

How the coronavirus' delta variant disrupted Middle East's 'return to normal' plans

Wed, 2021-08-04 21:23

DUBAI: Countries in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region with low rates of vaccination against COVID-19 have been experiencing an explosion of new cases and fatalities linked to the spread of the highly transmissible delta variant.

The variant has been detected in at least 132 countries, prompting new waves of infection, the resumption of travel restrictions, and mounting concern over the availability and effectiveness of vaccines.

In the Gulf and eastern Mediterranean region, the variant has been found in more than a dozen countries including Kuwait, the UAE, Bahrain, and Qatar. Although Saudi Arabia has not yet reported any cases, it has reimposed a raft of travel curbs in additions to bans and penalties for violators.

FORCE OF THE DELTA VARIANT



Countries of the Middle East and North Africa region grapple with a devastating surge of the highly transmissible strain

Also known by its scientific name B.1.617.2, the delta variant of the coronavirus was first detected in the Indian state of Maharashtra in October but was only labeled a variant of concern by the WHO on May 11.

Dr. Abdinasir Abubakar, head of the infectious hazards management unit at the WHO's Middle East and eastern Mediterranean regional office in Cairo, told Arab News: "It was very easy for delta to spread throughout the region due to the many migrant workers from South Asia living in the Gulf and North Africa."

The strain, itself the product of multiple mutations, is thought to be 60 percent more infectious than the alpha (or Kent) variant, an earlier mutation that emerged in southern England in November, and as contagious as chickenpox.

According to a confidential CDC document, picked up by US media in late July, delta is more transmissible than the common cold, the 1918 Spanish flu, smallpox, Ebola, MERS (Middle East respiratory syndrome) and SARS (severe acute respiratory syndrome), has a longer transmission window than the original strain, and may make older people more ill – even those fully vaccinated.

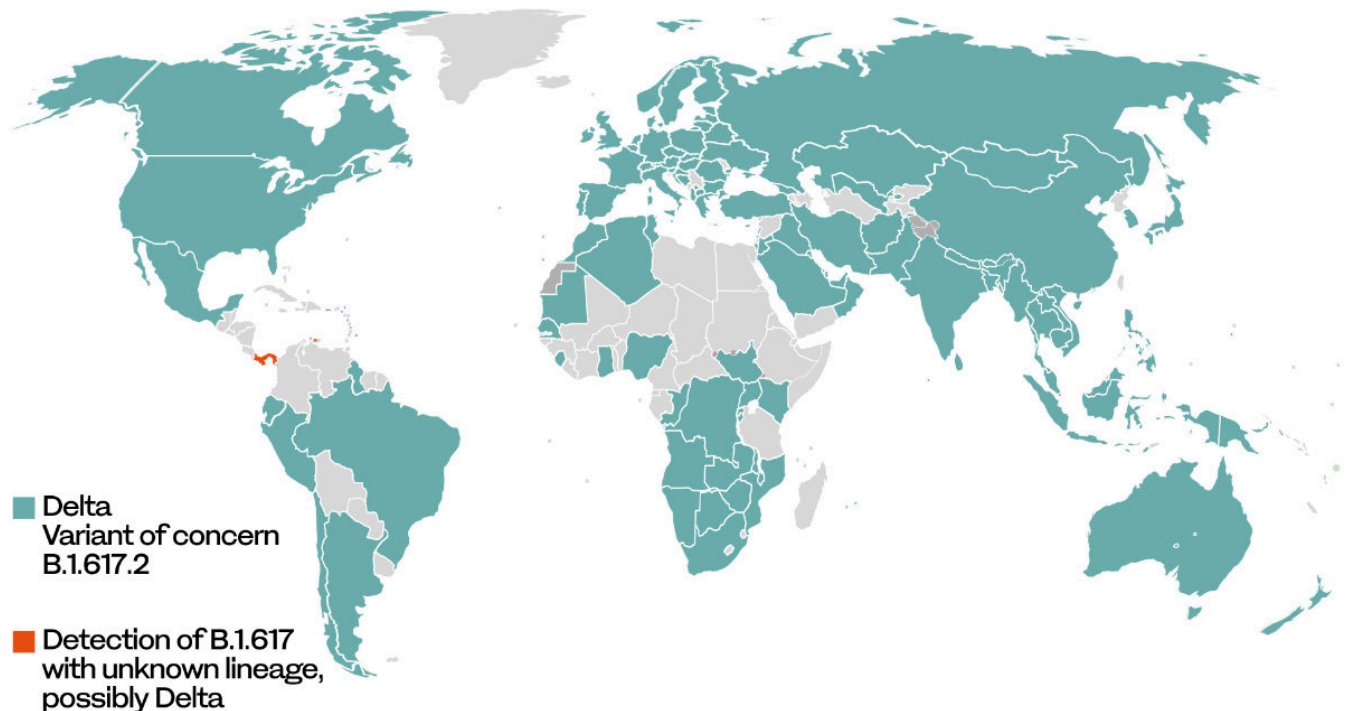
US health officials said people infected with the delta variant could carry up to 1,000 times more virus in their nasal passages than other strains, resulting in higher transmissibility. The WHO predicted there could be at least 200 million new cases worldwide in a matter of weeks.

