. The vaccine is being provided at 7 authorized centers.  
[pic.twitter.com/1fbF5APr0W](https://pic.twitter.com/1fbF5APr0W)

– Dubai Media Office (@DXBMediaOffice) [January 15, 2021](#)

The Department of Social Services, in cooperation with Sharjah Medical District, said it has received 800,700 applications for the COVID-19 vaccine from senior citizens and individuals with disabilities and mental illnesses, and their families. The vaccinations will be administered in their homes in Sharjah.

Afaf Al-Marri, the head of the department, said officials have been working to launch a number of initiatives designed to protect the health and safety of senior citizens since the pandemic began. He added that the launch of the home-vaccination service is one of the most important initiatives, designed to help some of the most vulnerable people.

During daily inspection tours, Dubai Economy issued fines to nine commercial establishments for failing to adhere to COVID-19 precautions. Inspection teams found 732 businesses to be compliant.

Abu Dhabi Media Office has released guidelines and a video explaining coronavirus precautions that should be taken when camping in the desert.

يشمل ذلك الالتزام بتعقيم اليدين باستمرار، ووضع الكمامة، وعدم المصافحة، واستخدام أدوات الطعام ذات الاستخدام لمرة واحدة، والحفاظ على التباعد الاجتماعي. [#مهمة\\_خلك\\_بأمان\\_#نلتزم\\_لننتصر](#)

– مكتب أبوظبي الإعلامي (@admediaoffice) [January 14, 2021](#)

Dubai Electricity and Water Authority (DEWA) said it aims to support efforts to overcome the exceptional global effects of the pandemic by “uniting and supporting all segments of society, adopting common humanitarian values and

strengthening cooperation with various local and international entities to accelerate the process of digital transformation and automate procedures for customers and employees alike.”

DEWA supports Dubai’s efforts to overcome the COVID-19 pandemic, in cooperation with the public and private sector to keep society safe, and accelerate digital transformation for customers and employees. [#DEWANews pic.twitter.com/NmDFRe9sra](https://pic.twitter.com/NmDFRe9sra)

– DEWA | Official Page (@DEWAOfficial) [January 15, 2021](#)

The authority said it is using all of its capabilities and resources to support national efforts to slow the spread of the virus. Its efforts include providing logistical support to the health and community sectors in the emirate, and a large number of employees have volunteered to support those who provide the first line of defense against the disease.

Saeed Mohammed Al-Tayer, DEWA’s managing director and CEO, said the “contribution of the authority’s employees embodies the highest forms of effective popular participation, cooperation, solidarity and community cohesion that characterizes the UAE.”

Elsewhere, Kuwait reported 530 new coronavirus cases, bringing the total to 156,964. The death toll rose to 947, with one additional death was reported in the previous 24 hours.

تعلن [#وزارة\\_الصحة](#) عن تأكيد إصابة 530 حالة، وتسجيل 268 حالة شفاء، و حالة وفاة واحدة جديدة بـ [#فيروس\\_كورونا\\_المستجد](#) COVID-19، ليصبح إجمالي عدد الحالات 156,964 حالة [pic.twitter.com/hWu7y0YPJs](https://pic.twitter.com/hWu7y0YPJs)

– [وزارة الصحة - الكويت \(@KUWAIT\\_MOH\)](#) [January 15, 2021](#)

In Bahrain, one death was reported, raising the death toll to 357, while 209 new infected cases were confirmed.

Out of 10685 COVID-19 tests carried out on 15 January 2021, 209 new cases have been detected among 97 expatriate workers, 104 new cases are contacts of active cases, and 8 are travel related. There were 397 recoveries from [#COVID19](#), increasing total recoveries to 93726 [pic.twitter.com/tpnxkJ8MzA](https://pic.twitter.com/tpnxkJ8MzA)

– [مملكة البحرين \(@MOH\\_Bahrain\)](#) [January 15, 2021](#)





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[Afaf Al-Marri](#)

[Sharjah](#)

[Ministry of Health and Prevention](#)

Saudi Arabia announces 3 more COVID-19 deaths UAE reports new record daily COVID-19 cases with 3,407 infections

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## [How artists in coronavirus-hit Middle East found strength in solidarity](#)

Fri, 2021-01-15 23:42

DUBAI: Art is cross-cultural in form, function and meaning. But since the coronavirus pandemic struck, fairs, exhibition spaces, concert halls, museums and performing arts centers across the world have been forced to close their doors and cancel events, threatening the livelihoods of artists and depriving societies of joys they once took for granted.

