

[Iraq to reopen airports on July 23, lift curfew after Eid Al-Adha](#)

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CAIRO: Iraq will reopen its airports for scheduled international traffic on July 23, the Higher Committee for Health and Public Safety said on Thursday, after suspending regular commercial flights in March because of the novel coronavirus outbreak.

The country will lift a nationwide night-time curfew after the Muslim holiday of Eid Al-Adha and reopen restaurants and malls as long as they implement preventative health and social distancing measures, the committee added in a statement.

It did not provide further details on flights. Some international flights have left Baghdad in recent weeks with passengers needing prior approval to travel.



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How technology is keeping elderly Egyptians safe during coronavirus crisis

Author:

Thu, 2020-07-16 21:17

CAIRO: Once upon a time, a person could simply get in their car, pick up groceries, and go visit their parents without a worry in the world. This now feels like a distant memory and will remain so until a permanent solution to the COVID-19 crisis emerges.

Nowadays, responsible citizens heed the advice to keep their distance from others at all times, especially from those most vulnerable to the killer virus – the elderly and individuals with pre-existing health conditions.

But as people exercise caution and distance themselves from loved ones, another problem presents itself: How to make sure that their parents get what they need. They cannot put off eating and taking medications until further notice.

The best people can do is leave whatever their parents need at the doorstep, but what if the children live in another country and cannot board a plane to get home given that most flights are grounded? The last thing they would want is for their parents to go out shopping for necessities, exposing themselves to risk.



This was the situation facing Anas Naguib, an Egyptian software engineer and co-founder of NioTek – a tech startup providing 4.0 industry solutions.

When airports around the world began shutting down in mid-March, Naguib was on a work trip to Saudi Arabia, unable to make it back to Cairo. His primary concern was making sure that his ageing parents received what they needed without too much exposure to risk.

After miraculously finding a way to get back to Egypt, Naguib quickly learnt that many people around him shared the same concern about their parents, particularly those who live outside the country. It was then that he came up with the concept of Sanad – an application connecting the elderly and special-needs individuals with volunteers in their area.

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“We fully developed the application in less than a month, 25 days to be exact,” Naguib said. “Many young people are seeking volunteer work, and the elderly and special-needs individuals could use the help in such troubling times. So, we came up with this platform to connect them and make it easier for everyone.”

As Naguib and his team worked to develop the app in the shortest time possible, they came across a competition organized by the Cairo Angels, a prominent angel investment network.

The idea was to fund the project with the greatest potential to help Egyptians during the COVID-19 outbreak with 100,000 Egyptian pounds (\$6,000). Sanad ended up winning the award, paving the way for the team to continue developing the potentially life-saving platform.

Fully aware that most elderly people are not keen on new technologies, Naguib and his team worked to make Sanad as user-friendly as possible.



“It’s a very simple app that’s based on voice notes to help the elderly or special-needs individuals use it easily,” Naguib said.

“There are two request options – groceries and medicine or emergency requests. We don’t share contact numbers between either side, but rather give them a chat window, which is modelled after the WhatsApp’s interface to make it look familiar so that they can communicate, confirm the order, maybe even send pictures of the exact products they need after a request has been placed and accepted by a volunteer.”

Naguib added: “One of our biggest barriers so far is building up the volunteering network – so far we have 50 volunteers across different areas, but we can’t launch services in any given area unless we have at least 10-15 volunteers so that we can meet the demand in that area.”

To that end, he has been in negotiations with a number of potential partners to launch a credit-based reward mechanism for volunteers. The more hours they put in, the more credit they get, which they can later redeem for discounts and promotions for other services and products.

Note: This report is being published by Arab News as a partner of the Middle East Exchange, which was launched by the Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum Global Initiatives to reflect the vision of the UAE prime minister and ruler of Dubai to explore the possibility of changing the status of the Arab region.



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A disinfection robot built by students combats COVID-19 in Lebanon
Technology is key to improving women's lives post COVID-19

[Minister: No investors for Lebanon's ailing power sector](#)

Author:

By BASSEM MROUE | AP

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Thu, 2020-07-16 15:57

BEIRUT: Lebanon's worsening economic crisis, which culminated with the tiny nation defaulting on its debt this year, is making it increasingly difficult to attract investors for the country's ailing electricity sector, the energy

minister said Thursday.

This in turn makes it harder to reform the state-run sector as required by the International Monetary Fund and also for international donors to provide Lebanon with financial assistance, Raymond Ghajar said. Still, he said the government is working on reforming the highly subsidized sector and has made important steps in that direction recently.

