

[IMF approves \\$5.2 bn, 1-year loan program for Egypt](#)

Author:

AFP

ID:

1593201538789268700

Fri, 2020-06-26 19:52

WASHINGTON: The International Monetary Fund threw a lifeline to Egypt on Friday, saying its executive board approved a new \$5.2 billion, 12-month Stand-By Arrangement that aims to help the country cope with the coronavirus pandemic and plug budget and balance-of-payments shortfalls.

In a statement, the IMF said the program “would also help the authorities preserve the achievements made over the past four years, support health and social spending to protect vulnerable groups, and advance a set of key structural reforms.”



Main category:

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Top-ranked Egyptian squash player Raneem El Welily ends her career
Egypt's Rameda gets requests to export COVID-19 drug

[30,000 Muslims pray in Al-Aqsa Mosque while sticking to social distancing](#)

Fri, 2020-06-26 22:41

AMMAN, Jordan: More than 30,000 Muslims attended Friday prayers at Al-Aqsa Mosque while respecting stricter health conditions imposed by the Jerusalem Waqf Department.

Sheikh Azzam Khatib, director general of the Jordanian Waqf Department in Jerusalem, said that the stricter conditions were brought in because of the uptick in the number of confirmed coronavirus cases in Jerusalem and in other Palestinian towns.

“We issued numerous statements, videos and other announcements telling worshippers that they must bring their own prayer mat and mask and that we will implement a strict physical separation,” he told Arab News.

Khatib said that the Health Ministry’s announcement of 72 coronavirus cases in the Jerusalem area was very disturbing. “We were worried seeing the numbers of those contracting the virus while many events, including weddings and other public gatherings, were being held without any adherence to basic anti-COVID-19 health requirements.”

He added that the Jerusalem Waqf did not want to be held responsible for the spread of the deadly disease.

“We take our responsibilities seriously and we don’t want to be blamed for facilitating the spread of the virus. We also don’t want to give an excuse to the Israelis to prevent worshippers from accessing the mosque again.”

Khalil Assali, a member of the Jerusalem Waqf Council, said that the waqf director and staff had no choice but to strictly follow the Health Ministry’s requirements.

“We noticed an increase in visits to pray in Al-Aqsa from Palestinian citizens of Israel and we have been worried about the potential of the spread of the virus, especially during the entry and exit of worshippers when they crowd around the gates and alleys,” he told Arab News.

Waqf staff as well as volunteers were deployed all over the Haram Al-Sharif, which is a UNESCO World Heritage Site, to ensure strict adherence to the waqf department’s orders.

Wedding parties have been banned in all governorates across the West Bank, the Palestinian government said last Tuesday, because the number of infections were rising.

“Due to the increase in the number of coronavirus infections during the past 24 hours and in order to avoid the spread of the epidemic ... With regret, the government has decided to ban wedding celebrations in all governorates in order to keep you and your community safe from any harm,” it said.

The Palestinian government ended a two-month lockdown on May 25, allowing all sectors to reopen.



Main category:

[Middle-East](#)

Tags:

[Coronavirus](#)

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From Jeddah to Jerusalem, the faithful return to their mosques Jerusalem's Al-Aqsa mosque compound reopens after more than two months

[How coronavirus crisis has changed business in the Middle East](#)

Fri, 2020-06-26 20:00

CAIRO: While countries in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) have responded unevenly to the coronavirus pandemic, a majority imposed aggressive temporary lockdowns on businesses and people's movement.

Containment efforts, paired with a global economic slowdown, supply chain disruptions and a drop in crude oil prices, have had grave implications for regional enterprises.

In anticipation of prolonged pain, some MENA businesses have reacted quickly and creatively to this economic turmoil. Here is a look at some of the innovations that swiftly took hold.

*** Fine dining delivered to your home**

Luxury dining is perhaps the hardest-hit segment of the food and beverage industry. Operators were quick to switch to delivery and takeout.

"High-end fine dining restaurants such as Coya (and) Zuma, amongst others, have pivoted in this way, and it's inspiring to see restaurants quickly move to a completely new business model," said Ryan Andrews, marketing director of Eat App, a Bahraini startup providing an electronic system for restaurant reservations.

Chatfood, a platform offering a commission-free direct-to-consumer delivery option for restaurants, witnessed a surge in new clients from the region, said co-founder Ben Mouflard.



(Image: EAT App)

*** The rise of e-commerce**

E-commerce in the region has been growing at a cumulative rate of 25 percent since 2014, and online-only retailers have long captured more than 90 percent of this market.

