

Lebanese blame 'brutal' Syrian regime over refugee attack

Author:

Tue, 2020-12-29 00:03

BEIRUT: An arson attack that destroyed a Syrian refugee camp in northern Lebanon has led to widespread criticism of the Assad regime for failing to help or repatriate its displaced citizens.

In the wake of the attack that forced 370 people to flee the camp late on Saturday, Lebanese political leaders accused the Syrian regime of intimidating refugees in the country and deliberately hindering their return.

The accusations came as the Lebanese army confirmed that eight people – two Lebanese and six Syrian nationals – had been arrested in connection with the arson attack, which followed a pay dispute between Syrian workers and their Lebanese employers.

The Syrian Arab News Agency quoted an official source in the foreign ministry calling on Lebanon to “secure protection and care for the displaced Syrians.”

The official source also repeated calls for refugees “forced to leave the country by an unjust war to return to their homeland,” saying that “every effort is being made to facilitate their return.”

However, Lebanon’s Foreign Ministry said that it had received no communication from Syrian officials, either directly or through the embassy in Damascus.

Head of the Progressive Socialist Party Walid Jumblatt accused the Syrian regime of hypocrisy over its condemnation of the attack on the camp and calls to punish the perpetrators.

“This regime gang has destroyed entire villages and cities in Syria, and violated Lebanon with acts of terror and assassination,” he said.

However, former Hezbollah chief Sheikh Subhi Al-Tufayli said that the media campaign calling for the return of Syrian refugees “raises fears of a dirty project that aims to solve the refugee problem by handing them over to the murderous regime in Damascus.”

On Monday, UNHCR spokesman Khaled Kabbara visited the charred campsite to inspect damage.

According to the refugee agency, most of the 370 residents have since been housed in other camps in the region or have found accommodation with locals.

About 1.5 million Syrians live in Lebanon, including 1 million registered as refugees with the UN, Lebanese government figures show. However, large numbers of Syrians are also believed to have entered the country

surreptitiously and are unregistered.

Syrian refugees make up 25 percent of the Lebanese population, with 17 percent living in camps, UNHCR has said.

A recent referendum showed that 96 percent of the refugees want to return to Syria as soon as they feel safe.

The social media debate over the return of Syrian refugees to their homeland included praise for Saudi Arabia following urgent assistance provided by KSrelief to residents left without shelter after Saturday's arson attack.

Syria's Ambassador to Lebanon, Ali Abdul-Karim, told the Syrian Al-Watan newspaper that the Syrian foreign ministry had contacted the embassy to check on the refugees' welfare.

"Some Lebanese have opened their homes to the Syrians who have lost their shelter," he said.

The Syrian envoy also called on Lebanon to "punish those responsible and those who caused harm to the displaced Syrians."



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Hundreds of Syrians flee as refugee camp torched in LebanonLebanon reserving nearly 2 million coronavirus vaccines

[Egypt cancels New Year celebrations, shuts event halls](#)

Author:

Tue, 2020-12-29 00:00

CAIRO: Egypt has canceled all New Year celebrations and will shut down any facility organizing festivities in an attempt to control the high number of new coronavirus cases.

The government is also banning weddings, funerals and other gatherings, and fining violators.

Egyptian Prime Minister Mostafa Madbouly told a meeting of the Supreme Committee for the Management of the Coronavirus Crisis that the past few days had witnessed a remarkable increase in the number of new cases, which demanded the meeting be convened to discuss how to limit the spread of the virus.

Cabinet spokesman Nader Saad said the meeting discussed a number of issues. It ensured the need to cancel all New Year celebrations and to take measures to close any facility that organized celebrations and to stop any activities, celebrations or festivals during the coming period.

It was also decided to completely close event halls and stress to hotels that weddings should only be hosted in open spaces, he added.

There has been a drop in tourism because of fresh coronavirus waves and European lockdowns, and a 80 percent decline in the hotel occupancy rate compared to the same period last year, according to officials from the Egyptian Chamber of Tourism.

Hotel occupancy decreased in December compared to the same period last year to around 15 percent in Cairo, 20 percent in Giza, 8 percent in Luxor and Aswan, and 15-20 percent in Sharm El-Sheikh and Hurghada, according to tourism officials.

Madbouly said that violators of COVID-19 guidelines should be penalized immediately, starting from Jan. 3.

People who do not follow measures and do not wear a facemask will get a fine of EGP50 (\$3.18) and, in the event of a failure to pay, the violator will be referred to prosecution bodies for further action to be taken.

