

Study finds growing acceptance in the Middle East of coronavirus 'new normal'

Fri, 2020-10-02 19:39

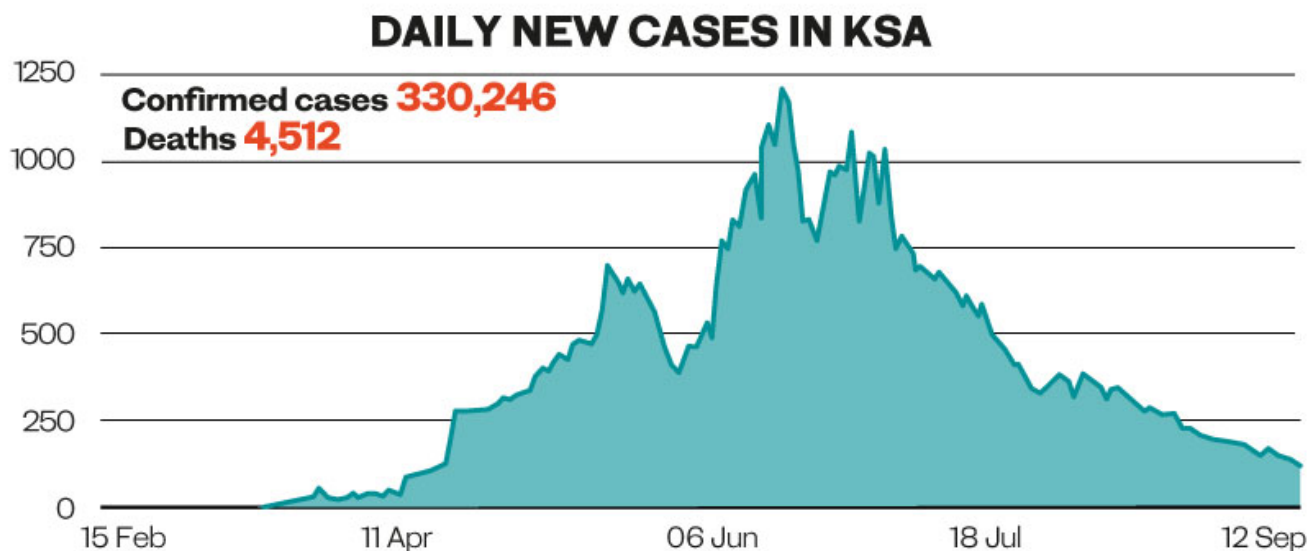
DUBAI: At a time when coronavirus cases are rising worldwide, fear of contracting COVID-19 is actually falling, surveys in Saudi Arabia, the UAE and several Western countries suggest.

Since the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the pandemic on March 11, almost 32 million people have been infected and almost a million have died, according to Johns Hopkins University data.

The virus has thrown the world economy into turmoil, pushing many countries into recession. Experts believe a properly tested vaccine is still months away, forcing governments to tread a fine line between boosting the economy while keeping new infections at bay.

The virus and lockdown measures have fundamentally changed working habits, social interactions and even family life.

Over the past six months, the online research firm YouGov has been tracking public attitudes and behaviors surrounding the pandemic, using its global research panel of more than 8 million respondents.



A review of its latest data shows that emotions surrounding COVID-19 are far more complex than they were at the outset of the pandemic. In many key markets, fear of catching the virus is now lower than it was six months ago.

As many countries, including France and the UK, impose new lockdown measures in response to the long-anticipated second spike, YouGov's data shows that consumer reactions to the pandemic are more muted, and that fear of catching

the virus has fallen since March.

Sociologists attribute this to a growing acceptance of the “new normal.” After an initial wave of anxiety, a new pace of life has emerged. Meanwhile, governments and medical officials continue to urge the public to take precautions.



Health workers wearing protective jumpsuits, carry the body of a 62-year-old displaced Syrian man who died of the COVID-19 disease, to be buried in the town of Salqin, in the northwestern Syrian Idlib province on September 17, 2020. (AFP/File Photo)

On Sept. 20, the WHO reported a record one-day rise in global COVID-19 cases, with 307,930 new infections. The biggest increases were detected in the US, India and Brazil.