To mitigate the deleterious effects of the lockdown on luxury retailers relying on in-store sales, Dubai Mall launched Noon.com, enabling them to sell and deliver products through the virtual store.

Dubai Airport Free Zone (DAFZA) is accelerating its efforts to launch Dubai Commercitiy, a 2.1 million sq. feet haven for e-commerce businesses with spaces for offices and logistics.

"Given the traction witnessed by clients (going) online due to the pandemic, we are on track for the scheduled opening by the end of 2020," said Mohammed Al-Zarooni, DAFZA director-general.

READ MORE: [A UAE-based startup addresses gaps in women's medical care](#)

*** Mobile banking and e-wallets**

A surge in the use of mobile banking and e-wallets has been observed across the region. Starting in March, Egyptian banks – including National Bank of Egypt, Banque Misr and BLOM Bank – have increased their electronic service capabilities.

National Bank of Oman encouraged users to make contactless payments. Fintech startups have been capitalizing on this trend with the launch of new services, among them PayBy's mobile payment app in the UAE.

"The future of banking is not digital. The future of banking is customer experience, and digital is a tool enabling customer experience," said Ali Khan, financial services director of PwC Middle East.



(Photo: AFP)

*** Virtual music concerts**

No-crowd live-streamed music concerts have become hugely popular, with a tipping point reached over the Eid Al-Fitr holiday.

The Egyptian Culture Ministry's YouTube channel started live-streaming music concerts in March. By the end of May, it had added more than 1 million new subscribers.

Supported by major production companies, several popstars from the region, including Egyptian Tamer Hosny and Saudi Mohamed Abdo, performed to an online audience.



(Photo: AFP)

* **The shift toward gift cards**

Entertainment businesses had to innovate to keep the cash flowing as many countries enforced curfews.

With the entertainment market shut down, companies have been promoting gift cards to stay afloat.

Vouchers and gift cards for cinemas and restaurants offer customers future discounts once restrictions are lifted.

“We’ve helped restaurants market their vouchers” via a dedicated marketplace, said Andrews of Eat App.

* **Telemedicine gets a real-life test**

Based on a recent report by Research and Markets, the digital health care market in Saudi Arabia will grow by 8.8 percent in 2020 to \$16.1 billion.

This growth is fueled by hospitals’ rapid adoption of telehealth services to cater to non-urgent medical needs while people’s movement is restricted.

As part of its response to COVID-19, Saudi Arabia has required that health insurance companies cover the costs of telehealth consultations.



(Photo: AFP)

*** Virtual guided tours**

Tourism was the first sector impacted by the pandemic, and is expected to be the last to recover.

Egypt's Tourism and Antiquities Ministry launched online virtual 3D tours of ancient tombs and monasteries.

The Contemporary Art Platform in Kuwait and the Akkasah Center for Photography in Abu Dhabi are among the region's art galleries currently offering online tours of their collection.

*** Drive-in cinemas are back**

Drive-in cinemas are coming back to help film lovers in the region get their entertainment fix without breaking social distancing rules.

Dubai welcomed its latest drive-in cinema in May on the rooftop of Mall of the Emirates, with a capacity of 75 cars.

It was followed by one at Dubai Mall, and Cairo's Mall of Arabia has also launched its own version.



(Photo: Courtesy of VOX Cinemas)

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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Saudi Arabia back in business as coronavirus curfews endA UAE-based startup addresses gaps in women's medical care

[A UAE-based startup addresses gaps in women's medical care](#)

Fri, 2020-06-26 19:02

DUBAI: Investment in the Middle Eastern health care sector is booming. Over \$144 billion will be plowed into medical facilities across the Middle East and North Africa by the end of 2020, with Gulf Cooperation Council nations contributing more than half of the total expenditure, according to Al-Masah Capital.

But while much attention is being paid to the region's general rise in non-communicable diseases, more focus must be given to female-specific health

issues, says Sophie Smith, founder of UAE-based startup Nabta Health.

“Women’s health has been under-researched and underfunded since time memorial,” she said. “So much global testing is still done only on men, which means women still get adverse reactions to medicines, for example.”

Nabta, which she dubs a “hybrid health care” company, aims to address gaps in local women’s health care, and to make affordable and accessible health care available to the next generation of women.

According to Smith, a new model of health care is required, “one that improves clinical outcomes by removing some of the inherent inefficiencies in the health care ecosystem.”