Ghajar spoke to The Associated Press Thursday amid an electricity crisis that has plunged much of the country in darkness, adding to the gloom of a deepening economic and financial crisis in the country.

The cuts, stretching in some cases to 20 hours a day, have led generator providers to shut down their machines for several hours a day to ration existing fuel. As a result, traffic lights in Beirut have been turned off and hospitals have struggled to make sure their surgeries and other work can continue without interruption.

Blackouts have been a fixture of life in this Mediterranean country since the 1975-1990 civil war, with successive governments failing to agree on a permanent solution for the chronic electricity failures, largely because of profiteering, endemic corruption and mismanagement.

The energy sector has been a huge drain on state coffers for decades.

The electricity company makes annual losses of up to \$1.5 billion, which have cost the state more than \$40 billion over the past decades. Reforming the sector has been a key demand of international donors, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund.

Ghajar said some steps toward reform have been taken, such as last week's naming of a new board of directors for Electricite du Liban, or EDL, the state monopoly. An electricity regulatory authority should be appointed before the end of the year, he said, though he did not mention any concrete steps for how the government plans to overhaul the sector, including whether it plans to improve bill collection.

"Lebanon can no longer afford to subsidize its people," said Ghajar, a Lebanese-Canadian, referring to consumer prices that have not changed since 1996. "This is an industrial service that needs to be paid for fairly for everybody."

Lebanese people, however, already pay for generators that provide backup power through the daily outages, and electricity prices cannot be increased before the state is able to provide round-the-clock electricity.

Ghajar painted a grim picture of Lebanon's current trajectory but said that a deal with the IMF would help regain some confidence that might lure investors once again.

The government had turned to power plant manufacturers, including General Electric and Siemens for building power plants. China has also expressed interest. But Ghajar said the country's myriad problems make it difficult for the government to comply with the conditions that would be required by private investors.

"After the default, this became practically impossible," said Ghajar referring to Lebanon's first ever default in March to pay back its debt that stood at \$90 billion – nearly 170% of its GDP. Almost half of the country's massive debt was caused by the electricity sector.

"You know, nobody, in my opinion, is going to come and build you a \$500 million power plant and say, I don't want anything from you, just sign here," Ghajar said.

He blamed wide power cuts over the past month on two faulty fuel shipments involving the Algerian state energy firm Sonatrach, which forced Lebanon to use – and ration – the reserves it has.

Ghajar said he expects the power cuts to start easing soon, with more fuel shipments on their way.



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A disinfection robot built by students combats COVID-19 in Lebanon 'Hunger crimes' on the rise in crisis-hit Lebanon

[The future of learning: Pandemic gives rise to homeschooling in the UAE](#)

Thu, 2020-07-16 21:10

DUBAI: Students in the UAE are preparing to return to schools in September after a six-month shutdown because of COVID-19.

But for many parents, the unprecedented period has sparked an interest in alternative ways to educate their children while keeping them safe from the virus.

One alternative is homeschooling – a form of education where children are taught at home, usually by parents, without following the rigid structure of traditional schooling methods.

Michaela Cooper, founder of Dubai and Northern Emirates Homeschooling Association (Duneha), said there is an increase in the number of parents interested in homeschooling. She said it is likely linked to the pandemic.

“We’ve had a major increase in individuals interested in homeschooling. I think that it is directly related to the pandemic,” she told Arab News. “We have thousands, literally hundreds per week joining the Facebook page. The majority of them said they have withdrawn their children from school and that they will be homeschooling them.”

When schools were shut in March, education transferred to online platforms. Institutions scrambled to create virtual classrooms and keep the academic year on track.

But Cooper, who has been homeschooling her children for a combined 28 years, said distance learning has not been effective for many parents, pushing them to rethink the way they want their kids to receive their education.

“I’ve spoken to hundreds of parents who have said they’ve seen how distance learning looks,” she said.

Although financial issues were given as a reason by interested parents, Cooper said it is not always the cause.

“I’ve met a lot who could easily afford private schools but have removed their children from them simply because they feel like they would rather take homeschooling on,” she said.

“Everyone has their own specific reasons, but a good number of them have been financial or the fact that they weren’t necessarily pleased with what they saw with online learning,” she added.

Cooper was excited at the spike in interest, as she talked about how homeschooling could offer better results for children.