In many countries, including the UK, the delta variant has now become the dominant strain. In Israel, which has a very high rate of vaccination, delta makes up 90 percent of new infections.

What is perhaps most alarming for health professionals is the number of young people, many of them unvaccinated, who are becoming seriously ill with the variant.

THE SPREAD OF THE DELTA VARIANT

Territories with the highly contagious coronavirus strain



Source: WHO classification as of July 20, 2021

ARAB NEWS

Earlier iterations of the virus were considered more harmful to older demographics and people with underlying health conditions, groups that governments have tended to prioritize in vaccination drives.

Although it appears to cause more severe symptoms than its forerunners, there was currently not enough data to suggest delta was any more deadly.

More encouraging was the data on the effectiveness of vaccines. A study by Public Health England found that the Pfizer vaccine was 94 percent effective against hospitalization after one dose and 96 percent effective after two doses, while AstraZeneca was 71 percent effective after one dose and 92 percent effective after two.

On Sunday, the UK's Guardian newspaper reported that New York-based Pfizer and Germany's BioNTech "have tweaked their mRNA vaccine to target the delta variant and will begin testing it on humans" this month.

The global market for COVID-19 vaccines, valued at \$70 billion this year, could grow bigger as scientists debate whether people will need booster shots for the delta variant.

Owing to the slow rollout of vaccines in large parts of the developing world, there is limited protection for their populations against COVID-19.

In MENA countries, outbreaks of the delta variant of the coronavirus are adding to the pressure on hospitals, life-saving equipment, and even mortuaries.

Tunisia has been gripped by social unrest, attributable to a mix of political dysfunction, stretched healthcare systems, and mounting economic hardship.

FASTFACTS

Delta was labeled a variant of concern by WHO on May 11.

Most new cases in eastern Mediterranean are delta variant.

Variant is especially transmissible among the unvaccinated.

Delta may be 60% more infectious than alpha variant.

Surge poses serious challenge to MENA health systems.

Best protection is to receive two doses of the vaccine.

In Iran, a country which has vaccinated just 3 percent of its population, around 35,000 new infections and 357 deaths were recorded on July 27 alone.

In conflict-ridden areas of the Middle East, namely Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, and Yemen, where immunization rates remain low, the surge in delta cases poses a serious challenge to already ailing health systems and fragile government structures.

Abubakar said: "We are extremely concerned about what will happen when the delta variant spreads to emergency countries like Syria and Yemen. Delta will reach all countries in the region. The WHO is trying to work with nations to prepare for the worst, like having more ICU (intensive care unit) beds, oxygen, vaccines, and amplifying our social messaging.

"No country is immune from delta. We cannot afford for other countries in the region to go through what Tunisia is going through right now," he added.

In Lebanon, for instance, a rise in COVID-19 cases would place an even greater burden on a cash-strapped country already blighted by electricity and fuel shortages.

Pierre Abi Hanna, head of the infectious disease division at Rafik Hariri University Hospital, told Arab News: "The numbers in Lebanon are increasing exponentially, and the majority of coronavirus cases circulating in Lebanon, from the samples taken, are from the delta strain.

“Over the last few weeks, we have also seen an increase in the number of hospitalized patients, all of whom are unvaccinated, as well as a small increase in the number of patients in ICU as well as those requiring mechanical ventilation.”