To date, at least 7.5 million people in the US have contracted the virus and more than 213,000 have died.

The Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation at the University of Washington has forecast a further 400,000 to 600,000 deaths in the US by January 2021. Despite these warnings, fear of catching the virus was higher in the US in March than in September.

INNUMBERS

Coronavirus

* In March, 71 percent of Saudi residents said they were “very” or “somewhat” scared of catching the virus.

* By September the figure had fallen to 61 percent.

* In September, 51 percent of UK residents said they were “somewhat” afraid of catching the virus.

* Number of US residents taking additional hygiene measures has fallen 8 percent since June.

According to Johns Hopkins University, the US is the worst-hit country in the world, with about 620 deaths per million population.

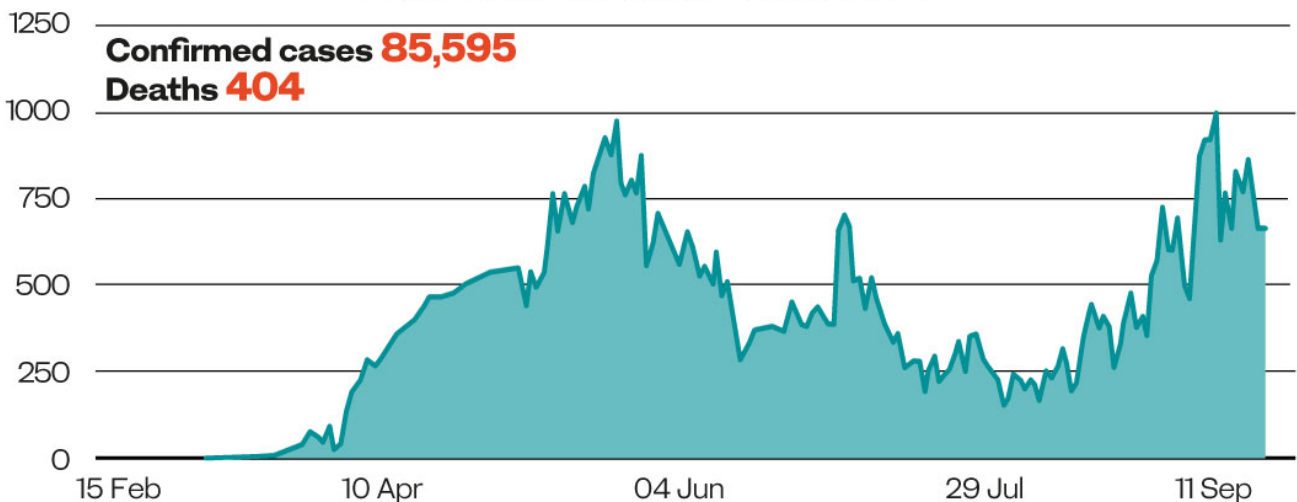
By contrast, in Vietnam, where 81 percent of residents reported being “very” or “somewhat” scared of catching the virus, the death rate per 1 million people is just 0.4.

These changing attitudes are having an impact on public behavior, including willingness to return to work.

In its COVID-19 Global Impact Study, published on Sept. 2, US insurance company Cigna revealed that the prospect of returning to workplaces is creating new anxieties among employees.

The study, carried out across 11 countries, found that 42 percent of respondents were concerned about catching the coronavirus during the commute, face-to-face meetings or in common work spaces. However, the drive to return to the workplace has been met with a mixed response globally.

DAILY NEW CASES IN UAE



According to YouGov’s data, just 8 percent of French respondents said they are now working from home. Meanwhile, 27 percent in Saudi Arabia are choosing to avoid the office, and 23 percent in the UAE.

The data also indicates Saudi Arabia and UAE residents are more likely to adopt social-distancing measures than people in France, Britain and the US.

Since the UAE recorded the Middle East's first four cases of the new coronavirus on Jan. 29, GCC governments have taken swift measures to reduce the impact of the virus on the region.

