

Turkey quits more observation posts in Syria's Idlib

Author:

Fri, 2020-12-18 00:03

ANKARA: Turkey is believed to be stepping up troop withdrawals in Syria's northwest Idlib province, the last major rebel stronghold in the country.

In the past, Ankara has strongly rejected any possibility of abandoning its contested observation posts, but with a major Assad regime offensive looking increasingly likely, there is no longer any strategic value in keeping the sites, observers say.

Turkey recently began evacuating its observation post at Al-Eis in northern Syria following prolonged attacks in the region by Russian-backed regime forces and Iranian-backed militias seeking control over the highway connecting Aleppo and Latakia provinces.

Analysts say that the move is a strong signal that Turkey's opening of observation posts as part of the Astana deal has failed.

Idlib is located in a so-called de-escalation zone established under the 2017 deal between Turkey, Russia and Iran.

Eight out of 12 observation points controlled by Turkey have been encircled by Russian and Iranian forces since late last year.

"Several other Turkish observation posts already have been encircled by Russian and Iranian backed forces. The remaining posts are in areas controlled by rebels," Halid Abdurrahman, a researcher on the Middle East and North Africa, told Arab News.

"These observation posts do not have any critical importance," he said.

Since October, Turkey has abandoned four observation posts and two military positions in Idlib.

"It was clear that these observation points would fail because under the Astana deal three countries had their own interests which often clash. Now the key question is whether Turkey will use its military presence in Idlib for defensive or offensive purposes," Abdurrahman said.

In early December, the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) agreed with Russia and the Syrian army to set up three joint observation posts in the Kurdish-controlled town of Ain Issa to monitor the cease-fire agreed under the 2019 Sochi deal between Russia and Turkey that required the Kurdish forces to pull back 32 km from the Turkish border.

Samuel Ramani, a Middle East analyst at the University of Oxford, believes that the Russia-SDF joint observation posts have angered Turkey since power

sharing with the SDF is even more problematic for Ankara than handing the territory over to the Assad regime.

“The encirclement of Turkish forces in Idlib has been strongly supported by the Assad regime since the summer of 2019 and frictions on this issue precede the October 2019 Operation Peace Spring campaign in northern Syria,” he told Arab News.

Turkey reportedly keeps thousands of troops in northwestern Syria apart from Ankara-backed rebel forces.

Navvar Saban, a military analyst at the Omran Center for Strategic Studies in Istanbul, said that the Astana process is “frozen, but not dead yet.”

“These are observation points, not military locations. Now they are surrounded by regime forces and would be at the mercy of any kind of provocative attack from the regime,” he told Arab News.

According to Saban, in the case of a major offensive in the region, the observation points would present a major security challenge for Turkey.

“Their main goal was to observe any violation from the regime. The area is now under the regime control. So it is not useful to keep them staffed and spend money on their resupply,” he said.

In October, Turkey also evacuated the observation post at Morek in Hama province, one of a dozen established in 2018. It was later surrounded by Syrian government forces.

With Idlib home to 3.6 million people, Turkey’s priority now is to prevent any potential refugee influx amid harsh winter conditions.



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Turkey will not step back on S-400 missile systems despite US sanctions Alarm bells ring again at UN over humanitarian crisis in Syria

[Latest bid to resolve Arab-Qatari relationship crisis ends in failure: Egypt](#)

Author:

Fri, 2020-12-18 00:04

CAIRO: Renewed attempts by Kuwait on behalf of Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt at reconciliation with Qatar have failed to reach an agreement.

Bassam Rady, spokesman for the Egyptian presidency, on Wednesday told a talk show on Sada El-Balad TV that the latest mediation moves to help defuse tensions between the four Arab countries and the Qataris had been unsuccessful.

The quartet cut diplomatic, trade, and travel ties with Qatar in mid-2017 and has since called on Doha to meet 13 demands in order to allow for a resumption of relations. These range from closing state-owned media company Al Jazeera and a Turkish base to severing ties with the Muslim Brotherhood and decreasing links with Iran.

“When Qatar responds to these demands with a sincere desire and strong political will, things will change,” Rady said.

Saudi Arabia recently indicated that a solution to the dispute was within reach as did Egyptian Minister of Foreign Affairs Sameh Shoukry.