Patients were being hospitalized because they could not take oxygen at home due to Lebanon’s electricity shortages. Those hospitalized had tended to be younger than before and mostly unvaccinated.

“Some of them have received one shot, but the majority have received none. We are now seeing a higher number of cases in the younger population, aged 20 to 49. In the last three days, we have had an increase in the number of people needing ICU beds,” Abi Hanna said.



GCC countries have coped well with the delta wave largely because of high rates of vaccination and high levels of compliance with public health measures. (AFP)

On a brighter side of the battle, GCC countries have coped well with the delta wave thanks to high rates of vaccination, high levels of compliance with public health measures, and timely travel restrictions.

At the end of June, the UAE announced it was suspending flights from India after recording its first cases of the delta variant. Emirati authorities said the strain now accounted for around one-third of all new infections in the country.

Although it has not recorded any cases of its own, Saudi Arabia unveiled a raft of new measures on July 3 – including a ban on travel to and from the

UAE, the world's top international-transport hub.

Saudi citizens who visit countries on its red list – the UAE, Afghanistan, Egypt, Ethiopia, India, Lebanon, and Turkey – now face a three-year travel ban either directly or indirectly through states on the green list.

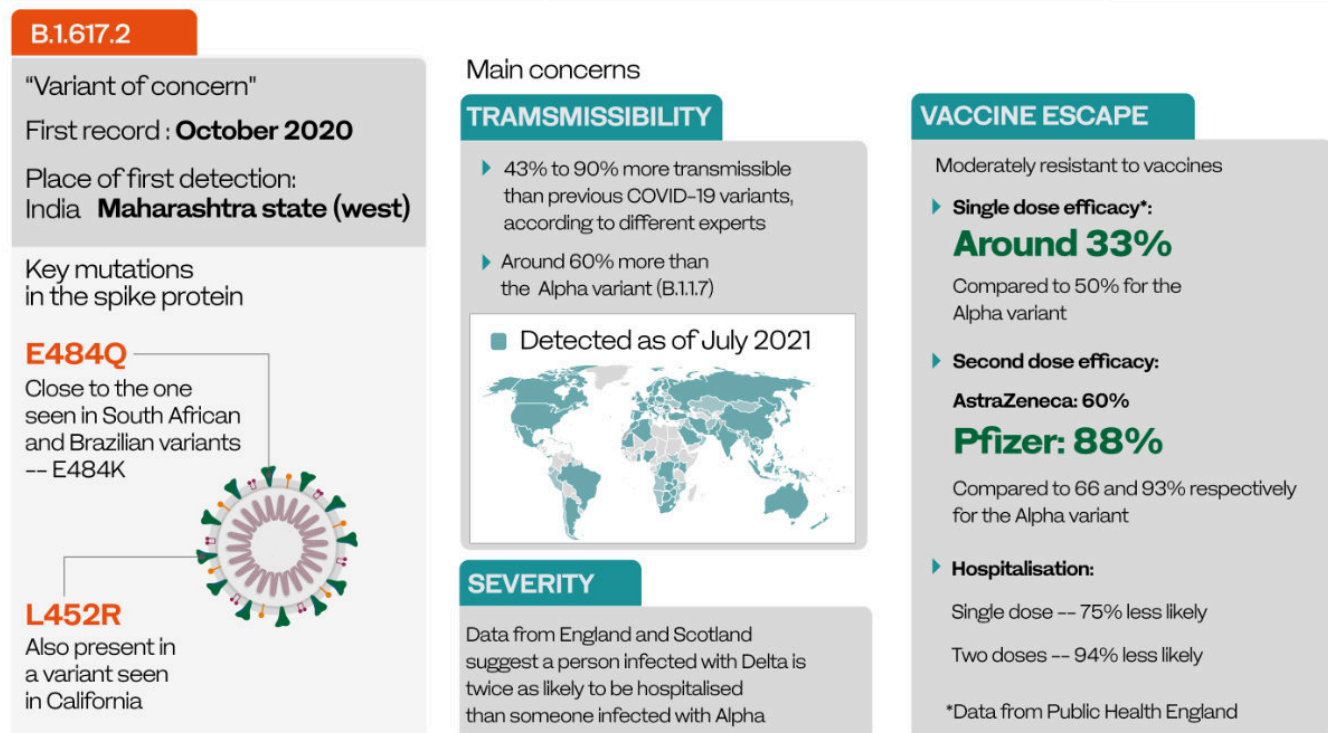
In addition to urging its citizens to continue wearing face masks and maintaining a safe social distance in public places, the Kingdom stressed that the best protection against the delta variant was to receive a second dose of vaccine.