The prime minister also ordered that restaurants and cafes commit to only taking in 50 percent of their capacity, intensifying campaigns in the most affected governorates.

Violators will be fined EGP4,000 and the facility will be closed for a week, provided that the collection of fines begins on Jan. 3. If the violation is repeated the closing period doubles.

Event halls violating the newly issued decisions will see their officials being referred for investigation if the venue is affiliated with the state, and being fined if affiliated to an association. Measures will be taken against the board of directors of the association.

During the meeting, it was also emphasized that the largest number of oxygen cylinders be secured for those needing them, and to confirm the availability of all medicines for coronavirus treatment protocols and medical supplies in all hospitals and private pharmacies.

It was also requested that citizens not hoard medicine.

The meeting heard that the Egyptian Drug Authority was taking measures to register different types of coronavirus vaccines that have been announced internationally. The companies producing these vaccines will be contracted according to the required quantities once this registration is complete.

The Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Interior will prepare the vaccination process.



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Fire at Egyptian hospital kills 7 coronavirus patients Egyptian startup prepares MENA students for a post-pandemic world

[Jordan detects two coronavirus variant cases: Minister](#)

Author:

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Sun, 2020-12-27 16:40

AMMAN: Jordan on Sunday confirmed two cases of a particularly infectious coronavirus variant in a man and his wife who had arrived from Britain. Health Minister Nazir Obeidat said the Jordanian couple traveled to the kingdom on December 19 and were found to be infected with the new strain of the virus after being tested and isolated.

The couple were still in quarantine and being monitored by medical experts according to virus protocols, Obeidat said, adding they were both in "excellent health" condition.

The new strain of the virus emerged earlier this month in Britain and has already reached several European countries, as well as Japan and Canada. The new strain, which experts fear is more contagious, prompted more than 50 countries to impose travel restrictions on Britain.

Jordan was among them and has barred flights from the UK since Monday, with the ban to be enforced until January 3.

The Middle Eastern country has officially recorded more than 286,356 cases of the novel coronavirus and over 3,729 deaths.

In mid-December, Jordan announced it had approved emergency use of the Pfizer-BioNTech coronavirus vaccine.

Obeidat said last month that vaccines would be distributed free of charge to Jordanians as well as foreign residents.

Since the virus first emerged earlier this year, Jordan has imposed strict restrictions, with schools and universities still closed and a night-time curfew imposed nationwide.



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Jordan launches COVID-19 vaccine registration website Jordan continues cross-border goods transport with Saudi Arabia despite new virus restrictions

[How Dubai defied the odds to bounce back from the coronavirus crisis](#)

Sun, 2020-12-27 21:08

DUBAI: Few global cities will look back fondly back on 2020, the year of COVID-19 lockdowns and travel bans. Many found themselves facing budgetary shortfalls and compelled to shut their gates to visitors. For most, the recovery is likely to be slow and painful, if warnings by experts are any guide. But Dubai, a city founded on trade, aviation and hospitality in a region reliant on hydrocarbon revenues, may be making a comeback sooner than predicted.

