

# Tussle over TikTok keeps Middle East content creators on edge

Tue, 2020-09-08 21:58

DUBAI: The race to buy one of the hottest social media apps in the market is intensifying as its current owner girds for a court battle with the US government.

Some of the world's biggest firms are huddled in talks to acquire the Chinese video-sharing platform TikTok after President Donald Trump's executive order last month that would ban the app in the US over national security concerns unless another company purchases it by mid-September.

On Aug. 24, TikTok and a company employee filed separate lawsuits in California against the Aug. 6 executive order.

Users in the Middle East are concerned about the regional ramifications of a potential US ban.



Video app TikTok said on August 22 it will challenge in court a Trump administration crackdown on the popular Chinese-owned service, which Washington accuses of being a national security threat. (AFP/File Photo)

With over 800 million active global users, according to DataReportal, and more than 2 billion downloads as of April 2020, the app ranks among the

world's 10 most popular social media platforms.

In the Middle East, social media influencers and content creators welcomed the app with open arms.

As of 2019, Saudi Arabia ranked as the eighth-largest country in terms of users, according to Route Note.

With the UAE taking second spot among Gulf Cooperation Council member states, TikTok set up its regional office in Dubai in 2018, servicing the Middle East and North Africa.



In the Middle East, social media influencers and content creators – such as Abbas, Sarah Miladd and Saad Abdullah – welcomed the app with open arms.  
(Supplied)

The UAE ranks 11th globally in number of TikTok influencers, with an average of 380 videos uploaded each onto their feeds.

“TikTok has grown rapidly this year, and across the Middle East in particular it has been really well received,” Rami Zeidan, head of video and creative at TikTok’s Dubai office, told Arab News.

“We’ve seen content emerge across multiple segments in the region, especially through the participation of our content creators in some hyper-local challenges, and we’ve recently seen an uptick in fitness, tech and gaming content.”

## **INNUMBERS**

### **UAE TIKTOK**

\* 2.16% Percentage of influencers with over 100k followers.

- \* 380 Total videos uploaded on average to influencers' feeds.
- \* 22.3% Accounts with more than 500 media entries.
- \* 58.54% 18-34-aged males' share of app audience.
- \* 20.04% Engagement rate of app influencers.

Zeidan said one of the app's main commitments in the region is to cultivate the TikTok community through different on-platform challenges and other initiatives tailored to Arabic audiences.

"We work closely with our TikTok community and encourage them to express their creativity across a variety of verticals from music to food, education, travel, fitness, fashion and comedy, as there isn't one area that we prioritize over the other," he added.

Growing with this popularity is uncertainty over the app's future following Trump's executive order and the legal challenges.

The executive order bars any US transactions with TikTok's Chinese parent company ByteDance.

The order states that the data TikTok collects "threatens to allow the Chinese Communist Party access to Americans' personal and proprietary information," and could allow China to track the location of federal employees and contractors.

Under the order, TikTok would be indefinitely blocked from millions of users in the US unless another company acquires the app by Sept. 20.

In its suit, TikTok argues that it was deprived the opportunity to respond, and said the national security concerns surrounding the app are without merit.

"The executive order is not rooted in bona fide national security concerns," reads the complaint posted on the company's website. "Independent national security and information security experts have criticized the political nature of this executive order, and expressed doubt as to whether its stated national security objective is genuine."

A separate lawsuit filed by a TikTok employee calls the order "sweepingly broad," and questions whether employee wages and salaries will be covered by a section of the executive order that bans transactions with the company. Many social media experts believe that the controversy has more to do with US-China tensions.

"Data is definitely something that's part of a big conversation when it comes to apps, but every single app we use has so much data, which a lot of governments already have access to" Alexandra Maia, social media creative strategist and CEO of House of Social, a Dubai-based consultancy business,

told Arab News.