“The biggest takeaway was the child-centered aspect. It wasn’t myself or any other adult insisting that this is the path you must take, these are subjects you have to take. You must do this or that,” she said.

“Give children the freedom to learn the things they want to learn and the subjects that they find interesting, and to take the path that will ultimately be their own,” Cooper, known in the community as Aminah, said.

Ramesh Mudgal, a Dubai-based school principal, admitted it was a “learning curve” for both parents and students, who suddenly had to adapt to a new

environment because of the pandemic.

“There were parents and students who were not very comfortable with the usage of live webinars, for example Zoom, and the technical aspect of it. There was a little bit of a challenge, but everyone has understood it’s an unprecedented situation. They all have to adapt to this,” Mudgal, who heads the Dubai branch of Global Indian International School, told Arab News.

Mudgal acknowledged the impact of the pandemic on education and stressed the importance of continuity.

“It has impacted everything. It has impacted how lessons are delivered. It has impacted how the teachers had to adopt everything and find out newer ways of engaging the students, ensuring there is collaboration,” he said.

When asked whether he thought homeschooling could become the norm after the pandemic, Mudgal said it was unlikely.

“In my opinion, and based on what I have read from international journals and education networks, and everywhere else, I do not see any significant increase in the number of parents opting for homeschooling,” he said.

Mudgal said homeschooling could be challenging for some parents because “it requires a whole lot of preparation – that means the amount of time and the amount of effort which parents have to put into homeschooling a child.”

But many parents do not see it as a challenge, including Cooper and long-time homeschooling father Jazeer Jamal, who has noticed an increase in the number of parents asking him about it.

“I have had several parents contact me just to look into homeschooling or to know more about how we have been managing to teach at home for all these years,” he said.

Jamal said the homeschooling community in the UAE is growing “in the number of organizations, chat groups, events and so on,” amid the pandemic.

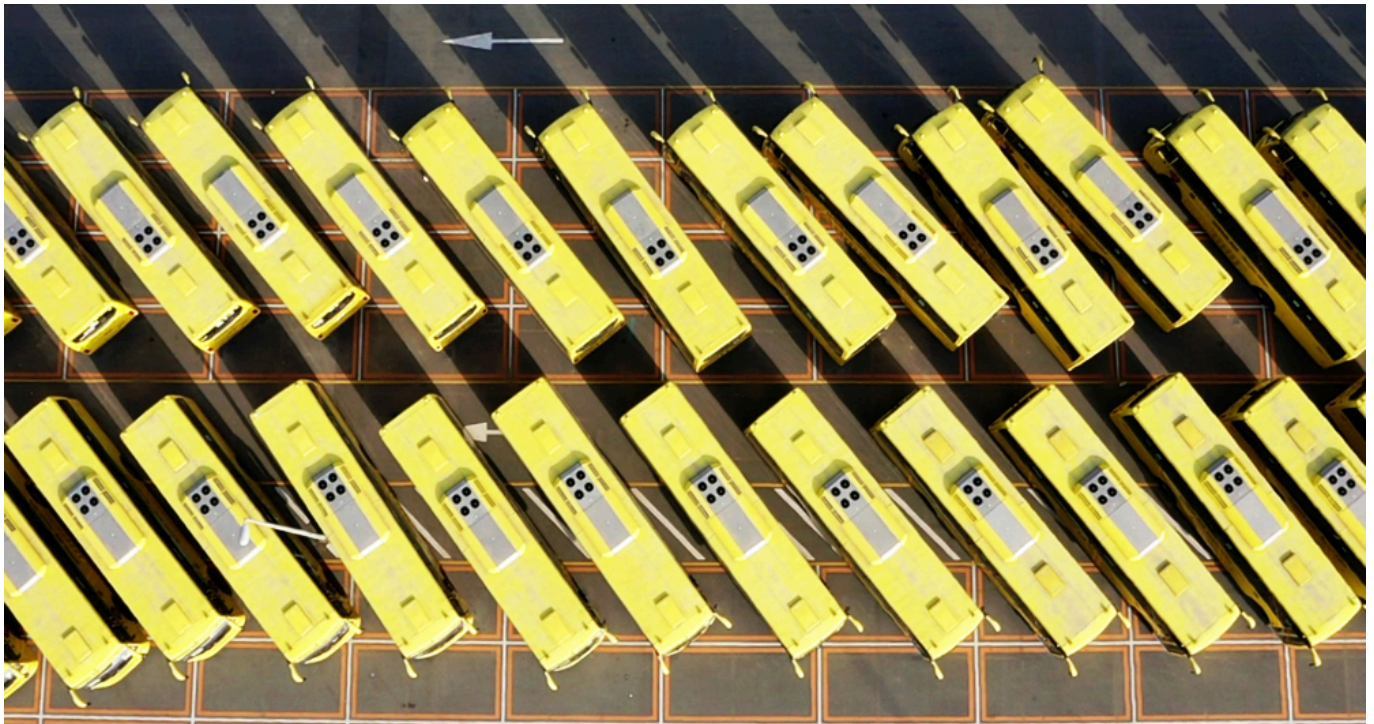
The 37-year-old Sharjah-based entrepreneur homeschooled his three children from the age of three, and has been active in promoting homeschooling in the country, where he said there is recognition from the government.

