

Coronavirus pandemic forces Jordanian children into labor market

Author:

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AMMAN: Omar's heart sinks when he trudges past his closed school gates in the Jordanian capital Amman – now part of his trip to work, to repair and clean kerosene heaters.

The 14-year-old, who dreams of becoming a pilot, is one of many minors experts say have been forced prematurely into the labor market.

Schools throughout Jordan have been closed for nearly a year now, and the economic fallout from the novel coronavirus pandemic has eaten into breadwinners' ability to feed their families.

"As school is shut, I help my family financially," said Omar, sporting a sweater and dirty jeans as he cleaned a heater with his blackened hands. He works exhausting 12-hour days at the workshop, and collapses into bed after a shower and a quick evening meal.

Overall, the work "doesn't bother me," he said.

"What is unbearable is the smell of kerosene ... (it) doesn't go away."

He earns three dinars (around \$4.25) a day, which helps pay the family's monthly rent of 130 dinars.

His contribution is vital because his father, a day laborer, has struggled to find work due to the coronavirus downturn.

But Omar has not given up hope, and said he was determined to return to school as soon as possible.

"I would love to continue my studies" and eventually become a pilot, he said.

"I don't want the coronavirus to destroy my dream."

BACKGROUND

UNICEF estimates less than a third of schoolchildren in the country have internet access, making it impossible for the bulk of pupils to follow online classes during the pandemic.

The Education Ministry has announced a return to classes next month for kindergarten and some elementary school levels, as well for students in their final year of high school.

Everyone else will have to wait until March.

UN children's agency UNICEF said that while it had no hard statistics, it believed many Jordanian children had been forced into precarious work since the pandemic began – despite it being forbidden to employ those under 16. Some 76,000 children were already working in Jordan according to the last official count, published in 2016.

"When we see children and when we speak to people, we are concerned that the numbers are increasing," said Tanya Chapuizat, UNICEF's country representative in Jordan. "It would seem logical... because we know the levels

of poverty are increasing” during the coronavirus crisis, she added. The official poverty rate in Jordan was 15.7 percent last autumn, but the World Bank has warned this will increase by 11 percentage points over “the short term.”

Experts fear child labor rates will surge even higher.

“I expect child labor to increase dramatically,” said Ahmad Awad, director of Jordan Labour Watch.

He pointed to both the rise in poverty and the pandemic’s negative impact on Jordan’s education system as drivers of this trend.



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Sun, 2021-01-24 00:02

DUBAI: Lab-grown meat may sound like an unpalatable sci-fi concoction, but thanks to new innovations in cellular agriculture, combined with growing consumer demand for sustainable alternatives, test-tube T-bones could soon be

on the menu.

Threats to global food systems and agriculture have come to the fore since the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted regional value chains, heightening awareness about the importance of public health and regulation of new scientific techniques.

For the Middle East in particular, the crisis has been a wake-up call for policymakers acutely aware they have fallen behind in the food sciences – a gap that Saudi Arabia and the UAE are now hopeful they can close.

“Food science is definitely something that’s missing here,” Prince Khaled bin Alwaleed bin Talal Al-Saud, founder and CEO of KBW Ventures, said during a recent virtual panel discussion on “The Future of Food: New Tastes, New Priorities, New Technologies.”



Vegetarian alternatives to burgers and sausages, revived by start-ups like Beyond Meat and Impossible Burger, are enjoying a certain enthusiasm that meat giants also want to enjoy. (AFP/File Photo)

“We’ve voiced it a bunch of times and we are actually working with the UAE government to establish some sort of ecosystem to develop that.”

The panel discussion, organized as part of Abu Dhabi Sustainability Week (Jan. 18-21), examined how the world’s food needs have evolved over recent decades from hunger prevention to tackling obesity, and how they must adapt to face new realities.

“Fifty years ago, food science was created for food safety. It was not created for food health,” Gabrielle Rubenstein, co-founder and chief executive of the US private equity firm Manna Tree, told the panel.