“Since TikTok is a Chinese-owned app – and we know there are tensions between China and the US – it’s a recipe for disaster, and we just have to sit and see what unfolds.”

Maia said a potential ban in the US may create a temporary sense of uncertainty among regular users in the Arab world, but will not impact “pure content creators” who are building a brand.



In this file photo taken on August 11, 2020, the logo of Chinese video app TikTok is seen on the side of the company’s new office space at the C3 campus in Culver City, in the westside of Los Angeles. (AFP/File Photo)

“The majority of people might be a little hesitant to continue creating content frequently, but a small group of hardcore creators will continue doing so because they understand the game,” she added.

“We see that (with TikTok) in the Middle East, just like (we saw) with Snapchat in Saudi Arabia. The younger generations go in first because they’re the savviest, the ones who have more of the early taste and thirst for it. The older generation then starts to catch up.”

In practical terms, TikTok initially attracted predominantly teenagers due to its unique and easy-to-use editing tools, but it quickly became popular among those in their 30s, with the hashtag #over30’sclub going viral in recent times. Despite the controversy, Maia, like many other analysts, believes TikTok is “here to stay.”

The buzz over potential buyers, including Twitter, Microsoft and most

recently Oracle, is creating anticipation over the future of TikTok, now worth an estimated \$75 billion, according to Pitchbook. The man behind the app, which has millions posting short-form mobile videos, is Chinese billionaire Zhang Yiming, whose net worth stands at \$16.2 billion.



The man behind the app is Chinese billionaire Zhang Yiming. (Reuters)

Known to be extremely private about his personal life, Zhang called Trump's demand to sell the app "unreasonable."

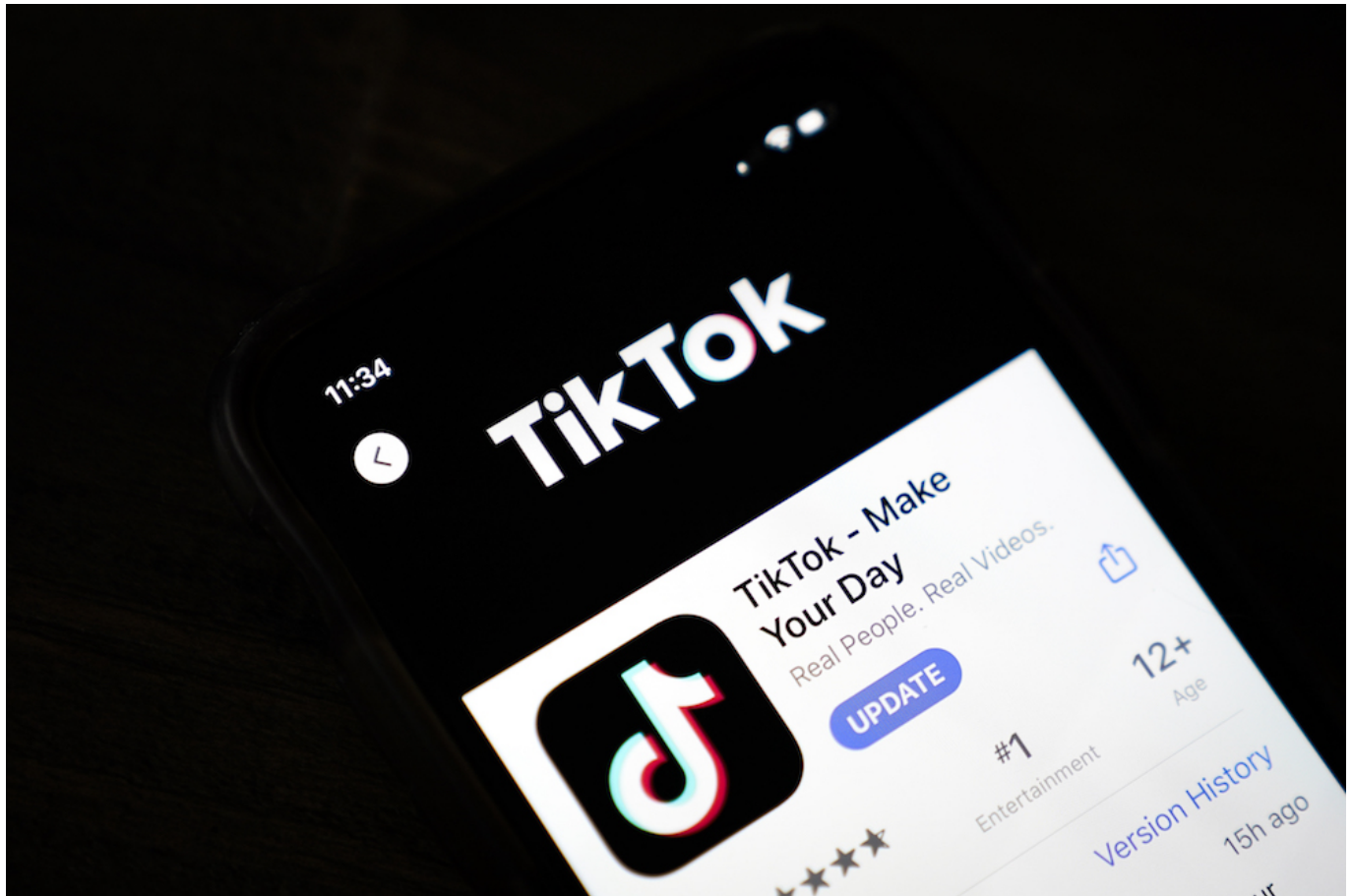
A TikTok spokesperson told Arab News: "Since publicly announcing two weeks ago that we are evaluating changes to the corporate structure of the TikTok business, there have been numerous suggestions made by external people not involved in the company's internal discussions. We do not comment on rumors or speculation. We are very confident in the long-term success of TikTok and will make our plans public when we have something to announce."