Nabta says it uses a combination of digital solutions and cutting-edge research to slash time and expenses in treating regional female health care issues.

The social enterprise also supports women by providing hundreds of health-related articles on its online portal www.nabtahealth.com and social media support groups in Arabic and English.

Nabta’s business model is based around care pathway models. Its first pathway concerns fertility and enables the diagnoses of polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS), a condition that Smith says is responsible for around 70 percent of local infertility.

The Nabta solution for PCOS incorporates a pay-as-you-go virtual consultation and a 48-hour couriered blood test.

“We can diagnose in three months rather than years, and for significantly less than it would cost in a clinic. Our solution affords women more privacy and autonomy,” Smith said.

SOPHIE SMITH’S TIPS FOR INNOVATORS

- * You do not need to reinvent the wheel.
- * You have to be passionate about your business idea or you will run out of steam. Try to solve a personal problem or something that resonates with you personally.
- * If you want to make a lot of money and help millions of people, you will need to find other people who are operating in the same space and believe in impactful business.
- * Get a co-founder who has a complementary skill set. A co-founder with a tech background is a big plus.
- * Make sure you get a good advisory board in place and ensure they make time for you.

In the coming years, Nabta hopes to deliver care pathways for ailments such as endometriosis, gestational diabetes, cardiovascular diseases and reproductive cancers, as well as PCOS aftercare.

Concerned by what she views as a “provider-led and provider-centric” health system in the UAE, Smith stresses that Nabta is an independent company, focused on bettering women’s health care.

“The local health care system is very commercially driven. A lot of the laboratories and health care providers are given kickbacks. Patients often get given tests they don’t need because of commissions,” she said.

“We don’t take kickbacks. We’d happily see that aspect of the health care system eliminated forever.”

Nabta, which is headquartered in Sharjah Innovation Park, has partnered with the University of Sharjah to help expedite its research and development ambitions.

“Our plan this year is to sign some joint ventures so we can more effectively innovate on a pathway-by-pathway basis and really become more disruptive in women’s health care,” Smith said.

The social enterprise is also focused on closing its seeding round, before launching its Series A round in June.

Women’s health has been under-researched and underfunded since time memorial.

Sophie Smith

Smith, who initially set up Nabta with \$110,000 of combined co-founder funding, says she wants to build a “trusted global leader in women’s health.”

She added: “We want to acquire companies that can help us add to our services. The more money we make, the more people we can help.”

Currently, Nabta employs 21 people across the region, including five developers based in Egypt.

“In this region, there’s a huge amount of growth potential for female-focused hybrid health care solutions,” Smith said.

“We eventually will export globally, but for now we’re very much focused on the Middle East,” she added.

“Nabta, which means blossoming plant in Arabic, is here to support women’s health care as they blossom throughout their lifetime.”

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Startup of the Week: Cura – Telehealth platform for consultations

[Seawater seeping into decaying oil tanker off Yemen coast](#)

Author:

By MAGGIE MICHAEL | AP

ID:

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Fri, 2020-06-26 14:13

CAIRO: The United Nations said an abandoned oil tanker moored off the coast of Yemen loaded with more than 1 million barrels of crude oil is at risk of rupture or exploding, causing massive environmental damage to Red Sea marine life, desalination factories and international shipping routes.

Meanwhile, Houthi militants who control the area where the ship is moored have denied UN inspectors access to the vessel. Internal documents obtained by The Associated Press shows that seawater has entered the engine compartment of the tanker, which hasn't been maintained for over five years, causing damage to the pipelines and increasing the risk of sinking. Rust has covered parts of the tanker and the inert gas that prevents the tanks from gathering inflammable gases, has leaked out. Experts say maintenance is no longer possible because the damage to the ship is irreversible.

For years, the UN has been trying to send inspectors to assess the damage aboard the vessel known as the FS0 Safer and look for ways to secure the tanker by unloading the oil and pulling the ship to safety.

But one European diplomat, a Yemeni government official and the tanker's company owner said that Houthi militia have resisted. The diplomat said the militia are treating the vessel as a "deterrent like having a nuclear weapon." All three individuals spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss the subject with a reporter.

"They do say that openly to the UN, 'We like to have this as something to hold against the international community if attacked,'" the diplomat said. "Houthis are definitely responsible for failure of the UN to look at the ship."

Money is also an issue, the diplomat said, adding that the Houthis initially were demanding millions of dollars in return for the oil stored in the tanker. The UN is trying to reach an arrangement where money could be used to pay workers and employees at Yemen's Red Sea ports, the diplomat added.