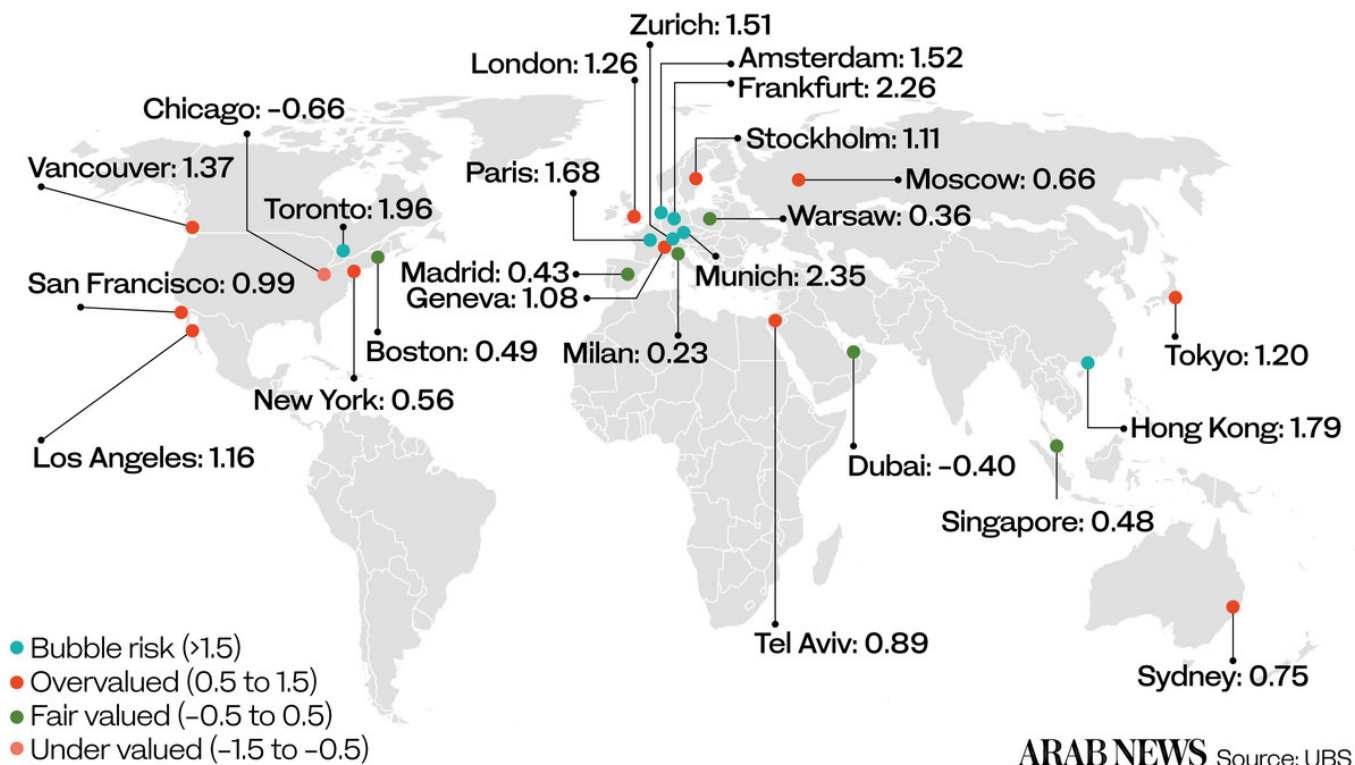
How the UAE's commercial capital keeps defying critics is a complex story

involving many different factors. But when all is said and done, Dubai appears once again to be back on its feet even as many of the world's great metropolises struggle with the debilitating effects of repeated lockdowns. The "City of Life" has not only survived the worst year in recent memory but looks all set to thrive in the new year, when it also hosts the World Expo from Oct. 1.

Since Dubai reopened to international travelers on July 7, it has witnessed a steady uptick in visitors, who have given the city's numerous hotels and beachfront resorts a timely cash-flow boost. Restaurants, bars and even nightclubs have reopened. Hotels that weathered the downturn have hiked room rates as bookings soar during what has always been the city's busiest tourist season.

HOW DUBAI COMPARES WITH OTHER BIG CITIES

Global Real Estate Bubble Index of 2020 rates Dubai's properties as fair valued



Peace dividend has done its bit. The UAE's normalization of relations with Israel, announced in a joint statement in August, could not have happened at a more opportune time. Hebrew, the everyday language of Israel, can now be heard at hotels and restaurants throughout Dubai. A recent report in The Times of Israel said more than 50,000 Israelis have already visited the UAE since the Abraham Accords peace agreement was signed on Sept. 15.

There are now a number of daily direct flights between Tel Aviv and Dubai, and both countries have declared each other "green zones," meaning quarantine is not required on arrival or return. Nearly 200 hotels and restaurants in the UAE now serve kosher meals.

A report issued by STR, a hotel management analytics firm, in December said the key hotel markets in the UAE had reached or surpassed 50 percent

occupancy due to strong domestic and recent international demand, with Dubai at 65 percent occupancy for the week of Nov. 30 to Dec. 6.

“The UAE is probably one of the nimblest countries in the world with the ability to move at such an incredible pace,” Philip Wooller, STR’s area director for the Middle East and Africa, told Arab News.

“Decisions are made in hours that in many countries might take months, or more likely, years. With all emerging economies, there will be ups and downs, but if we focus on the hospitality sector, Dubai’s pace of growth has been nothing short of sensational.”

Wooller wrapped up the emirate’s progress thus: “Just a few short years ago, Dubai had only a handful of hotels and a handful of visitors. Pandemic aside, the same Dubai is now the world’s fourth-most visited city with one of the largest hotel markets and a growing list of world-class venues.”