TikTok has launched a news portal called "The Last Sunny Corner of the Internet" to address comments around the Trump administration's executive order, its approach to combating misinformation, and the app's security roadmap.

For concerned content creators in the Arab world, Maia has a few words of advice: "As marketers and businesspeople, we just have to focus on creating content, building our brand, being transparent with our followers, and just start preparing a little bit on that exit strategy in case it does happen. But until then, create your content, and your community will follow you where you want them to follow."

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## [Yemeni court sentences 5 Houthi operatives to death as fighting rages](#)

Tue, 2020-09-08 01:55

AL-MUKALLA: A Yemeni court in the central province of Marib has sentenced five Houthis to death for undermining security in government-controlled

areas.

The military court from the Marib-based 3rd Military Region on Sunday ruled that the operatives – who were part of a Houthi cell uncovered last year – had plotted to assassinate military and security officers, planted improvised explosive devices (IEDs), blown up military equipment, and trained armed gangs in government-controlled areas, state news agency SABA reported. State media identified only one of the five convicted operatives, Taher Ali Al-Marhabi. A sixth member of the cell was acquitted of the charges. Local Yemeni officers have long blamed Houthi sleeper cells in liberated areas for a string of assassinations and explosions and for sending information on the locations and movements of military commanders to their seniors in Sanaa and Saada.

The same military court ordered the military prosecution in Marib to question 180 senior members of the Iran-backed Houthi movement, including Abdul Malik Al-Houthi and his brothers, who were previously charged with forming an armed group that overthrew the government, colluded with other countries, and killed people.

In July, a court in Marib held the initial session of the trial of Houthi leaders accused of masterminding the coup against the internationally recognized government of President Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi in 2015 and the subsequent military campaign.