Saudi and UAE resident say they are more likely to avoid crowded places than those in France, the UK and the US. Among those surveyed, 72 percent of Saudi residents said they are avoiding crowded spaces compared with 63 percent of UK residents.



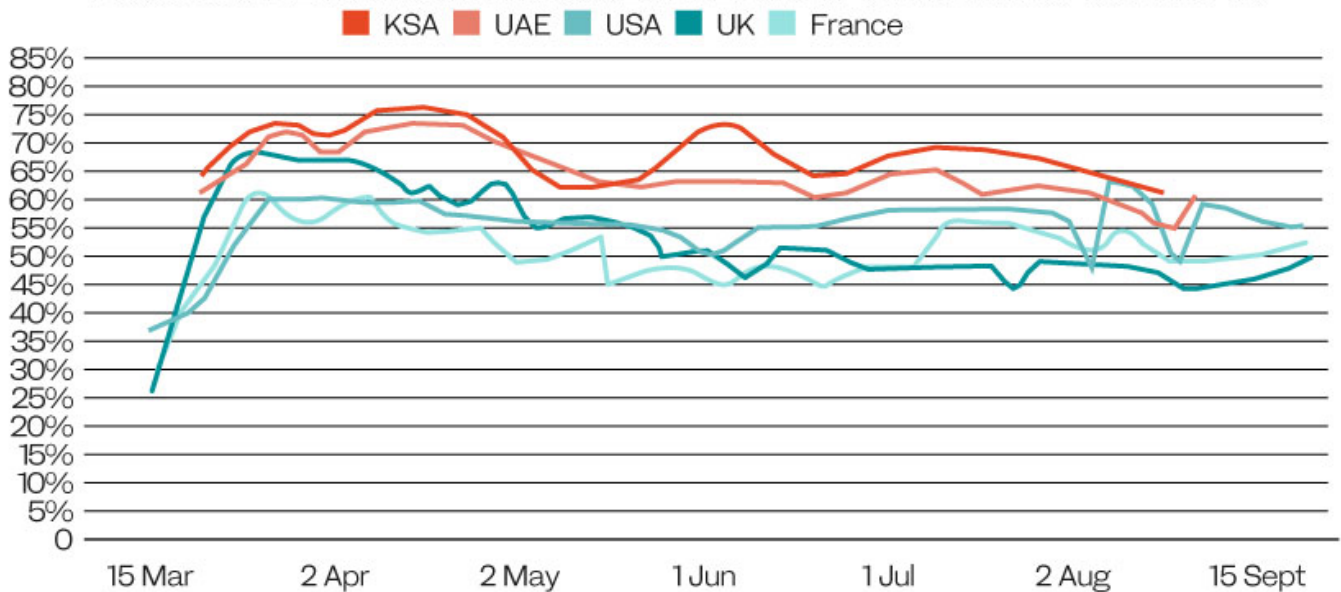
World Health Organization (WHO) Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus attends a press conference organised by the Geneva Association of United Nations Correspondents (ACANU) amid the COVID-19 outbreak on July 3 at the WHO headquarters in Geneva. (AFP/File Photo)

In June, when face masks were not yet mandatory in the UK, just 31 percent of UK residents reported wearing one in public places. By comparison, 80 percent of UAE residents reported wearing a face mask during the same month.

Following a change in UK government guidelines, the percentage of residents wearing face masks rose to 76 percent in September.

About 59 percent of Saudi residents say they avoid touching objects in public places compared with 42 percent of French residents, while 68 percent of UAE residents have improved their personal hygiene in response to the pandemic, compared with 58 percent of UK residents.

YUGOV BEHAVIOR TRACKER: FEAR OF CATCHING COVID-19



Poor adoption of social-distancing measures in northern hemisphere countries, which are fast approaching the winter influenza season, will be a marked cause for concern as medical facilities come under further strain. Indeed, the data indicates a trend toward public complacency at the very moment that cases are rising quickly.

