

Algeria escalates France dispute with flight ban

Mon, 2021-10-04 00:16

PARIS: The diplomatic discord between Algeria and France deepened Sunday after Algiers banned French military planes from its airspace, its latest response to a row over visas and critical comments from President Emmanuel Macron.

France's jets regularly fly over the former French colony to reach the Sahel region of western Africa, where its soldiers are helping to battle jihadist insurgents as part of its Barkhane operation.

"This morning when we filed flight plans for two planes, we learned that the Algerians had stopped flights over their territory by French military planes," said an army spokesman, Col. Pascal Ianni.

He said the decision had "slightly impacted" supply flights but "does not affect our operations" in the Sahel.

But the move heightened tensions that had already flared on Saturday when the Algerian government recalled its ambassador to France, citing "inadmissible interference" in its affairs.

According to French and Algerian media reports, Macron told descendants of figures in Algeria's 1954-62 war for independence that the country was ruled by a "political-military system" that had "totally re-written" its history.

"You can see that the Algerian system is tired, it has been weakened by the Hirak," he added, referring to the pro-democracy movement that forced Abdelaziz Bouteflika from power in 2019 after two decades at the helm.

Macron's office did not deny the reported comments, but said the president was discussing the war in Algeria with French youths and answering questions, not giving an official interview.

Ianni said there had been no official notification of the flight ban, and the French Foreign Ministry, contacted by AFP, declined to comment.

Last year, the Algerian government criminalized the dissemination of what it considers "false news" that harms national unity.

Saturday's ambassador recall was the second time it had done so, having taken a similar response in May 2020 after French media broadcast a documentary about the Hirak movement.

Algerian officials have cracked down on efforts to revive the pro-democracy protests, and rights groups say dozens of people linked to it have been jailed in recent months.

Algiers was also angered last week after France said it would sharply reduce the number of visas it grants to citizens of Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia.

Paris said the decision had been made necessary by the former colonies' failure to do enough to allow illegal migrants in France to be returned.

When a French court denies a person's visa request, authorities must still secure a consular travel pass from his or her home country in order to forcibly expel them, a document that Paris says Algiers, Rabat and Tunis are largely refusing to provide.

Macron has reportedly ordered the number of visa deliveries to Algeria and Morocco to be halved from 2020 levels, and by a third for Tunisia.

The Algerian Foreign Ministry summoned France's ambassador Francois Gouyette on Wednesday to make a "formal protest" of the visa ruling.



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Algeria recalls ambassador to France as tensions rise
Algeria summons French ambassador over visa restriction decision

New guidelines: Israel restricts its COVID-19 'green pass' rules, sparking protest

Author:

Mon, 2021-10-04 00:09

JERUSALEM: Israel restricted its COVID-19 Green Pass on Sunday to allow only those who have received a vaccine booster dose or recently recuperated from coronavirus to enter indoor venues. The new criteria mean that nearly 2 million people will lose their vaccination passport in the coming days.

Israel is the first country to make a booster shot a requirement for its digital vaccination passport. The move is widely seen as a step to encourage booster vaccination among those who have yet to receive a third dose.

Under the new guidelines, people must have received a booster shot to be eligible for a green pass. Those who have received two vaccine doses, and those who have recovered from coronavirus, will be issued passes valid for six months after the date of their vaccination or recovery.

The government's advisory Cabinet on coronavirus was set to convene Sunday to discuss existing restrictions and guidelines.

Technical problems hamstrung the Health Ministry's rollout of the updated green pass as millions of Israelis tried to reissue digital documentation that would allow entry to shops, restaurants, cultural events, gyms and other indoor venues.

Scores of Israelis staged demonstrations around the country in protest of the green pass system, with convoys of cars clogging morning commutes as many Israelis returned to work Sunday after September's Jewish High Holidays. Opponents of the system said it is a form of forced vaccination.

"We are totally against any forced vaccinations, or any forced medications, and we are totally against doing anything to our children and grandchildren that we don't agree with," said Sarah Felt, who protested along the main highway connecting Jerusalem and Tel Aviv.