In Sanaa, a court operated by the Houthis, ordered on Sunday confiscating properties and freezing the bank accounts of 75 military and security officers for backing the internationally recognized government of Yemen and the Arab coalition military operations in Yemen. Among the convicted officers were commanders of military regions and army troops battling Houthis in Marib and Jouf, and senior officers at the Ministry of Interior.

Over recent years, the Houthis have sentenced Yemen's president, his deputy, the prime minister, and hundreds of military and civilian officials to death and stormed their properties in Sanaa and other areas under their control in northern Yemen.

Yemeni analysts believe the Houthis are blackmailing those officials into joining their movement. Other experts think the cash-strapped Houthis might sell confiscated properties to fund their military activities across Yemen. A pro-government officer who was recently convicted by a Houthi court told Arab News on Monday that a private bank based in Sanaa froze his bank account, and he advised Yemeni activists who openly criticized the Houthis not to open accounts with banks based in Houthi-controlled areas.

"I do not have any property in Sanaa. The bank told me my account was frozen by the bank's HQ in Sanaa," said the officer, who lives in a liberated city in southern Yemen, and wished to remain anonymous.

"This is a war. The Houthis get even with those officers who support the legitimate government by targeting their properties," he added.

Meanwhile, fierce fighting between government forces and Houthis broke out on Sunday and Monday as the army announced it had killed, wounded, and captured dozens of rebel fighters in Jouf and Marib.

The heaviest fighting was reported in the northern province of Jouf where government forces announced liberating a chain of mountains after killing more than 20 Houthis and capturing 37 others.

State media showed images of burnt military vehicles abandoned by the fleeing Houthis and government pickups carrying almost two dozen captured Houthi

fighters.

Maj. Gen. Ameen Al-Waili, the acting commander of the 6th Military Region, told state media that army troops and allied tribesmen, backed by air cover from Arab coalition warplanes, had inflicted heavy blows to the Houthis on battlefields in Jouf by killing and capturing dozens of their fighters. He said that his troops had liberated a large swathe of land east of Hazen, the capital of Jouf, as warplanes destroyed 10 Houthi military vehicles. Military commanders added that current military operations outside Hazem were aimed at cutting off Houthi supply lines and wearing down the group's manpower before storming the city.



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## [Lebanon's COVID-19 patients exceed 20,000](#)

Mon, 2020-09-07 23:58

BEIRUT: Lebanon's total number of COVID-19 patients has exceeded 20,000, with



the country's health minister on Monday describing the situation as "delicate and in need of full awareness by all citizens."

About 12,753 COVID-19 patients were registered during August, while 3,118 cases were registered during the first week of September.

The number of COVID-19 patients whose source of infection was unknown has exceeded 4,000.

Health Minister Hamad Hassan said: "It is the duty of the state to protect society with its health security, and society must respond to the instructions of the Ministry of Health and adhere to wearing masks, hygiene, and instructions issued by the government."

Many official departments were closed at the weekend in Lebanon for sanitization operations after coronavirus was detected among employees.

Foreign Ministry staff underwent polymerase chain reaction (PCR) tests after a COVID-19 case was found among them. A retirement home in Beirut's Ain El-Remmaneh area has recorded infections among the elderly and the staff caring for them.

"It is not easy," added Hassan. "There are a lot of cases in Lebanon and, unfortunately, there are some deaths. Hence, I ask that precautionary and preventive measures be taken seriously, as all the mobilization and emergency laws are not important if we do not take the measures absolutely seriously. We must be responsible and not transmit the infection to our nearest members of the family."

The ministry is equipping government hospitals in areas far from the capital with the requirements for receiving coronavirus patients, while private hospitals are working to raise their preparedness in terms of providing intensive care beds and regular beds for COVID-19 patients.

Hassan rejected speculation about the results of PCR tests issued by laboratories accredited by the ministry, and urged people not to "question or underestimate" the pandemic.

Municipalities are monitoring infected people and tracking their condition. They have also resorted to isolating villages until infected people recover to prevent the transmission of the virus to others.