To be sure, social-distancing rules are still in force, mask-wearing is required even on beaches, and there are restrictions on gatherings of more than five people except for members of the same family. The precautionary measures are likely to remain in place for as long as the authorities in Dubai consider them necessary.

INNUMBERS

Dubai

- * **200,000** – Travelers visiting emirate for Christmas, New Year holidays.
- * **30%** – Rise in share prices of Damac Properties Dubai Co. in December.
- * **2021** – City to host World Expo from Oct. 1.

If a recovery is indeed underway, it’s still early days. Even before the pandemic hit, Dubai was experiencing a general slowdown in economic activity. The pace of expatriate departures had quickened as many shops, businesses and companies struggled to stay afloat in a city that had grown accustomed to continuous growth almost since the discovery of oil.

Reports of even longtime residents returning to their home countries augured badly for the future of an economic model built on the presence of expats, who comprise about 90 percent of Dubai’s population.

With the onset of the pandemic came an oil price plunge, as collapsing energy demand worldwide resulted in crude prices hitting two-decade lows. Finance ministers of the Gulf countries sounded the alarm and central bank chiefs went for broke in anticipation of another global recession. The international

media was filled with reports of blue-collar South Asian and Filipino workers leaving on repatriation flights.

For Dubai, the existing economic problems were exacerbated by the impact of the coronavirus crisis on the global travel and tourism industry, which came to a shuddering halt. A strict 24-hour lockdown implemented in April forced businesses with already bruised balance sheets to close or lay off staff.

Foreign migrant workers bore the brunt of the cost-cutting measures, with many seeing their salaries slashed, delayed or frozen. Oxford Economics estimated that as many as 900,000 jobs could be lost in the UAE and 10 percent of its residents uprooted.

Anxiety bubbled away just beneath the surface in Dubai, a cosmopolitan city known for its entrepreneurial energy, boundless ambitions and unlimited shopping opportunities. And after March, two of the emirate's biggest strengths – the aviation and hospitality sectors – proved to be its greatest weaknesses amid a pandemic blamed on a highly transmissible and deadly virus.



This picture taken on July 8, 2020 shows an aerial view of the Atlantis The Palm, luxury hotel resort located at the apex of the man-made Palm Jumeirah archipelago off the Gulf emirate of Dubai. (AFP/File Photo)

Now, with the launch of the UAE's COVID-19 vaccination campaign, those grim days could soon be regarded as a forgettable page in Dubai's history. Hotels are busy adjusting their business strategies to cope with the new influx of

visitors. The Jumeirah Group, which manages the world-famous Burj Al-Arab hotel, has established a series of pop-up experiences, including SAL – a chic new pool and beach club that is regarded as a cutting-edge concept.

“Dubai’s nature is to be entrepreneurial and radically adaptive to changing environments, and these characteristics have allowed it to navigate the crisis and come out stronger,” Danielle Wilson Naqvi, owner of boutique travel agency Unique Family Travels, told Arab News.

It is not just the big companies who are betting on a brighter future. Anecdotal evidence of green shoots of recovery can be found in the upbeat mood of many small business owners who experienced stress and uncertainty during the lockdowns.

“Despite a challenging few months before the summer, footfall to Cassette has been the strongest we have ever had,” said Haider Madani, owner and co-founder of Cassette DXB, a cafe-restaurant that opened in February 2019.

“Thanks to our higher number of customers, we have been able to increase the size of the team, helping a lot of great talent in the market looking for work, as well as expand our food and drink offering.”



A picture taken with a fish-eye lens on July 19, 2020 shows Dubai’s Burj Khalifa, the tallest structure and building in the world ahead of the launch of the UAE “Hope” Mars probe. (AFP/File Photo)

While only time will tell how deep the recovery is, if it is real then Dubai has pulled it off just when the outlook could not have been bleaker. “Pre-pandemic Dubai faced economic challenges – its real estate and hotel sector

were perhaps oversupplied,” said Wooller. “In some ways, the pandemic has allowed Dubai to take stock of the situation and provided an opportunity to change direction where needed.

“I think it is too early to talk about a second boom, but Dubai feels pretty good at the moment. The handling of the pandemic has also been a credit to Dubai, and I fully expect the city to go from strength to strength in 2021.”

In the last two months, the UAE government has adopted a raft of measures aimed at boosting the economy and attracting skilled talent from around the world. These include a groundbreaking amendment to the UAE Companies Law that permits 100 percent foreign ownership within the onshore jurisdiction of the UAE, which previously required 51 percent Emirati ownership in businesses operating outside the free zones.