The art world in recent decades revolved around an international circuit of exhibitions, art fairs, biennials and performances. Artists, curators, collectors, gallerists and art lovers crisscrossed the globe to congregate at events as far apart as Dakar and Mexico City. That is, until world travel slowed and then ground to a halt in March 2020.

Today, with lockdown restrictions returning to many countries, art is shared primarily online and via social media or by appointment-only visits to galleries and museums. And as the world economy sputters, art creation, appreciation and sales have been sidelined. For many artists, the need to survive, both physically and mentally, has taken priority.



Galerie Dr. Dorothea van der Koelen (Mainz and Venice), Art Dubai 2019.  
(Courtesy: Photo Solutions)

In the Middle East, a region perennially beset by conflict, uncertainty and political turmoil, art and culture have somehow found a way to flourish, oftentimes against unthinkable odds.

The picture already appeared bleak at the start of 2020, even before lockdown restrictions were imposed. The UAE was experiencing a prolonged economic downturn, while geopolitical tensions drove many of the region's galleries,

particularly those in Lebanon and Iran, to despair.

With ongoing social reforms, economic diversification and a rapidly expanding cultural scene, Saudi Arabia was the biggest beacon of hope, but the closing of its borders and event cancellations after March put a damper on the creative industry's spirits.

Facing economic and financial hardship, the Middle East's arts community knew instinctively it needed to pull together.



Many galleries, institutions and performing arts centers in the Gulf region are up and running again, although strict social-distancing measures remain in place. (Supplied)

Initiatives were quickly launched by the likes of Art Jameel, the UAE Ministry of Culture, the Kamel Lazaar Foundation in Tunisia and Dubai's vibrant arts hub Alserkal Avenue to support creative and cultural enterprises through community building and artistic exchange. Alserkal Avenue gave its tenants a three-month rent-free package.

Fast-forward to January 2021. Many galleries, institutions and performing arts centers in the Gulf region are up and running again, although strict social-distancing measures remain in place. Art Dubai, one of the first events to cancel its physical fair in 2020, has announced it will go ahead as planned from March 17-20 at its home in Madinat Jumeirah.

"For us at Art Jameel, 2020 was the year of collective survival and 2021 is one of collective recovery," Antonia Carver, director of Art Jameel, told Arab News.

“We were able to distribute more than 100 micro-grants through the Research and Practice Platform that we launched back in April: this program, among others, clearly demonstrated the huge wealth of creative talent in the Arab world and how a network of continued support is sorely needed.”

The crisis is not over yet, to be sure. “Artists and creatives in the Middle East need the full gamut of support, including grants,” Carver added.



Facing economic and financial hardship, the Middle East’s arts community knew instinctively it needed to pull together. (Courtesy: Photo Solutions)

As it is often said, the show must go on – even if by other means. Supporting artists and commissioning new works even in the absence of physical events is key to keeping the art scene going, says Bill Bragin, artistic director of the Arts Center at New York University Abu Dhabi (NYUAD).

“The reality is that we probably won’t be doing in-person events until September 2021,” he told Arab News. “I’ve really tried to get rid of the language surrounding ‘real events’ or ‘live events’ and exchange these now for real-time events that are happening via the internet or by telephone and are no less real.”

What is crucial is to make sure artists are supported, he says. To that end, Bragin has commissioned several pieces by UAE-based artists to be performed later in the year.

“There was a sense of urgency,” said Bragin. “Those of us working in the art and culture scene in the UAE generally have a sense of mission about it. This is important work to us individually and also to the country and to the

transformation of the UAE. We all want to keep the momentum. We don't want to lose ground now."