Israel raced out of the gate early this year to vaccinate most of its adult population after striking a deal with Pfizer to trade medical data in exchange for a steady supply of doses.

This summer Israel launched an aggressive booster campaign to shore up waning vaccine efficacy in its population.

Over 60 percent of Israel's population has received two doses of the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine and nearly 3.5 million of Israel's 9.3 million citizens have received a booster dose of the vaccine.

But at least 2 million more have received just two doses, and many will lose the privileges bestowed by the green pass.

Recent months have seen a surge in new cases of coronavirus in Israel.

As of Sunday, over 70 percent of the 588 serious coronavirus cases in Israeli hospitals were unvaccinated individuals, according to Health Ministry data.

The ministry issued a statement Sunday morning that because of heavy traffic on its green pass website and app, previously existing certificates would be valid in the coming few days.



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Israel's chief envoy Yair Lapid in Bahrain for first official visit
Israeli settlers attack Palestinian village, wound toddler

[First official EgyptAir flight lands at Tel Aviv airport](#)

Author:

Mon, 2021-10-04 00:05

JERUSALEM: Egypt's national carrier on Sunday made its first official direct flight to Israel since the two countries signed a historic 1979 peace treaty as an EgyptAir jet landed at Tel Aviv's Ben Gurion Airport.

The airline's affiliate, AirSinai, has for decades operated flights to Israel without the company logo, out of fear of public backlash.

The national carrier will now run three weekly flights between Cairo and Tel Aviv with the EgyptAir markings.

The Israeli Embassy in Cairo tweeted that direct flights are "an important and welcome sign of strengthening bilateral ties between the two countries, especially economic relations."

Last week, Bahrain's GulfAir made its first direct flight to Israel, further cementing commercial ties established with the signing of the "Abraham Accords" between Israel and four Arab states last year.

Sunday's flight came two weeks after Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett made the first public visit to Egypt by an Israeli leader in over a decade.

He met with Egyptian President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi in the Sinai resort town of Sharm El-Sheikh in a sign of warming ties between the two countries.

In August, Israel removed a longstanding advisory for its citizens about travel to Egypt's Sinai Peninsula, a move seen as a gesture to its strategic partner.



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EgyptAir to boost weekly flights between Cairo and Istanbul
EgyptAir reduces its ticket prices by 50% to European countries

UN agency for Palestinian refugees has urgent budget crisis

Author:

Sat, 2021-10-02 23:58

NEW YORK: The UN agency helping Palestinian refugees is facing an “existential” budget crisis and appealing for urgent funding of \$120 million to keep essential education, health care and other services running, the agency’s chief said.

“We keep struggling, running after cash,” Philippe Lazzarini said.

“The financial situation is a real existential threat on the organization, and we should not underestimate this because it might force the organization to decrease services,” he added, and if that happens “we risk to collapse very quickly.”

At stake is the agency’s ability to keep 550,000 children in school, provide healthcare for thousands, and pay the salaries for its 28,000 staffers in November and December, Lazzarini explained.

The UN Relief and Works Agency known as UNRWA was established to provide education, healthcare, food and other services to the 700,000 Palestinians who fled or were forced from their homes during the war surrounding Israel’s establishment in 1948.

Lazzarini added that it wasn’t clear for agency officials “if yes or no we will be able to keep our activities in November and December.”

He emphasized the importance of the US returning as a major donor to UNRWA this year after former president Donald Trump stopped all funding in 2018. President Joe Biden’s administration announced in April it would provide a total of \$235 million to projects in the West Bank and Gaza as well as to UNRWA.

But Lazzarini said the US funding has been offset by decreased funding from other donors as a result of the economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, and no information from potential donors in the Middle East.

He pointed to the UK’s decrease in its overseas aid budget from 0.7 percent to 0.5 percent of GDP, and the decline in Arab support to UNRWA from \$200 million in 2018 to about \$89 million in 2019 and \$37 million in 2020.

He said UNRWA's uncertain funding has generated anxiety among Palestinian refugees that the "lifeline" provided by the agency could be weakened, and a feeling of being abandoned by the international community.