“They were just trying to feed the world and mass produce, but we didn’t know that it would cause cancer or obesity.”

Today, the cost of treating chronic diseases caused by obesity in the US is equivalent to roughly 9 percent of its gross domestic product (GDP), while 70 percent of deaths are caused by lifestyles linked to poor diet.



This undated handout from Eat Just released on December 19, 2020 shows a nugget made from lab-grown chicken meat at a restaurant in Singapore, which became the first country to allow meat created without slaughtering any animals to be sold. (AFP/File Photo)

Solutions could lie in the new scientific innovations led by start-ups. The missing ingredient, according to Rubenstein, is scalability. “This is something that we all need to work on together,” she said. “The only way we can do that is by scaling innovation knowledge and research. It’s not necessarily about getting food into the hands of the country – what’s totally missing is knowledge in innovation.”

Universities in the UAE, for instance, currently do not offer PhDs in food science, leaving regional startups whose goal is to create the foods of the future at a disadvantage. Rubenstein’s company wants to change that. “Let’s take our scholar model and give this to you so that the next generation are food scientists,” she said.]

One interesting takeaway from the pandemic is the shift in consumer preferences towards healthier and more sustainably produced food. Experts believe technology and regulations will have to adapt quickly to respond to

these changing demands.

"We are going through what is probably the most challenging time we have gone through in the last 20 years," Prince Khaled said. "And from my point of view, it is the most important thing that has happened to us because it has shifted people's attention towards what their priorities are."

Responding to these new demands, retailers are already allocating more shelf space to the likes of Beyond Meat, Impossible Foods and other plant-based alternatives as shoppers cut back on animal products.

FASTFACT

Cultured cells

***Singapore became the first country in the world in Dec. 2020 to approve a commercial meat product made from cultured animal cells for human consumption.**

Scientists have gone a step further, exploring the revolutionary possibilities of cellular agriculture – the production of proteins, fats and tissues using lab-grown cell cultures that would otherwise have come from the slaughterhouse.