Social-distancing measures have helped countries across the world reduce the number of new coronavirus infections from one day to the next – also known as flattening the curve. Yet self-reported YouGov data for the KSA and UAE clearly show people are becoming less vigilant regarding specific health and safety measures.

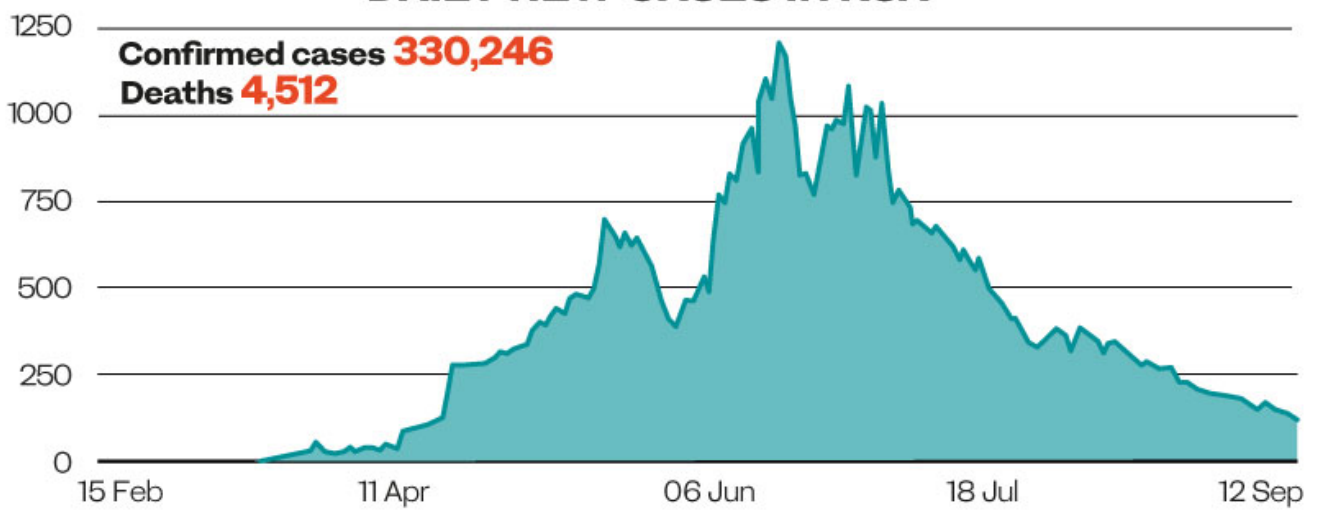
Mask use was down by 5 percent between June and September in Saudi Arabia and the UAE, while adoption of personal hygiene measures fell by 6 percent in both countries over the same period.

With mobility up across both nations, schools reopening and international travel increasing, the pandemic is an evolving situation. Authorities say complacency must not catch on or coronavirus will catch up.