In an effort to reverse this trend, Lazzarini said Sweden and Jordan will be co-hosting a conference in mid-November in Brussels whose main aim is to ensure more predictable multi-year funding for the agency.

He said UNRWA is seeking \$800 million a year for three years for its "core" activities – education, healthcare, and social protection and safety nets.

UNRWA also has a separate emergency budget which provides humanitarian aid to Gaza and Syria, he said. This year that budget was around \$500 million, and he said it will probably be similar in 2022.

There are now 5.7 million Palestinian refugees, including their children and grandchildren, but Lazzarini said UNRWA only helps the 550,000 in school and 2.8 million who have health benefits.



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UN says US aid for Palestinian refugees will not cover the shortfall
Palestinian refugees welcome US decision to restart aid

[US-China rivalry forcing Arab Gulf states to make impossible choices, UAE's Anwar Gargash tells World Policy Conference](#)

Sat, 2021-10-02 23:32

ABU DHABI: Economic and strategic competition between the US and China is putting immense pressure on the Arab Gulf states, a top Emirati official told delegates on the second day of the 14th World Policy Conference in Abu Dhabi.

Anwar Gargash, the UAE's presidential diplomatic adviser and former minister of state for foreign affairs, said the geopolitical rivalry is forcing countries in the region to make impossible choices concerning their strategic and business partnerships.

Gargash urged the international community to speak up against such pressure and not to become pawns in a new Cold War. "I think if this message comes across to the Chinese, to the Americans and to others, I think this will, in itself, create, I would call, a moral collective," he said on Saturday.

"We're all worried, very much, by a looming Cold War. That is bad news for all of us because the idea of choosing is problematic in the international system, and I think this is not going to be an easy ride."

The UAE and other Arab Gulf countries have long been close US allies. However, China has since emerged as a powerful economic player in the region and its thirst for crude oil has made it the Gulf's biggest buyer, presenting nations like the UAE with a dilemma.

"This is going to be a big challenge for all of us," Gargash said. "For us here in the UAE, the United States is our predominant strategic partner but China is our number one or two – with India – economic partner."



Although the Chinese offer lucrative opportunities for trade and business partnerships, Gargash hinted the UAE considers the Americans a more transparent strategic ally.

“China will continue to be extremely important,” Gargash said. “While America’s direction is something you can glean from various readings and conferences and discussions, understanding China’s direction, I think, is more opaque.”

What began as a trade war over China’s economic policies has since evolved into a clash between differing ideologies, leading to mounting tensions in the South China Sea and schisms between the US and its traditional European allies.

US-China bilateral relations nosedived in 2018 when then-President Donald Trump imposed punitive tariffs on China. This was followed by restrictions on China’s access to US tech products and foreign investments involving security concerns and by allegations of unfair Chinese commercial practices.

President Joe Biden has since amplified his predecessor’s policies by strengthening anti-China alliances and implementing additional sanctions. Borrowing from the Cold War playbook, Biden has characterized the US-China conflict as “a battle between the utility of democracies in the 21st century and autocracies.”



Analysts believe US-China tensions are driven less by economic realities and more by great power rivalries – exacerbated by mutual mistrust over each other’s strategic aims.

Gargash highlighted the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on international affairs, arguing it demonstrated the need for greater cooperation rather than confrontation.

“We are really seeing several dimensions to the changes in the international system,” he said. “I think, on the one hand, the pandemic makes it very very clear that our geostrategic priorities need not only be political ... but it can be about other issues.

“It will need, actually, from all of us, an understanding ... that confrontation is not the way forward, and communication is the way forward.

“It doesn’t mean that we will be able to change Iran’s perception of its role in the region, or Turkey’s perception of its role in the region, or how we see the Arab world and how it should come back to a more lively regional system. But at the same time I think we need to also understand that it is extremely important that we avoid confrontations.”



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UAE minister Sheikh Nahyan bin Mubarak opens World Policy Conference in Abu Dhabi
Biden calls Xi as US-China relationship grows more fraught