He said: “Egypt thanks the Kuwaiti role to heal the dispute ... Egypt is following up the commendable efforts of Kuwait to bring Arab countries closer. We hope that the dispute will be bridged between the Arab countries. Egypt is always working to strengthen Arab cooperation.

“We will see what can be achieved in this regard, and as long as it fulfils the interests of the Arab countries and Egypt, there will be an important development. We greatly value the efforts of the state of Kuwait and the

Kuwaiti leadership,” the minister added.

Separately, official spokesman for the Egyptian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ahmed Hafez, also expressed Egypt’s appreciation for the continued efforts made by Kuwait to resolve the Gulf relationship crisis.

“We hope that these kind efforts will result in a comprehensive solution that addresses all of the crisis’ causes and ensures strict and serious commitment to what will be agreed upon,” he said.

Hafez pointed out that Egypt, based on its responsibilities and position, always prioritized the preservation of Arab solidarity, stability, and security.

The Kuwait News Agency (KUNA) recently reported that Kuwait was anticipating “fruitful talks” aimed at achieving “Gulf and Arab stability.”



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Alleged Qatari expert ‘does not rule out’ French intelligence role in Samuel Paty murder
Qatar comes to Turkey’s ‘rescue’ amid public outcry

Yemen will fight corruption and currency woes, says prime minister

Author:

Thu, 2020-12-17 23:14

AL-MUKALLA: Institutional corruption and a spiralling currency will be among the targets of Yemen's new government, Prime Minister-designate Maeen Abdulmalik Saeed said.

Speaking after a meeting with party leaders and the parliamentary speaker on Wednesday, Saeed said the new administration will focus on reviving Yemen's economy, halting the depreciation of the riyal, alleviating the suffering of Yemenis and combating corruption in state institutions.

Devaluation of the riyal has hit ordinary Yemenis, while uncontrolled currency speculation has damaged the economy, he said.

"We are confronting a multidimensional battle. It is not only military but also economic, humanitarian and developmental. The new government represents the will of the people, and will face challenges with courage and resolute measures," he said.

Saeed said that his government will apply radical reforms aimed at boosting revenues and improving financial management.

Under the Riyadh Agreement designed to end hostilities between the internationally recognized government and separatists in southern Yemen, the Yemeni president in July mandated the outgoing prime minister to form a new unity government that will include separatist Southern Transitional Council.

On Wednesday, the Yemeni army and separatists said they had completed the military components of the agreements after withdrawing their forces from flash points in the southern province of Abyan under the supervision of Saudi monitors.

The Yemeni riyal has tumbled from 500 against the dollar in January 2018 – when tensions between the Yemeni government and separatists erupted into sporadic military clashes – to 920 this month.

The currency rebounded on Thursday after the Arab coalition announced the beginning of implementation of the Riyadh Agreement.

In the western city of Taiz, hundreds of protesters demanded the government take immediate steps to halt rising prices and the devaluation of the riyal.

Led by local labor and human rights unions, protesters carried posters urging the government to address worsening economic conditions and improve people's lives.

"The fall of the currency is a direct killing of the Yemeni citizen," one

poster read. "Silence about high prices and a falling currency is premeditated murder," another read.

In Riyadh, the Yemeni government repeated its demands to the UN mission to relocate its main office from Houthi-controlled areas in the western province of Hodeidah to a "neutral" area in the country.

Yemen's Foreign Minister Mohammed Al-Hadrami told Daniela Crosslake, deputy head of the UN Mission to Support the Hodeidah Agreement, that the Houthis are obstructing UN monitors in Hodeidah and violating the Stockholm Agreement.

The UN mission in Yemen is unable to work freely since its main office is inside Houthi territory, he said.

Yemen's government has boycotted the Redeployment Coordination Committee (RCC) that monitors a truce in Hodeidah since March when a Houthi sniper killed a government soldier.

Hundreds of civilians have been killed in shelling or by land mines planted by the Houthis in Hodeidah since late 2018 when the government and the militia signed the Stockholm Agreement, local right groups say.



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[riyadh agreement](#)

Aden-Abyan road reopened as Yemeni government, separatists finish redeployment process
Protesters call for Houthis' designation as a terrorist group after death of Yemeni football coach and son

[Egypt welcomes UAE joining Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum](#)

Thu, 2020-12-17 22:24

CAIRO: Egypt has welcomed the UAE's entry into the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum (EMGF), according to a spokesman for President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi.