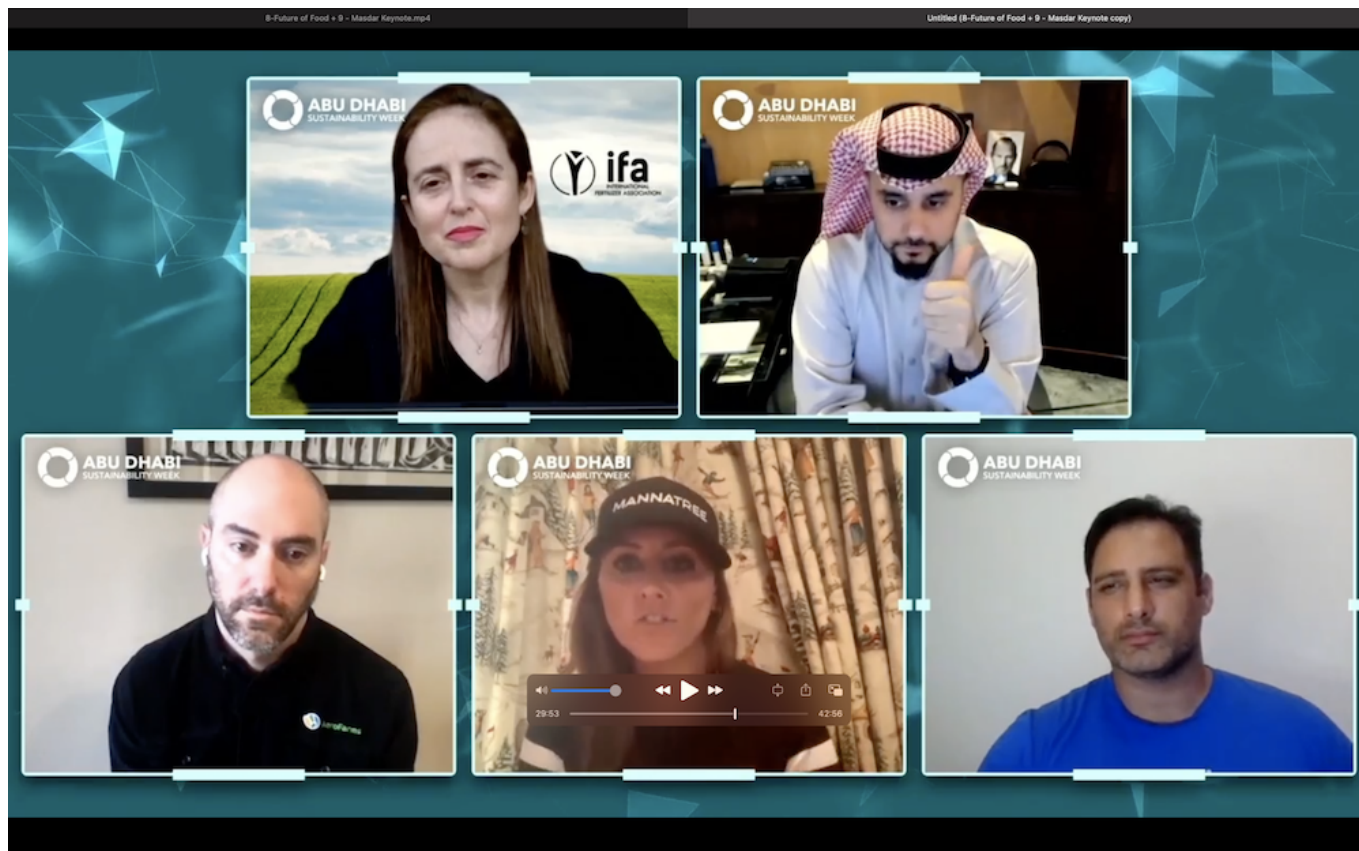
In Dec. 2020, San Francisco-based alternative protein company Eat Just announced its cultured chicken product has been approved for sale in Singapore – the first time a commercial meat product made from cultured animal cells has been approved for human consumption.

"I hail Singapore for the enormous courage that it took to just start regulating cellular agriculture," Prince Khaled said. "This didn't happen coincidentally during this pandemic. We've seen a lot of the issues that this current pandemic has driven towards; it has opened people's eyes to the zoonotic diseases that are out there."

High concentrations of livestock are potential breeding grounds for epidemics. Indeed, scientists believe the coronavirus responsible for the COVID-19 pandemic originated in animals sold at a wet market in the Chinese city of Wuhan before making the jump to humans.

Experts believe moving away from the mass farming of meat, eggs and dairy could not only reduce the risk of future zoonotic outbreaks but also reduce pressure on the environment.

Prince Khaled wants to see companies working in cellular agriculture and plant-based proteins demonstrate how they can address food and land scarcity. "Now's the time to actually find solutions," he said.



The panel discussion, “The Future of Food: New Tastes, New Priorities, New Technologies,” organized as part of Abu Dhabi Sustainability Week (Jan. 18-21), examined how the world’s food needs have evolved over recent decades from hunger prevention to tackling obesity. (Supplied)

With an estimated 9.7 billion people to feed by 2050, companies involved in these projects will have to play a role in the drafting of regulations. Much will also depend on what governments choose to subsidize.

“At the end of the day, the future is definitely going to be solved through people like these panelists – people who have the money, the backing and the investors to do it,” Prince Khaled said.

“But, more importantly, it’s a match made in heaven when you have the entrepreneurs who share that vision with you. We invested in a company that ships organic seeds to people to grow in-house. These aren’t going to solve world problems or world hunger, but collectively, that’s the only real way we’re going to be able to do something about this.”

The regulatory environment will have to move with the times to ensure a smooth transition. Singapore is currently leading the way, with its food agency working closely with start-ups.