The country's dire economic situation has, however, prevailed over the preventive measures taken to combat the virus. Restaurants, cafes and bars have resumed activity and security measures are lax in pursuing those breaking COVID-19 procedures by not wearing face masks.

Abdul-Rahman Al-Bizri, an infectious diseases specialist and member of the Health Ministry's crisis committee, said that Lebanon's rate of infections was relatively high and would continue to rise.

## **FASTFACT**

**Abdul-Rahman Al-Bizri, an infectious diseases specialist and member of the Health Ministry's crisis committee, says that Lebanon's rate of infections is relatively high and would continue to rise.**

"Unfortunately, people do not abide by the prevention instructions," he told Arab News.

"The virus has a wide spectrum of symptoms; there may be no symptoms at all,

and they can be simple symptoms such as a cold, and the symptom may be shortness of breath. The death rate among the infected elderly reaches 25 percent, but the total deaths in Lebanon since the beginning of the pandemic has so far not exceeded 1 percent, which is an internationally accepted percentage.”

He said that the total number of infected health workers in hospitals exceeded 500, which had led to disruption in some departments but had not stopped their work. Hospitals were still able to deal with staff infections, he added.

North Lebanon’s governor, Ramzi Nohra, said that everyone was supposed to adhere to preventive measures, including wearing face masks, maintaining public hygiene and social distancing, and that authorities were taking “all measures” to protect people, educate them and get them to follow ministry instructions.

The governor added: “However, the dangerous coronavirus began to multiply and spread in Tripoli and some northern regions. We hope that this pandemic will not become out of control and every infected person must adhere to quarantine. We will be on the lookout for all violators.”

Tripoli district recorded 43 new cases within 24 hours.

The governor of Baalbek-Hermel, Bashir Khader, said that the situation was still under control in the region despite the spread of the virus in many towns that had been isolated.

He attributed the spread to the indecisiveness of some municipalities in deterring violators of preventive measures, such as banning hookah smoking in cafes, to a shortage of municipal police personnel and also because of a sharp rise in temperatures, which recently exceeded 40 degrees and prompted people to abandon face masks.

Khader said: “Hospitals in the area are equipped to receive COVID-19 cases. No infections have been recorded among the nursing or medical teams yet, and we have adopted home quarantine for mild cases. In Baalbek-Hermel governorate, there are 250,000 Syrian refugees distributed into 120 camps, and we organized maneuvers with the High Commissioner for Refugees on how to deal with the spread of the virus in these camps and created quarantine facilities and the plan was activated.”

In Palestinian refugee camps, where the population density is very high and adherence to preventive measures varies, the UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) announced that test results from the past few days showed 27 new cases of coronavirus.

There were 14 in Ain Al-Hilweh camp, including one of the agency’s employees, and 13 in Burj Al-Barajneh camp. A UNRWA staff member also tested positive in the central clinic in Beirut and is under home quarantine.

UNRWA has announced the closure of its health center in Ain Al-Hilweh camp and the central clinic in Beirut so they can be sterilized.



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# Timing of Barzani's visit to Turkey is telling, experts say

Mon, 2020-09-07 23:35

ANKARA: Turkey has sent a clear signal of its intentions to challenge France's ambitions in the region by holding meetings with the Iraqi Kurdish leader Nechirvan Barzani on Sept. 4.

The timing of Barzani's visit was telling, just two days after French President Emmanuel Macron visited Baghdad to show his support for Iraqi sovereignty. Turkey and France are becoming regional rivals in their diverging moves in the Eastern Mediterranean and the battle for offshore gas rights.

Barzani, the president of Iraq's Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) led a delegation for a series of meetings.

"Both sides stressed the desire to develop relations between the Kurdistan Region and Turkey especially in enhancing trade volume and joint economic coordination. They voiced the significance of Turkish investment across various sectors in the Kurdistan Region," the Kurdistan Region Presidency said on Friday.