Dr. Wail Bajhmoum, an infectious disease consultant and head of the internal medicine department at King Fahd Hospital in Jeddah, told Arab News: "Citizens should have the vaccines which have been provided by the government and the Ministry of Health free of charge and have been available for everyone in more than 587 centers all over the Kingdom.

"Researchers have shown that two doses of the vaccine will provide very good immunity against all variants of coronavirus, including delta."

DELTA VARIANT AT A GLANCE

Key facts about the highly transmissible coronavirus strain



Sources: [sciencemediacentre.org](https://www.sciencemediacentre.org/)/[New Scientist](https://www.newscientist.com/)/[Nature](https://www.nature.com/)/[webmd.com](https://www.webmd.com/)/[bmj.com](https://www.bmj.com/)/[Public Health England](https://www.publichealthengland.org/) **ARAB NEWS**

The UAE, which has implemented one of the world's fastest vaccination campaigns, has issued a delta-detecting PCR test to help isolate the new outbreak. Cases rose at the end of June to more than 2,000 per day, contributing to a daily average of 10 deaths – the country's highest toll in a single day since March, according to Reuter's COVID-19 tracker.

The UAE's National Emergency Crisis and Disaster Management Authority said the increase in deaths was due to the spread of the alpha, beta, and delta

variants. Since then, cases have fallen, with 1,536 recorded infections and two deaths on July 27.

“Some countries are better prepared than others. Delta was confirmed earlier in the Gulf countries, but they have a better system in place to handle the variant. This helped limit the spread of the variant, supplemented by the high vaccination rate in Gulf countries.

“We have found that the impact of delta on Gulf countries is low compared with countries with low vaccination rates, notably Tunisia, Afghanistan, Iran, and Iraq,” Abubakar added.

The delta variant is only one of several mutations since the coronavirus first emerged in the Chinese city of Wuhan in late 2019 – and it will not be the final iteration.

“It is not the last variant that we will see. We have to be prepared for new variants as well,” Abubakar said.

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Thousands demand justice on anniversary of port blast in Lebanon

Wed, 2021-08-04 23:17

BEIRUT: On a national day of mourning, thousands of Lebanese citizens joined victims' families and protesters on Wednesday to commemorate the inaugural anniversary of the deadly Beirut port blast.

Tensions escalated quickly as authorities shot off a water cannon and deployed tear gas at protestors who threw stones toward security forces near parliament. Some protestors even attempted to storm the parliament building in the heart of Beirut from the various entrances.

According to the Lebanese Red Cross, more than 50 people were injured in clashes between protesters and the authorities. The army said it arrested a citizen in the Zouk area, who was in possession of a weapon, ammunition, gas masks, and metal chains. They made six more arrests at the Awali checkpoint in Sidon as weapons, ammunition, and military equipment were confiscated.

The protesters called for justice and a swift investigation into who should be held responsible for the blast while a senior Christian cleric demanded to know why explosive chemicals had been stored in the capital.

On Aug. 4, 2020, a massive explosion – the country's worst peacetime disaster – destroyed a large section of the capital, killed at least 215 people, and injured more than 6,500. The blast destroyed entire residential neighborhoods and left at least 300,000 people homeless.

The forensic investigator into the crime has not yet issued an indictment to explain what happened but more details about the explosion continue to emerge.

The 2,750 tons of ammonium nitrate, which had been stored at the port for several years without proper safety precautions, arrived on a Russian-leased cargo ship that made an unscheduled stop in Beirut in 2013.

An FBI report seen by Reuters last week estimated around 552 tons of ammonium nitrate exploded in the blast, far less than the amount that had originally arrived.

The protesters on Wednesday demanded that the immunities for the defendants, which include acting ministers, representatives, and security officials be lifted so a proper investigation can be conducted.