Responding to criticism about the social aspect of home education, both Jamal and Cooper said it was the biggest myth about homeschooling, with the pandemic demonstrating how social interaction could still be done without the physical presence of a traditional school.

“The difference between the socialization of commercial schooling and homeschooling is choice. Being parents, we play a big role in creating a safe social environment for our children and providing the required emotional support to interact with their peers,” Jamal said.

The pandemic has opened up important discussions about education, not just in the UAE, but globally. It is up to parents to decide how their children

should be educated, whether from the comfort of home or traditional classrooms.



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UAE extends distance learning until end of academic year UAE closes schools and colleges to combat the spread of coronavirus

[**A disinfection robot built by students combats COVID-19 in Lebanon**](#)

Author:

Thu, 2020-07-16 20:26

BEIRUT: Sanitation and good hygiene are the best defenses against coronavirus, but constant cleaning and disinfection puts cleaners and anyone they come into contact with at risk of the disease. Enter the robots.

Two Lebanese engineering graduate students are helping their country's fight against the pandemic by developing a low-cost automaton that has already been deployed in hospitals and homes across the country.

Ali Mohamed Hassan, one of the brains behind the project, said: "The project

aims to reduce risks to humans through technological solutions. The idea is to sterilize infected areas and surfaces, such as hospitals, endemic neighborhoods and isolation rooms, to prevent doctors, health workers and volunteers from being infected.”

Hassan and his classmate Abdul Latif Atwi, both 23-year-old students at the Lebanese International University, built the robot earlier this year. The prototype holds between 15 to 25 liters of disinfectant and can spray an area of three square meters. The robot is powered by three 12 volt batteries and can be controlled remotely from a distance of up to one kilometer.

Atwi said the robot is a rework of the duo’s spring 2019 senior project, an agricultural pesticide atomizer.

The new prototype took three months and cost about \$700 to construct, with \$100 going toward the purchase of a pump that was imported from Kuwait, where Hassan works with a mechanical engineering company.

They have already put their invention to work in cleaning wards and operating rooms at Nabih Berri Hospital, as well as in 25 homes. The service costs between \$50 and \$75 depending on the size of the job. People reach out to them for help with disinfection through their Facebook page.

“We focus on closed areas to avoid human contact, but optimum performance absolutely depends on human input so all surfaces within an indoor space are cleaned,” Hassan said.

The World Health Organization does not recommend indiscriminate spraying of disinfectant in indoor spaces, based on a study which found spraying ineffective in removing contaminants outside of direct spray zones.

“That’s why you need a human being to operate the robot, so that every surface is sanitized, including those most at risk,” he said.

The duo are currently marketing their creation to other hospitals and hope to build more robots. They also want to equip their invention with a thermal scanner to detect people who may have developed a fever from COVID-19.

“The next-generation robot will do two jobs,” Atwi said. However, the pair face a problem.

“The thermal camera we want costs about \$10,000, so it will take us some time to raise that amount,” Atwi added.

Hassan and Atwi have not actively sought to raise funds for the project but hope to be able to bootstrap the project themselves, although they said they would welcome external investment.

“If we are able to expand our team, we can build more robots,” Atwi said.

The pair have had their fair share of challenges getting to this point, Hassan said, adding that public attitudes can be a significant disincentive.

“In our country, people don’t encourage you to work on such projects. You’ll be mocked for even attempting to try and solve a problem,” he said.

“In addition, there are few domains available to help budding inventors. Luckily, we had the support of our university faculty. Without them, we wouldn’t have been able to break through,” he added.

Either way, their story is inspirational. What items have you got sitting around that could be transformed to help fight the pandemic?

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