Bassam Radi said the Egyptian leader had also expressed the importance of the added value that the UAE would bring to the group.

"The president welcomes the UAE's accession to the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum as an observer, along with the founding member states, expressing the importance of the added value that the UAE will contribute to the forum's activities to serve strategic interests and enhance cooperation and partnership between the forum countries," said Radi.

Talks were held on Wednesday between the Egyptian president and Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed to discuss issues in the region and issues of cooperation between the two countries.

A high-level EMGF working group held its eighth meeting to discuss organizational matters to activate the forum's activities, including reviewing the position of the headquarters agreement to be concluded between Egypt and the forum, and procedures for adding new members and observers.

The Egyptian Ministry of Petroleum said the meeting also discussed the forum's road map during 2021. It included the work plan of the Gas Industry Advisory Committee and the detailed plans of its three technical, economic and organizational subcommittees.

The meeting approved the requests for two additional members to join the committee, bringing the number of members to 29 from the most important companies and institutions concerned with the region's gas industry, compared to 16 members when it was launched in November last year.

It was the first meeting to be held after the final signing of the forum's charter by the seven founding countries – Greece, Cyprus, Italy, Israel, Jordan, Palestine and Egypt – in September and its ratification by Egypt's parliament on Tuesday.

On Sept. 22, the Egyptian Ministry of Petroleum and Mineral Resources announced the signing of a charter to convert the EMGF into a regional organization based in Cairo. The signing was attended by ministers of the forum.

The organization is interested in strengthening cooperation and developing the political dialogue on natural gas in order to contribute to the economic exploitation of the countries' reserves of the resource.

The Turkish Foreign Ministry spokesman, Hami Aksoy, described the EMGF as an anti-Ankara bloc considering its transformation into an international organization.

Turkey is in a dispute with Greece over maritime and energy rights in the eastern Mediterranean.



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Egypt and UAE discuss Eastern Mediterranean Turkey's belligerence roils gas-rich eastern Mediterranean

Arab region braced for challenge of coronavirus vaccine distribution

Wed, 2020-12-16 23:50

DUBAI: News that several COVID-19 vaccines are passing advanced trials and getting licensed for use has been met with relief and jubilation. The challenge now is finding ways to distribute the vaccines to every corner of the globe in the hope of ending the pandemic once and for all.

Emirates, the Arab world's biggest commercial carrier, has teamed up with logistics firm DHL to launch a massive vaccine-delivery effort before the year is out, according to company officials.



Emirates, the Arab world's biggest commercial carrier, has teamed up with logistics firm DHL to launch a massive vaccine-delivery effort. (Supplied)

Nabil Sultan, divisional senior vice president of Emirates SkyCargo, told Arab News a hub has now been created at Al-Maktoum International Airport, also known as Dubai World Central, to receive, store and then distribute vaccines to hospitals across the region.

Preparations began in summer when pharmaceutical firms first announced advanced trials. "We are able to store almost a million vaccine doses in our facility under the temperature requirements set by the manufacturers," Sultan

said.

Some of the new vaccines must be stored at ultra-cold temperatures in special containers packed with dry ice – conditions which may be too costly and cumbersome for poorer countries in the developing world.



When to expect the next vaccine

Progress: ■ Trial ■ Results expected ■ Awaiting approval ■ Available to public

👤 Trial size 🚰 Doses required ❄️ Storage temperature 🎯 Efficacy

2020 May June July Aug. Sep. Oct. Nov. Dec. 2021 Jan. Feb. March April May June July Aug.

PFIZER/BIONTECH

👤 44K 🚰 2 ❄️ -70°C 🎯 95%

Pfizer was the first company to report positive phase 3 clinical data. It plans to produce 50 million doses in 2020 and 1.3 billion in 2021.