In November, a major overhaul of the country’s personal laws allowed unmarried couples to cohabit and loosened alcohol restrictions. For its part, Dubai launched in October a remote working program that makes it possible for digital nomads and their families to relocate to the emirate on an annual basis for just \$287 plus medical insurance costs.



A recent report in The Times of Israel said more than 50,000 Israelis have already visited the UAE since the Abraham Accords peace agreement was signed on Sept. 15. (AFP/File Photo)

The amended legislation followed the approval in October by Dubai of an extra \$136 million (AED 500 million) economic stimulus package to support the local economy, which brought the year’s total stimulus measures to \$1.8 billion.

Property dealers are hoping that small fluctuations in the Dubai real-estate

market are the harbinger of an eagerly awaited recovery. According to the UBS Global Real Estate Bubble Index, every major city experienced price rises except Dubai in 2020, whose market went into decline during the pandemic due to a lack of liquidity and is therefore “fair valued” from an investment standpoint.

“This was on top of an already undervalued real estate market,” Taufiq Rahim, an UAE-based senior fellow at the New America Research Institute, told Arab News. “Dubai’s assets were already at a low and it had to adjust to a low base. Now you have an increase in visitors, in people looking for property and for residency.”



This picture taken on July 8, 2020 shows an aerial view of the Dubai Frame landmark in the Gulf emirate of Dubai. (AFP/File Photo)

At the end of November, the Dubai Land Department (DLD), in cooperation with Property Finder, launched the seventh edition of Mo’asher, the emirate’s official sales price index. It showed that demand for villas and townhouses was at an all-time high, with growth of over 500 percent since May 2020.

More good news arrived last week in the form of the first batch of Pfizer-BioNTech-manufactured COVID-19 vaccines flown into the UAE by Emirates SkyCargo for Dubai Health Authority. Praising the “effective management of the pandemic by Dubai’s visionary leadership,” Nabil Sultan, a senior executive of the carrier, said: “By transporting COVID-19 vaccines across our extensive network, we look forward to helping people around the world get back on their feet after the devastating impact of the pandemic.”

The emirate’s current mood is one of cautious optimism and confidence. “You need to be very brave to take on Dubai,” Wooller, of the hotel-management analytics firm STR, told Arab News. “It is a city that is extremely quick on

its feet.”

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Dubai ruler approves \$15.5bn budget for 2021 as economic recovery seenDubai sees surge in bank financing, new fintech firms in 2020

[French authorities to question Carlos Ghosn in Lebanon](#)

Author:

Sun, 2020-12-27 21:01

BEIRUT: A French judicial security mission is set to question former Nissan CEO Carlos Ghosn, who has Lebanese and French nationality.

The mission will arrive in Lebanon on Jan. 18 to question the 66-year-old fugitive.

A judicial source told Arab News: "The Cassation Prosecutor, Judge Imad Kabalan, is the one who will interrogate Ghosn, and the French delegation has the right to participate in the interrogation."

The source added that the interrogation is part of the French case against Ghosn regarding an alleged misuse of Renault funds in a birthday party he hosted for his wife, Carole, in the Palace of Versailles.

Ghosn is one of the most important and senior executives in the global auto industry. He saved Nissan, one of Japan's largest car companies, from bankruptcy in 2000.

He chaired the Renault-Nissan-Mitsubishi Alliance, the largest of its kind in the automotive industry. Japanese authorities arrested Ghosn in 2018 for financial offenses and he was imprisoned for 130 days. He moved to Japan in the late 1990s and revolutionized the practice of corporate management.

In March 2019, after Ghosn was placed under house arrest in Japan, he fled the country and entered Lebanon through Istanbul. Lebanese authorities faced criticism over a refusal to hand Ghosn over to Japanese authorities. But officials claimed that, because he is a Lebanese citizen, he should be tried on Lebanese soil by the Lebanese judiciary.

Authorities in France have started at least two investigations related to Ghosn, one of which is related to suspicious transactions in Renault, in addition to suspicious payments for trips and special events paid by the Renault-Nissan holding company, based in the Netherlands. The second investigation is focused on the misuse of company funds to pay for the Versailles party.

Lebanon's courts previously denied a lawsuit brought against Ghosn by Lebanese activists that claimed he entered Israel – an enemy state. The judiciary said that his entry to Israel was "outdated."



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Hundreds of Syrians flee as refugee camp torched in Lebanon
Lebanon lockdown possible if COVID-19 cases increase