Supporting artists and commissioning new works even in the absence of physical events is key to keeping the art scene going, says Bill Bragin, artistic director of the Arts Center at New York University Abu Dhabi (NYUAD). (Supplied)

The same holds for Saudi Arabia. Although coronavirus restrictions have temporarily disrupted plans in different economic fields, the arts and culture sector has found ways to forge ahead.

"As difficult as 2020 was, it revealed humanity's agility in response to extraordinary circumstances," Farah Abushullaih, head of Ithra Museum at the King Abdulaziz Center for World Culture in Dhahran, told Arab News.

"At Ithra, we remained committed to our ethos of making culture accessible when we were forced to close our doors. We launched the online platform Ithra Connect to engage with our community. The initiative reached more than one million people, underscoring the appetite for culture in the Kingdom."

Besides Ithra Connect, the museum also launched Ithra Open-Call to support young Saudi artists and the COVID-19 Exhibit, while Ithra's annual Tanween exhibition was held digitally.

## **FASTFACT**

# Creative industries

- \* Arts and crafts.
- \* Design & fashion.
- \* Advertising.
- \* Architecture.
- \* Film, video, photography & TV/radio.
- \* Music & performing arts.
- \* Publishing, software & computer games.

Ithra returns in 2021 with a full calendar of events, including Al-Sharqia Gets Creative, Ana Mohafeth and the Saudi Film Festival, which is organized in partnership with the Saudi Arabian Society for Culture & Arts in Dammam with the support of the Ministry of Culture's Film Commission.

"Despite the inevitable slowdown of 2020, the art scene in Saudi is still thriving, because there's an important number of creatives combined with an active Ministry of Culture and a growing number of institutions, collections and galleries that are building the infrastructure and creating opportunities for all the actors that make up an art scene," said Alia Fattouh, director of Athr Gallery, one of the Kingdom's premier contemporary art galleries based in Jeddah.

Misk Art Institute (MAI), established by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman in 2017 to encourage grassroots creativity, held its annual Misk Art Week from Dec. 3-7, drawing a record 85,000 unique online viewers and more than 2,500 physical attendees over the course of the five-day event in Riyadh.

"In the face of this pandemic, MAI adjusted its programming for Misk Art Week to present a hybrid form that offered virtual and online sessions as well as live events for local audiences," Reem Al-Sultan, CEO of Misk Art Institute, told Arab News.



During these times of turmoil and transition, the Middle East needs the arts more than ever, Antonia Carver, director of Art Jameel, told Arab News.  
(Supplied)

Some in the arts community want to see the same spirit of generosity extended to the wider region.

“We have seen a real proactiveness and safeguarding of the artistic cultural landscape here in the UAE during the pandemic,” Reem Fadda, director of Abu Dhabi Cultural Foundation, told Arab News.

“Institutions and governmental entities anchored themselves onto the cultural sphere during these tough times because they truly believed it was a catalyst for alleviation and support of our communities. Now the time has come for the UAE to also reach out and support the extended region where it can, through grants, commissioning opportunities, and other means.

“At the Cultural Foundation in Abu Dhabi we have announced a number of initiatives that are offering grants and commissions extending to the region, be it in performing arts, visual arts, or other disciplines.”



Unlike in the pre-COVID-19 days, with lockdown restrictions returning to many countries, art is shared primarily online and via social media or by appointment-only visits to galleries and museums. (Supplied)

As daunting as they may be, the challenges confronting the Gulf region's creative sector are one thing. The rest of the Middle East is a different story altogether.

The Beirut port blast of Aug. 4 struck at the very heart of the Middle East's art scene, devastating an area where many galleries and studios are located.

Beirut has long been a regional center for artistic production, yet Lebanon lacks the state and private support structure available in the Gulf.





Although coronavirus restrictions have temporarily disrupted plans in different economic fields, the arts and culture sector has found ways to forge ahead. (Supplied)

“The situation in Beirut is particularly urgent, given the need to rebuild physically, amid such a challenging political environment – although, sadly, this is also the situation in Syria, and other countries, too,” said Carver.