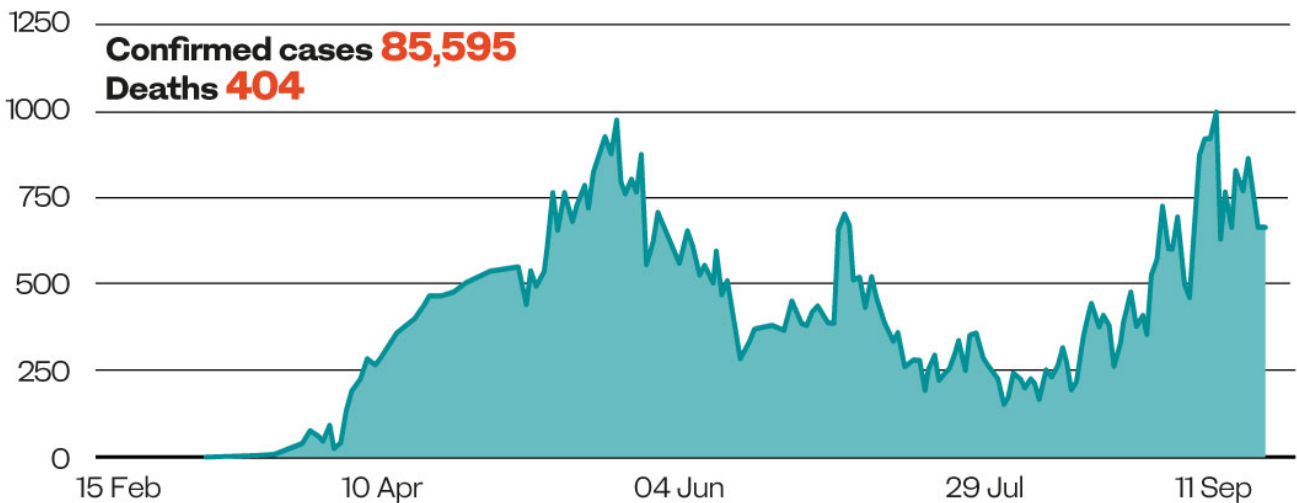




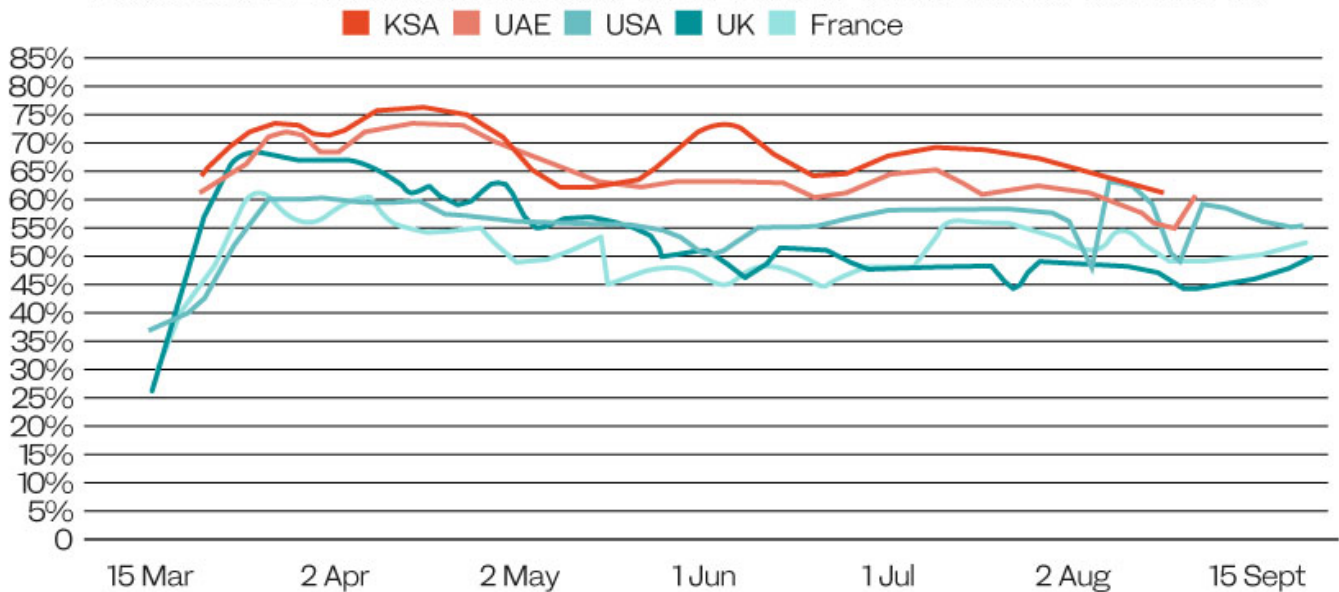
DAILY NEW CASES IN KSA



DAILY NEW CASES IN UAE



YUOVG BEHAVIOR TRACKER: FEAR OF CATCHING COVID-19



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challenges of global change: Saudi U20 summit leader

Fri, 2020-10-02 18:23

RIYADH: The world's urban centers are, more than ever, pivotal to fostering global change, the vice chair of a G20-linked Saudi summit has claimed.

Cities now consume more than two-thirds of the world's energy and account for at least 70 percent of global CO2 emissions.