"Justice is not just the demand of the families of the victims but of all Lebanese," Maronite Patriarch Bechara Boutros Al-Rai, Lebanon's most senior Christian cleric, said during Wednesday's memorial service.

"All immunities should be lifted. We want to know who brought in the explosives, who allowed for their unloading and storage, who removed quantities of it, and where it was sent."

French President Emmanuel Macron accused the entire Lebanese political class of having "contributed to the exacerbation of the crisis when it placed its interests above the interests of the Lebanese people."

Macron warned that individuals involved in corruption in Lebanon "should not doubt our determination to apply sanctions against them."

The Lebanese parliament is yet to decide on Judge Tarek Bitar's request to lift the immunity of three MPs accused in the Beirut port explosion: former Finance Minister Ali Hassan Khalil, former Public Works Minister Ghazi Zeaiter, and Former Interior Minister Nohad Machnouk.

Caretaker Interior Minister Mohamed Fahmy refused to lift the immunity of the defendant Abbas Ibrahim, director-general of the Lebanese General Security, last week.

Judge Bitar had previously charged the three MPs, and former minister Youssef Fenianos, with "negligence" and "possible intent to murder" because they were aware of ammonium nitrate "and did not take measures to spare the country the risks of an explosion."

Security services took strict measures on the roads leading to the heart of Beirut on Wednesday. They allowed only pedestrians to enter the area and prevented motorbikes and cars during the protests.

On Tuesday, civic groups indicated that attempts would be made during the commemorations to storm parliament, homes of ministers, MPs, and public institutions. They said sit-ins would be held until the parliament approved the lifting of immunity.

On the day of national mourning, flags were lowered over the presidential palace and public institutions as all facilities in the capital were closed.

Thousands of citizens gathered near the port in the afternoon waving Lebanese flags. Protesters came from Baalbek, Tripoli, Tyre, and Matn to express their anger at the authorities' attempts to put obstacles in the way of knowing the truth. Men and women were dressed in black while children and the elderly carried flags and chanted for justice.

The families of the victims carried pictures of their deceased loved ones as they recalled moments of sorrow and tears. They demanded to know why their relatives died.

"What is required is to prosecute all those whom the judiciary accuses of negligence and knowledge of the existence of these tons of deadly materials but did nothing," Hussein Nassar, a war veteran, told Arab News.

"This includes everyone from the top of the pyramid to the lowest ranking official. The revolutionaries are patient, and we will bring down this

parliament in the upcoming elections.”

Nadim Ezz El-Din said he came from Deir Qanoun En Nahr in the south to demand that the ruling authority appears before the judiciary: “I do not want to insult people, but criminals should be behind bars.”

A woman who went by “Lara” went to the Beirut Port to show solidarity with the victims’ families and traveled with her sisters from the Dbayeh area.

“We still believe in the homeland and the revolution, but we hate the parties that took power and brought us to where we are today,” she said. “We will stand in the face of this authority no matter how hard they try to suppress us.”

Elham Awad came with her friends from the Saadiyat region in the south. She said the firing of rockets from the south toward Israel on Wednesday was “an attempt to divert the attention away from the perpetrators of the Aug. 4 massacre.”

A virtual conference to support Lebanon on Wednesday concluded with participants pledging a combined \$370 million within the year to support a country ravaged by a failing government, economic collapse, and widespread living crises.



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Why the trauma does not end for Beirut blast survivors
Lebanese authorities 'criminally negligent' over Beirut blast, Watchdog says

Heroic Beirut nurse reunited with babies she saved from port explosion

Wed, 2021-08-04 23:03

BEIRUT: A nurse hailed as a national hero for rescuing three premature babies from a hospital wrecked by the explosion at Beirut's port a year ago was reunited with them on Wednesday, the first anniversary of the blast. Pamela Zeinoun was working at St. George Hospital University Medical Center, less than a kilometer from the port, when the massive explosion sent a devastating shock wave through the city. Without knowing what had happened, she instinctively scooped up a twin brother and sister and a third baby from their cots in the damaged neonatal intensive care unit on the hospital's fourth floor and carried them to safety.

“I couldn’t believe what I was seeing,” Zeinoun told Arab News. “The feeling of holding again the babies who I had saved a year ago was indescribable – so warm and empathetic.”