Some experts, however, criticize both the Houthis and the UN for failing to fully understand the magnitude of the crisis with the abandoned ship.

Ian Ralby, founder of I.R. Consilium, who specializes in maritime and resource security, told the AP that UN's efforts to send a team to assess the ship is "futile." What the vessel needs is a salvage team, he said.

"It's real shame that they wasted so much money and time in this futile operation," said Ralby. "If you are taking these years to get a simple team to assess, we will not have a second chance to salvage," he added.

Ralby, who has written extensively about the tanker, told the AP that amid declining oil prices the cost spent on cleaning up the environmental damage from an explosion or leakage will be much more than the millions worth of oil on the ship.

But the Houthis have refused to back down from their demands.

The Iranian-backed Houthi militia are in control of the western Red Sea ports, including Ras Issa, 6 kilometers (3.7 miles) from where the FS0 Safer tanker has been moored since the 1980s.

The floating tanker is a Japanese-made vessel built in the 1970s and sold to the Yemeni government in 1980s to store for export up to 3 million barrels pumped from oil fields in Marib, a province in eastern Yemen. The ship is 360 meters (1,181 feet) long with 34 storage tanks.

A senior official at the state-owned oil company in charge of the tanker, said because of a shrinking operational budget, which used to be around 20 million dollars a year before the war, the company could no longer afford to

purchase fuel needed to run the boilers on the ship. The boilers are needed to power generators that, among other things, keep an inert gas that prevents explosions flowing. The tanker needs 11,000 tons of the fuel, which cost about 8 million dollars each year.

"After the stoppage of the boilers the strong majority of the equipment and the machines of the tanker stopped because they all depend on steam power," the company official said. That includes the machines that power the ventilation system, which reduces humidity and prevents corrosion, he said. Over the past two years, the Yemeni government in exile, the UN, and western diplomats have been sounding the alarm and putting pressure on Houthis to secure the tanker. The militants initially agreed to let inspectors examine the tanker but later backtracked.

The more delays in reaching a solution to the vessel, the more dangers it poses, Sharaf Eddin said.

The British ambassador to Yemen urged the Houthis on Friday to give UN inspectors access to the vessel "right now."

Michael Aron said that 63,000 fishermen will lose their livelihoods, the crops of 3.25 million Yemeni farmers will be devastated and the port of Hodeidah will be closed if the vessel ruptures or explodes.

A recent internal government memo obtained by the AP shows that earlier this month a diving team was dispatched by the state-run oil company that owns the tanker to seal holes in the ship that have allowed seawater to leak into the engine room.

The divers were able to make repairs, but it remain unclear if the work will hold, according to the July 13 report.

"We believe that the plugs/seals that were installed to prevent the entry of seawater into the engine room space will not withstand/hold long," the report read.

An earlier letter dated Oct. 2019 sent by the Yemeni minister of oil – who is affiliated with the Saudi-backed government – to the prime minister, and seen by the AP, found other problems with the tanker.

"Rust has covered some parts of the tanker along with equipment, fire distinguishing system stopped working, and what is more dangerous is that the gas which was covering the oil inside the tanks has leaked out. It was used to protect the tankers from exploding," the letter read.

The oil minister's letter recommended three different approaches to deal with the tanker: make repairs, pump the oil to another ship, or to pull the tanker away and safely unload it in another port.

The minister wrote that because of the "collapsing condition" of the vessel, the best solution is to pull it away to another port.

"We are notifying you about this dangerous situation to do your best and to get Yemen and the region out from such environmental dangers," he wrote.

The letter came months after the UN's projects arm, known as UNOPS, put out a tender to hire an international agency to inspect the vessel after an initial agreement with Houthis.

The UN hired a team of experts and had them standing by in Djibouti. The AP obtained a copy of the tender letter and documents showing the experts' proposed inspection program and a list of equipment needed, including gas

detector and oil sampling kits.

But the Houthis backed out of the agreement before the repair crew could be sent to Yemen.

Mark Lowcock, the UN humanitarian chief, told the UN Security Council last year that the UN assessment team was ready to be deployed but “the necessary permits remain pending with the Ansar Allah authorities” in reference to Houthis.

“I would just like to note that this is additionally frustrating when one recalls that the same authorities wrote to the United Nations early last year requesting assistance with the tanker and promising to facilitate our work,” he added.



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Pirates attack tanker Stolt Apa off Yemen Disaster warning over 'ticking time bomb' Yemen tanker