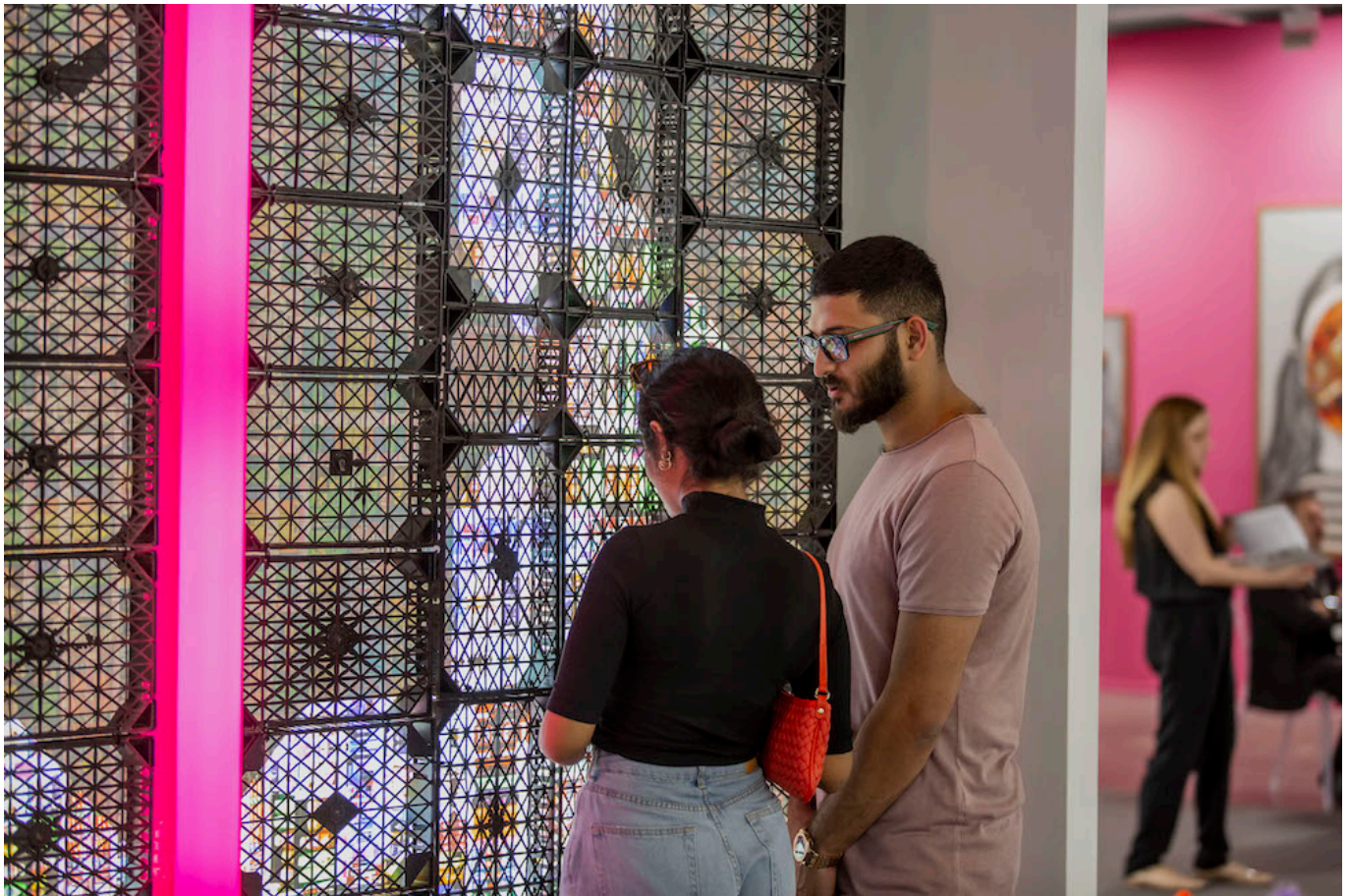
During these times of turmoil and transition, the Middle East needs the arts more than ever, says Carver.

“Culture is the crucible of society, where we discover and debate ideas and forms, and figure out our role going forward. Now they are needed more than ever, particularly in the Arab world,” he said.

“While in 2020 we were perhaps dazzled by the COVID-19 headlights, in 2021 we will have to try to make sense of it and move on.”

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