“I’m from California and I’ve been in Singapore for a few years, but I’ve never seen anything like it,” said Max Rye, chief strategist at TurtleTree Labs, a Singapore-based biotech company founded in 2019 with the aim of producing lab-grown dairy products.

“We meet with the agency on a very regular basis. They ask questions about how we can work together to get our products to the market, and that’s not

what I'm used to hearing," he said.



Lab-grown meat from the US is presented in the Disgusting Food Museum on December 6, 2018 in Los Angeles, California. (AFP/File Photo)

By contrast, in the US much of that discussion would revolve around food safety and toxicology, he said.

"If there was any recommendation, it would be just to work much closer with your startups," Rye said. "These types of companies are trying to solve the much bigger problems around climate change among (issues)."

KBW Ventures recently increased its investment in TurtleTree Labs and Prince Khaled has joined the firm as an official adviser. He also holds investments in the California-based company Beyond Meat.

Prince Khaled agrees that a nourishing environment from a regulatory standpoint will be crucial.

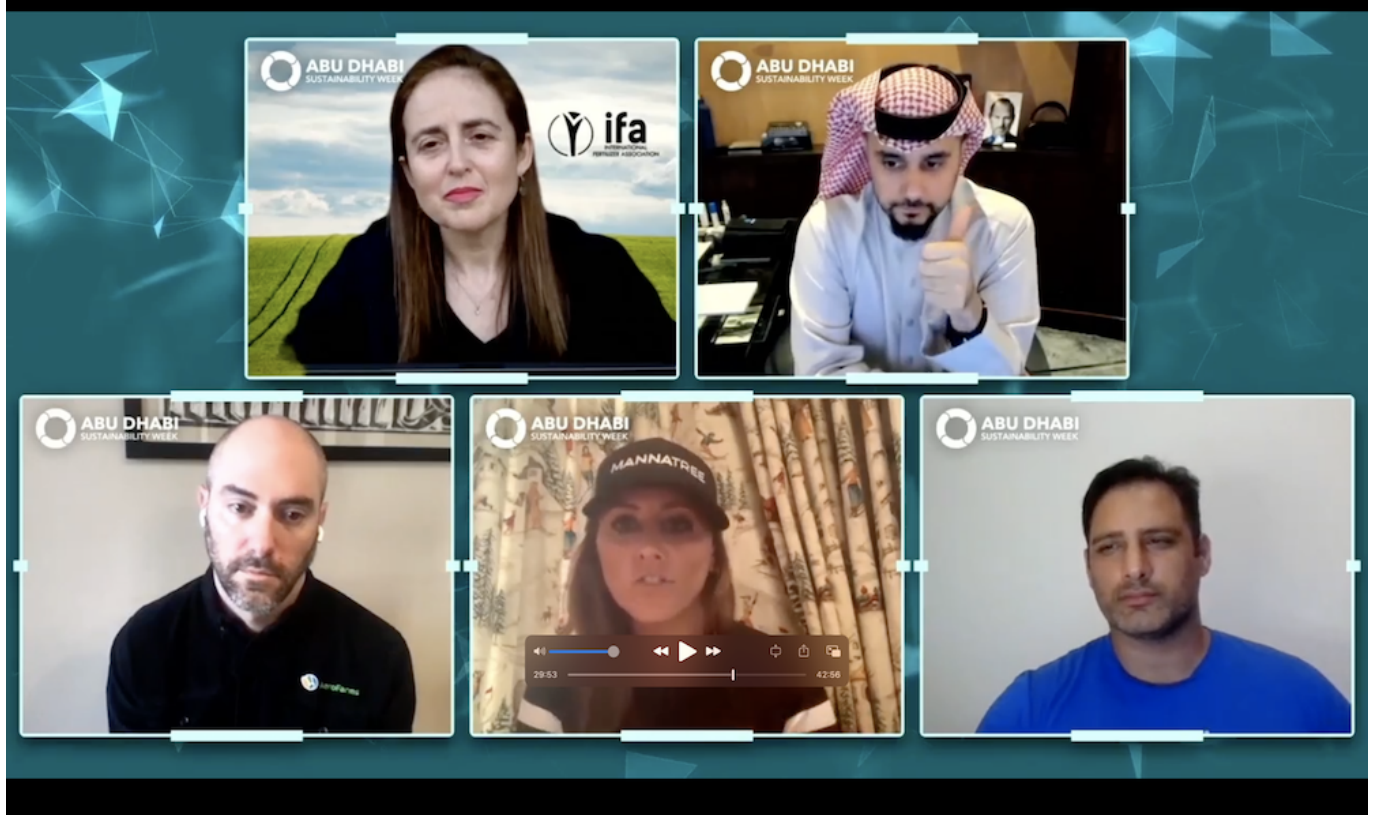
"The thing that struck me with Singapore is that this is a breakthrough when it comes to regulatory approvals," he said. "I'm really hopeful the US, and the Middle East, will follow suit."