Since 1950, the urban population of the world has grown from 75.1 million to 4.2 billion. With 90 percent of urban areas situated on coastlines, cities are highly vulnerable to the effects of climate change, including rising sea levels and storms.

Hosam Al-Qurashi, vice chair of the U20, told Arab News: "The U20 (the urban track of the G20 organization that has been meeting in Riyadh) is about voicing the issues that cities and their inhabitants around the world are experiencing.

"We want to make sure that these voices reach the leaders of the G20 so that they implement solutions and initiatives that guarantee the resilience and sustainability of these cities for the long term."

Al-Qurashi noted the U20 pillars of collaboration, consensus, evidence and scientific-based outcomes.

He said the grouping was composed of more than 40 cities and 30 knowledge partners that were collaborating to find solutions to some of the challenges facing urban centers around the world.

The U20 Mayors Summit has been taking place under the shadow of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic with all its associated socio-economic uncertainties.

"COVID-19 gave us an X-ray and showed us that we are not as strong and resilient a species as we thought. Accordingly, there is now a global direction to re-invest in science, wellbeing, and healthy living," Al-Qurashi added.

In the midst of the pandemic the U20 formed a special working group on COVID-19 – a sub-product of the U20 that was chaired by Rome and Buenos Aires.

The group has shared 32 case studies and best practices for dealing with the health crisis and also commissioned a survey to gather data from cities

together representing more than 75 million residents.

The accumulated policy recommendations of all the special working groups will be combined in a communique for delivery to the G20 leadership.

Al-Qurashi said: "The process is so multilateral and so fair, and every city had equal say and contribution in the development of this communique. It has been built on consensus and full collaboration of all of the participating cities."

He pointed out the speed at which the U20 had reacted in the middle of the pandemic.

"We could not meet. The working team had to quickly adjust to the needs of this common threat that humanity is currently facing. The group was created in order to develop policy recommendations on how to recover from the pandemic and how to prepare for future shocks," he added.

Cities and their transportation networks were coming under increasing pressure as growing numbers of people moved to urban areas, he said.

"In the future a public transportation network is definitely going to adopt standard operating procedures to deal with pandemics so that people will automatically react to future pandemics and calamities by being more resilient, capable, and ready to face these shocking events that we were not prepared for in the past.

"I believe that Saudi's presidency over the G20 has raised the bar quite high in the way we handled it and managed these sessions and the way we involved people that was so collaborative and so inclusive and open.

"Importantly, COVID-19 did not impact the deliverables of the summit. We are proud of the legacy that we are leaving behind and for the other cities to build on," Al-Qurashi added.

The aim of the U20 was to build resilience for the present and future of the world through cities, he noted.

"Innovation is at the heart of these special working groups: Innovating new solutions, themes, new forms of economy, of improving the climate and safeguarding the planet.

"This was about innovating urban solutions to address the challenges of cities across the world. That was what the U20 was all about."



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Circular economy takes center stage at Riyadh U20 panel discussion
U20 Mayors Summit: Reimagining the city in the age of COVID-19

[Lebanon asks Interpol to issue arrest warrants for two Russians over Beirut blast](#)

Fri, 2020-10-02 18:24

LONDON: Lebanon has asked Interpol to issue arrest warrants for two Russians who transported material into Beirut port which exploded on August 4.

Almost 3,000 tons of ammonium nitrates were shipped into the port in 2013 and stored there, which then subsequently exploded – killing 193 people, wounding more than 6,500 and causing billions of dollars of damage to the Lebanese capital.

Judge Fadi Sawwan referred the case to the state prosecution, which then asked Interpol to arrest two Russian citizens believed to be Boris Prokoshev, captain of the MV Rhosus which sailed from Turkey to Beirut, and businessman Igor Grechushkin living in Cyprus, who purchased the cargo ship in 2012, the National News Agency said.

Grechushkin had already been questioned by police on request of Interpol's Lebanon office back in August.

More than 20 people, including port and customs officials, have been arrested and questioned since the devastating blast, which is now considered to be one of the biggest non-nuclear explosions ever recorded.