MODERNA

👤 30K 🚰 2 ❄️ 2-8°C 🎯 95%

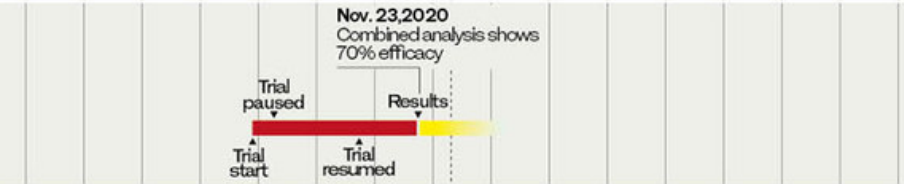
Moderna and Pfizer use a new vaccine approach involving messenger RNA. Moderna expects to have 20 million doses for US in December and 100 million globally in Q1.



ASTRAZENECA/OXFORD

👤 65K 🚰 2 ❄️ 2-8°C 🎯 70%

AstraZeneca struck deals for 3 billion doses even before any late-stage study results. That's more than twice as many as any other candidate. Initial clinical results were mixed.



NOVAVAX

👤 45K 🚰 2 ❄️ 2-8°C

This small biotech firm has never brought a product to market. It received more than \$1.6 billion from the US and \$399 million from the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness. The stock rose 3,000% in nine months.



JOHNSON & JOHNSON

👤 60K 🚰 1 ❄️ 2-8°C

Of the leading candidates, this is the easiest to distribute, requiring just one dose and standard refrigeration. To hedge its bets, J&J announced a separate trial with two doses in November.



SINOVAC BIOTECH

👤 26K 🚰 2 ❄️ 2-8°C

Sinovac's vaccine triggers an immune response using the COVID-19 virus itself, after it has been chemically inactivated.

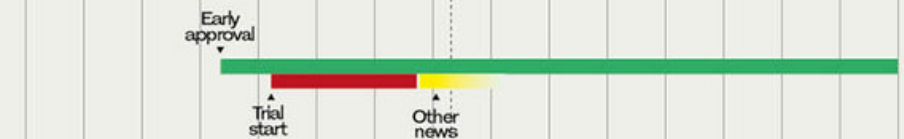
Russia and China took the unusual step of allowing vaccine distribution before conducting large-scale clinical trials.



GAMALEYA

👤 40K 🚰 2 ❄️ -18°C 🎯 91%

A variation of the Russian vaccine, known as Sputnik V, can be stored using standard refrigeration temperatures of 2-8°C. It's currently available in limited quantities.



CANSINO BIOLOGICS

👤 40K 🚰 1 ❄️ 2-8°C

CanSino's shot was approved for the Chinese military even before late-stage tests began. It uses a harmless cold virus to deliver its genetic payload.



SINOPHARM

👤 50K 🚰 2 ❄️ 2-8°C 🎯 86%

Sinopharm administered hundreds of thousands of doses before its vaccine was fully tested. It's currently working on two candidates in late-stage trials.





Source: Bloomberg

For instance, the vaccine developed by US pharmaceutical giant Pfizer in

partnership with German firm BioNTech, licensed for use in the UK on Dec. 2 and for emergency use by the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) on Dec. 12, must be stored at a frigid -70 C.

Moderna, another US drugmaker, has developed its own vaccine using the same revolutionary mRNA method as Pfizer/BioNTech, which must be stored at a chilly, although more moderate, -20 C.

Meanwhile, both the Chinese-made Sinopharm shot, approved by the UAE on Dec. 9, and the UK-manufactured Oxford/AstraZeneca vaccine can be stored at refrigerator temperature.



SAUDI ARABIA

- Saudi authorities have said that the vaccine will be made available to everyone in the Kingdom.
- The Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine is expected to arrive in Saudi Arabia shortly and will be distributed in stages, according to media reports.
- The vaccine will initially be used for people over 65 years, health workers and those suffering from obesity, immunity deficiency and chronic diseases.
- Saudi Arabian Logistics Company, a cargo ground handler and logistics provider, has announced the unveiling of its new 5,000 square meters of storage. The pharma and perishable facilities combined can adequately handle up to 365,000 tons of cargo a year.

“One of the challenges we came across is that a lot of the countries around us – in Africa, the Middle East and the Indian subcontinent – lack the infrastructure in terms of storage,” said Sultan.

“Therefore, bringing the vaccine to Dubai in a bigger quantity and (distributing) them in smaller quantities was the ultimate solution.”