The oil deal between KRG and Turkey allowing exports to the Turkish market has triggered conflict between Baghdad and Erbil over oil revenue-sharing mechanisms.

According to Iraqi Kurdish media, Barzani conveyed the Iraqi prime minister's message to Erdogan requesting the withdrawal of Turkish troops from Iraq and sharing the details of a bilateral oil deal with Baghdad. Ankara has not commented on the outcome of the visit.

Samuel Ramani, a Middle East analyst at the University of Oxford, thinks that Turkey's relationship with Iraqi Kurdistan is independent from its military hostilities toward Syrian Kurds and also from the broader Turkey-Iraq relationship.

"Engagement between Barzani and Turkey is not overly surprising. The important factor is France. France under Macron has tried to reprise its role as an arbiter between Iraq and KRG. Paris sought to capitalize on Turkey's recent cross-border strikes in Iraq, which were poorly received by Baghdad and viewed as a violation of sovereignty, as an opportunity to advance this historic agenda," he told Arab News.

**Turkey's relationship with Iraqi Kurdistan is independent from its military hostilities toward Syrian Kurds and also from the broader**

## **Turkey-Iraq relationship.**

**Samuel Ramani**, Analyst at the University of Oxford

According to Ramani, France hoped that diplomatic engagement – with three separate meetings between Iraqi and French officials this month – would bring the KRG and Iraq into its fold and further away from Turkey.

“But the KRG has long prized its foreign policy independence, balancing between various actors. The KRG praised Qassem Soleimani after his death and cultivating ties with Iran, as well as Israel, and is now emulating its Israel-Iran balancing strategy with France and Turkey,” he said.

However, Barzani’s visit aroused criticism from the Kurdish community in Turkey for focusing on strengthening trade relations rather than contributing to the settlement of the country’s longstanding Kurdish issue.

Ankara launched a cross-border operation to northern Iraq in mid-June against the hideouts of the outlawed Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK), which infuriated Baghdad, while Barzani was recently threatened by the PKK due to his relations with Ankara.

Abdulla Hawez, an independent researcher from Erbil, said: “The visit appears to have been planned abruptly following Macron’s visit; it is a clear message from Erdogan that Iraqi Kurdish leaders will stay within his orbit and that they cannot be used by France in its regional feud against Turkey.”

Bekir Aydogan, a Turkish expert on Iraqi Kurdistan, agreed.

“Considering French President Macron’s Baghdad meeting with Iraqi officials, including Barzani, and Macron’s emphasis on Iraq’s sovereignty during the visit, it is not far-fetched to say that Turkey, by hosting Barzani in Ankara, wanted to remind France of its close relations with the KRG,” he said.

The Turkish Foreign Ministry also drew harsh criticism for hiding the Kurdish flag in social media posts about the meeting in order to satisfy government’s nationalistic coalition partner MHP.

While the photographs shared by Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu on Twitter, featuring only Turkish and Iraqi flags, pictures posted by Barzani showed a Kurdish flag as well as.

For Aydogan, Barzani’s close ties with Ankara and his opposition to PKK’s presence in KRG indicate that Turkey’s hold on KRG is strong.

“Despite the anti-Kurdish sentiment in Turkish domestic policy, as seen in the debates over the presence of the official KRG flag during the meeting, this visit reminded Ankara that Iraqi Kurdistan Region is still an indispensable actor in the region,” he said.



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## [Armed clash erupts at Beirut's Tariq Al-Jadida district](#)

Author:

Mon, 2020-09-07 23:30

CAIRO: Several injuries have been reported after an armed clash erupted in Beirut's Tariq Al-Jadida neighborhood on Monday evening. The Lebanese army deployed to the area and cordoned off Karam Darwish street where the clash took place, the state National News Agency said. Machine guns were used in the clash, a correspondent for the agency said. The injured were rushed to hospital as army attempted to restore security.



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