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B-Future of Food + 9 - Masdar Keynote.mp4

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Chinese firms bet on plant-based meat
Where's the meat? UK's first vegan butchers opens
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Hundreds protest police repression in Tunisia

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Sat, 2021-01-23 19:02

TUNIS: Hundreds of demonstrators took to the streets of Tunisian cities on Saturday to protest police repression, corruption and poverty, following several nights of unrest marked by clashes and arrests.

Saturday's protests come as the North African nation struggles to stem the novel coronavirus pandemic, which has crippled the economy and threatened to overwhelm hospitals.

Over 6,000 people have died from Covid-19 in Tunisia, with a record 103 deaths reported on Thursday.

The government on Saturday extended a night-time curfew from 8 p.m. (1900 GMT) to 5 a.m. and banned gatherings until February 14.

But protesters took to the streets in several parts of the country, including the capital Tunis and the marginalized interior region of Gafsa, to demand the release of hundreds of young people detained during several nights of unrest since January 14.

"Neither police nor Islamists, the people want revolution," chanted demonstrators in a crowd of several hundred in Tunis, where one person was wounded in brief clashes amid a heavy police presence.

Protests were also held in the coastal city of Sfax on Friday.

Much of the unrest has been in working class neighborhoods, where anger is boiling over soaring unemployment and a political class accused of having failed to deliver good governance, a decade after the 2011 revolution that toppled long-time dictator Zine El Abidine Ben Ali.

Economic misery exacerbated by novel coronavirus restrictions in the tourism-reliant nation have pushed growing numbers of Tunisians to try to leave the country.

"The situation is catastrophic," said Omar Jawadi, 33, a hotel sales manager, who has been paid only half his salary for months.

"The politicians are corrupt, we want to change the government and the system."

The police have said more than 700 people were arrested over several nights of unrest earlier this week that saw young people hurl rocks and petrol bombs at security forces, who responded with tear gas and water cannon.

Human rights groups on Thursday said at least 1,000 people had been detained.

"Youth live from day to day, we no longer have hope, neither to work nor to study – and they call us troublemakers!" said call center worker Amine, who has a degree in aerospace engineering.

"We must listen to young people, not send police in by the thousands. The whole system is corrupt, a few families and their supporters control Tunisia's wealth."

Tunisia last week marked one decade since Ben Ali fled the country amid mass protests, ending 23 years in power.

Tunisia's political leadership is divided, with Prime Minister Hichem Mechichi waiting for parliament to confirm a major cabinet reshuffle announced last Saturday.







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Tunisia rights groups say 1,000 arrested in 6 nights of riots
Tunisia marks revolution's 10th anniversary in lockdown

[El-Sisi says Egypt to begin COVID-19 vaccinations on Sunday](#)

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Sat, 2021-01-23 19:19

CAIRO: Egypt will begin coronavirus vaccinations on Sunday, beginning with medical staff, President Abdel-Fattah El-Sisi said in recorded comments on Saturday.