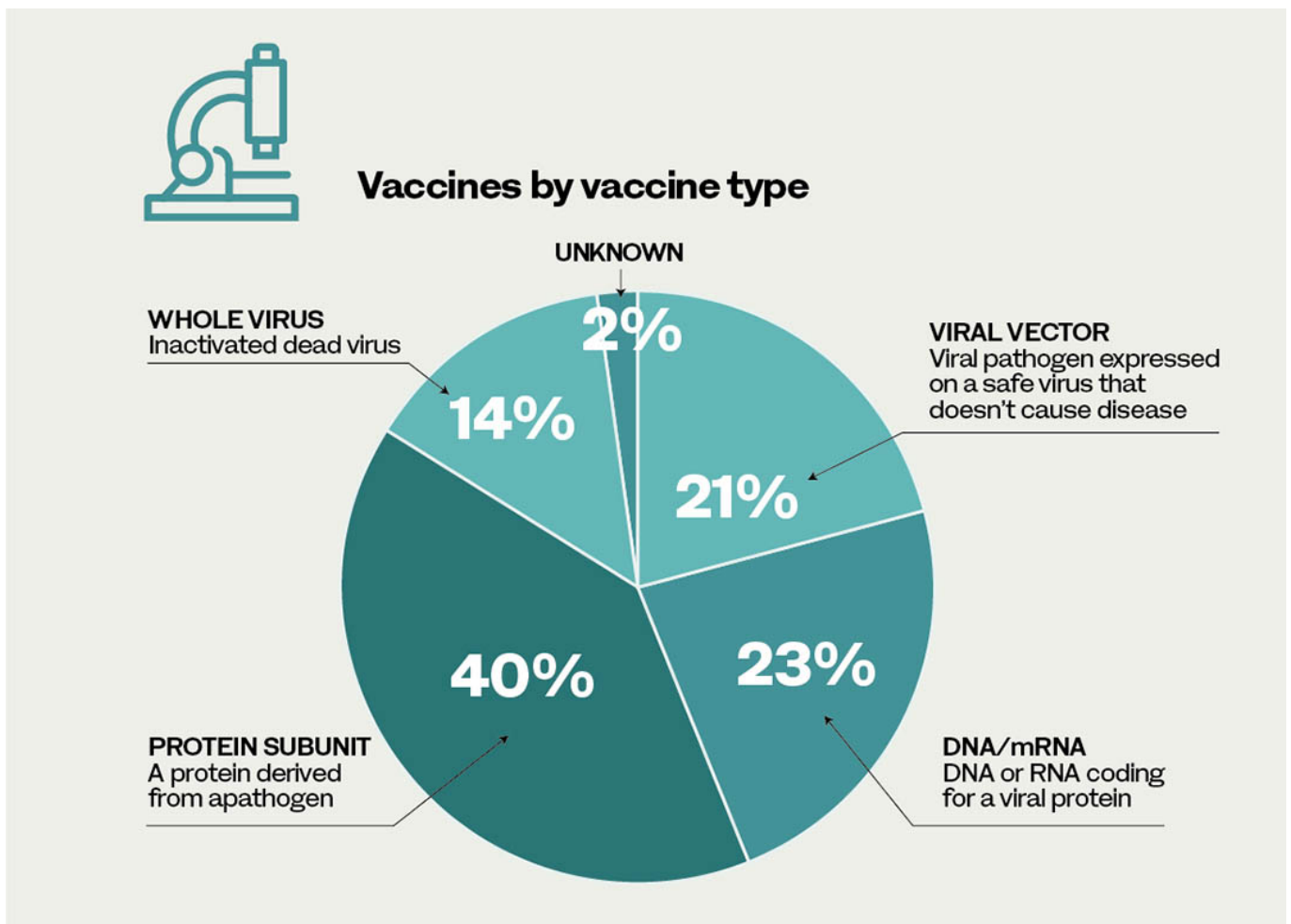
FASTFACTS

KINGDOM’S IMMUNIZATION PLAN

- * Saudi Arabia’s vaccination program to commence in three phases.
- * 1st phase to target people 65+ and those with chronic diseases and low immunity.
- * 1st phase to also include people most exposed such as health workers.
- * 2nd and 3rd stages to target 50+ age group and then the wider public.