The Rhosus set sail from Batumi in Georgia carrying more than 2,700 tons of ammonium nitrate destined for Mozambique, but was forced to make a detour to Beirut in November 2013.

Almost a year later, in October 2014, the explosive material was moved into the port's Warehouse 12, which holds impounded materials.

The ammonium nitrate remained in the warehouse until it exploded while the Rhosus never left the port and sank there in February 2018, according to Lebanese official documents.



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[US defense chief's rare Algeria visit points to Sahel region threats](#)

Author:

Reuters

ID:

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Thu, 2020-10-01 20:30

ALGIERS: US Secretary of Defense Mark Esper made a rare visit to Algeria on Thursday for talks with the president about war-torn Libya and the troubled Sahel region to the south of the Sahara.

Both countries are alarmed by the threat posed by Islamist militant groups in North Africa and the Sahel, and Algeria is weighing a more active military role against them outside its own borders.

Esper and President Abdelmadjid Tebboune held "talks on Libya and the Sahel and both parties agreed to maintain cooperation and coordination," a statement from Algeria's presidency said.

In a statement, the Pentagon said Esper voiced support for expanding military relations with Algeria during the meeting.

"The two leaders discussed security throughout North Africa and the Sahel and ways to advance our strategic military and diplomatic partnership," the Pentagon said.

Esper's visit is the first by a US Defense Secretary to Algeria since Donald Rumsfeld's in 2006 and he is also the most senior American official yet to meet Tebboune.

Tebboune took office in December after mass protests last year led the army to push his predecessor Abdelaziz Bouteflika to step down after 20 years in power.

The new president has proposed changes to the constitution aimed at mollifying the opposition protest movement, but the reforms would also give the army new powers to intervene in neighboring states.

"Mark Esper wants to discuss the Algerian army's possible role in the region once the new constitution is passed as it allows peace-keeping operations

overseas,” a Western diplomat in Algeria familiar with the matter told Reuters.

An Algerian source said the talks were expected to focus on Libya, where nine years of chaos after the overthrow of Muammar Qaddafi have created space for militants, and Mali, where French troops are trying to help quell an Islamist insurgency.

“Algeria has an influence in Mali. It showed it can help. The Americans understood that French military intervention did not curb terrorism,” a senior Algerian security source, who asked not to be named, told Reuters.

“As for Libya, it is well known that Algeria maintains good ties with all the players including tribes and personalities,” the senior source told Reuters.



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Algeria protest movement activists jailed
Algeria journalist acquitted after year in detention

Egypt extends measures to boost country's struggling tourism sector

Thu, 2020-10-01 22:45

CAIRO: The Egyptian government has extended the duration of a number of policies and incentives designed to boost the country's struggling tourism sector, which has been badly affected by the coronavirus pandemic.

The measures include the waiving of visa fees until April 30 next year for tourists visiting the governorates of South Sinai, the Red Sea, Luxor and Aswan.

Businesses that operate within the tourism industry, including hotels, will not have to pay any fees or electricity, water and gas bills until Dec. 31 this year. In addition, all debts owed by companies in the sector, including amounts accrued before the pandemic began, will be rescheduled, with no repayments due until Jan. 1.

A flight incentive program, which includes discounted airport fees for airlines, was extended until Dec. 31.

The government said that their decision to extend the measures beyond the previously announced end date of Oct. 31 is designed to support the winter tourism season, which runs from Nov. 1 until April 30.

The global tourism sector has been particularly badly affected by the effects of the pandemic. It is vital to the economies of many nations, including Egypt, but has effectively been closed down due to lockdowns and travel restrictions around the world.

Bassem Halqa, who represents workers in Egypt's tourism industry, said that the decision to waive visa fees for some of the country's most popular destinations is a very important step in efforts to encourage tourists to return, and will have a positive impact on sector.

However, he called for the initiative to be extended to cover additional destinations, such as Cairo, Alexandria and Giza. He also urged the government to allow public beaches and hotel gyms to reopen.



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Virus-free month lifts Egypt tourism hopesRed Sea resorts drive Egypt tourism hopes