On Friday, Egypt recorded 748 new cases and 52 deaths. However, health officials say the real number is likely far higher because of the relatively

low rate of coronavirus testing and the exclusion of private test results. Egypt received its first shipment of vaccines developed by China National Pharmaceutical Group (Sinopharm) in December. Egypt will get 40 million vials via the GAVI vaccine alliance for 20 million people, or 20% of the 100 million population, its health minister said last week.



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[Lebanon MPs accuse Aoun of 'acting as a party'](#)

Sat, 2021-01-23 22:00

BEIRUT: Deputies in the Lebanese Parliament have accused President Michel

Aoun of acting "as a party, not as a president entrusted with the constitution."

On Saturday, MP Anwar Al-Khalil said that Aoun's media office's statement on Friday "undermines the Lebanese people's minds and destroys the hope of forming an important government. It is also a digression from obstinacy and stubbornness."

Friday's statement said Aoun was a "partner in choosing ministers and distributing ministerial portfolios."

Al-Khalil reminded Aoun that "the constitution named you as president, a symbol of national unity and a protector of the constitution."

"Your advisers are making you one team. Enough bickering! Support the whole country and save it from collapse," Al-Khalil said.

Aoun defended himself and the head of the Free Patriotic Movement (FPM), MP Gebran Bassil, against the accusation of obstructing the formation of a government, which raised tension between him and Prime Minister-designate, Saad Hariri.

MP Hadi Abu Al-Hassan said: "Hariri is faced with a crippling process in order to force him to resign." He added that the president and the FPM "do not want the return of Hariri as prime minister without Bassil in the government."

He criticized Aoun, saying: "The covenant is unconscious. It lives somewhere else, as attested to by all, and through his practices, he wants to monopolize everything."

"The problem in the country is the non-presence of a conscious central authority that is aware of what is happening. It is absent and today, we are reaping what was sown," he said.

Former MP Mustafa Alloush, who is also the Future Movement's vice president, said the president's objective was "to make Bassil afloat again and move the presidency to his son-in-law. It is not the rescue of the republic."

Alloush said that the new government should "lend a helping hand to establishments and countries. Lebanon might be able to convince the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to have a loan, however, if that is not followed by CEDRE (Conference for Economic Development and Reform through Enterprises) and aid from the Gulf and the US, we will have increased our debt to the IMF."

He said the other team, specifically Hezbollah, was not interested in the rescue operation. "Aoun and the FPM rely on Hezbollah to justify their stubbornness to obstruct the formation of the government, with the aim of making Bassil president." He said Bassil was subjected to US and personal sanctions that were neither accepted by the Gulf nor internationally and "they are trying to impose a de facto government."

On the calls to form an opposition against Aoun and his political team, Alloush said: "There is a lot of talk, but if these parties agree on the idea, they disagree on the details."

Abdel-Sattar Al-Laz, adviser to former prime minister, Tammam Salam, told Arab News: "A meeting was held a while ago at Salam's house. It included former heads of government, leader of the Progressive Socialist Party, Walid Jumblatt, and addressed the possible scenarios to solve the stalemate in the country."

Forming an opposition was difficult at the moment, Al-Laz said. "Any new opposition needs Christian and Shiite participation and cannot be limited to Sunni forces and a Druze party. There is a need for a Christian team such as the Lebanese Forces and Kataeb, and those have their personal agendas. The opposition cannot be formed of independent people. It is required to have driving forces with a real representation."

"The ball is in the court of the Christian partner. Can they form an opposition against the president to ask for his removal or pressure him to resign? Such opposition should be headed by the Maronite Patriarch Bechara Al-Rai, and I rule out its formation since it will affect the position of the Maronite presidency. In that light, there is no hope except to wait for change in the region, otherwise, we are facing a dead end."



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Dispute between Aoun and Hariri escalates in LebanonPatriarch Al-Rai resumes mediation between Aoun and Hariri to form government