Even developed countries are scrambling for resources in preparation for the vaccines, particularly the delicate Pfizer/BioNTech shot, says Dr. Mais Absi, a research scientist at King’s College London.

“The number of refrigerating cabinets with a temperature of -80 degrees Celsius is limited in European countries,” she told Arab News. “So, you can imagine the situation in developing countries.”



With so many vaccine candidates emerging, governments will soon be able to shop around for the best shots to suit their needs. And, thanks to Emirates, Dubai will be a regional hub.

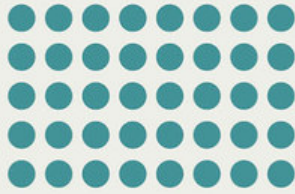
“Emirates SkyCargo already has a dedicated pharma facility at Dubai International Airport (DXB),” Sultan said. “Together, for the Dubai vaccine hub project, the two facilities offer close to 9,000 square meters of dedicated pharma storage area in addition to over 10,000 pallet storage locations for the vaccine.”

The firm transported more than 75 million kg of pharmaceuticals in 2019 alone, making Dubai a natural choice as a regional vaccine hub. But even for such an experienced cargo handler, the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine has proved uniquely challenging.

Coronavirus vaccine tracker

PHASE 1

Vaccines testing safety and dosage



40

PHASE 2

Vaccines in expanded safety trials



17

PHASE 3

Vaccines in large-scale efficacy tests



15

LIMITED

Vaccines in early or limited use



5

APPROVED

Vaccines approved for full use



2

ABANDONED

Vaccines abandoned after trials



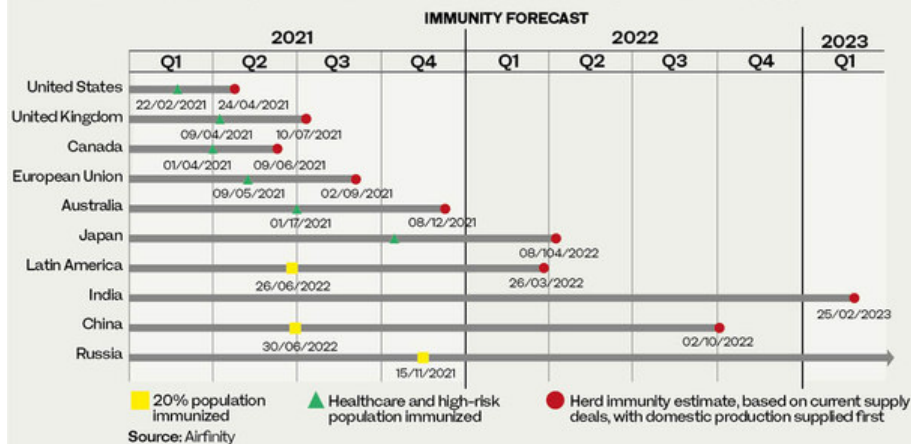
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Source: NYT



Back to normal immunization forecasts

Timeline for countries/regions to reach herd immunity based on agreed vaccine supply deals



“If you take Pfizer for instance, a box of vaccines will require almost 23 kg of dry ice,” said Sultan. “The maximum limit you can have on a passenger aircraft for instance is roughly 1,000 kg of dry ice. This means you can carry one pallet per passenger aircraft.”

To account for this excess weight, Emirates went back to the aircraft manufacturer and talked with aviation authorities to increase the capacity for cargo and civilian aircraft.

“Now we have a modern fleet of aircraft including 11 dedicated Boeing 777 freighters and 14 Boeing 777-300ER aircraft with seats removed from Economy Class for additional cargo capacity, and our Boeing 777 and Airbus A380 passenger aircraft, which transport cargo including temperature sensitive vaccines in the belly hold,” said Sultan.

The aviation industry was hit hard by the COVID-19 pandemic, as governments closed borders and flights were cancelled. Even now, with an easing of restrictions, Emirates is operating flights to just 130 of the 170 destinations it served before the outbreak.

By deploying its underutilized fleet for distribution of COVID-19 vaccines, the airline is no doubt doing its bit for global economic recovery and a hoped-for rebound in commercial travel.

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Saudi Arabia's first batch of coronavirus vaccine arrives today: health minister
Lebanon to get first batch of COVID-19 vaccines in two months, minister says