The twins, Ali and Sidra, and the third baby, Noah, were brought by their families to the hospital, which was forced to close because of the damage caused by the explosion but has partly reopened, to meet Zeinoun. Noah’s family left Lebanon after the explosion

A photo of the reunion was taken at the spot where a news photographer captured one of the most enduring images of the disaster: a dust-covered Zeinoun clutching the three babies, cradling a phone with her neck.

“It was so heartwarming and emotional, especially when I tried to carry them in one go,” said Zeinoun who recalled how tiny they were 12 months ago and how they have grown since. “They looked so cute, funny and lovable to play with. I felt I was giving them the same warmth I had given them on Aug. 4 in 2020.”

She said it felt great to see the children are growing up healthily, safely and away from danger.

Zeinoun described the explosion as a “heartbreaking catastrophe” and said she sympathized with all the families and victims who lost loved ones. In her hospital alone, the blast killed 22 people.

“When I see the casualties’ families trying to find answers to what happened, I feel like their daughter ... I just wish that justice would prevail and we find out who is behind what happened,” she added.

Describing the scene inside her ward after the explosion, she said the ceiling had collapsed and the room was littered with debris, furniture and toppled medical equipment.

Amid the confusion, as she held the three infants she stopped to answer a ringing telephone in the emergency room, a moment that was captured by Lebanese photojournalist Bilal Jawich. His photo went viral worldwide, appearing on news sites and TV channels and social media platforms. A new father who was visiting his newborn baby on the day of the explosion, helped Zeinoun by lifting metal shelves that had fallen onto incubators so that she could rescue the infants. Despite all the damage, chaos and broken elevators, the nurse managed to carry the newborns down four floors and out of the hospital to safety. She then walked with them in her arms for nearly 5km through streets littered with rubble and wreckage before the driver of a car took them to another hospital. On Wednesday's anniversary, the people of Lebanon mourned those who were killed and injured in what was one of the most powerful non-nuclear explosions in history. More than 200 people died, more than 6,500 were injured and an estimated 300,000 were left homeless.



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Why the trauma does not end for Beirut blast survivorsLebanese authorities 'criminally negligent' over Beirut blast, Watchdog says

Turkey refuses to serve as 'waiting room' for US-bound Afghan refugees

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Wed, 2021-08-04 22:47

ANKARA: Ankara on Tuesday slammed a US move to offer potential resettlement to Afghan migrants who have US affiliations, saying it would cause another "migration crisis" in the country.

Under the new program announced by the US State Department on Monday, the US will open its doors to thousands of Afghans who are fleeing the Taliban violence, but with certain preconditions.

Ahead of the formal withdrawal of US soldiers at the end of this month, the Priority Two refugee program will cover Afghans who worked for US-funded projects and US-based NGOs and media outlets.

Afghans who do not qualify for the Special Immigration Visa program are among those eligible for this program. However, they should be referred by a US agency or the most senior US citizen employee of an NGO or media outlet that is based in the US.

In the meantime, they must wait in a third country after they leave Afghanistan, and this waiting time can last for 12 to 14 months before their application is processed.

Ankara fears this may trigger potential refugee inflows to the country as Afghans mostly use Turkey as a transit country to reach Europe and the US.

"It is unacceptable to seek a solution in our country without our consent instead of finding a solution among the countries in the region," Tanju Bilgic, a spokesperson for the Turkish Foreign Ministry, said on Aug. 3, adding that Turkey cannot handle another migration wave on behalf of a third country.

Hundreds of Afghans have recently crossed into Turkey over the passing week, fueling anti-immigrant sentiment in the country and raising concerns about

further influx as the country already hosts more than 4 million refugees, mostly Syrians and Afghans.

On Aug. 3, 264 Afghans were held after being found inside a truck in the eastern province of Van, where the country has begun building high walls to stop infiltrators from Iran.

"If the US wants to take these people...it is possible to transfer them directly to their country by planes," Bilgic said.

Fahrettin Altun, communications chief for Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, told Bloomberg on Wednesday: "Turkey does not, and will not, serve as any country's waiting room."

A great majority of Afghan asylum seekers will probably remain in Turkey because the number of people who are eligible under the US program is limited, while the UN only resettled 20,000 asylum seekers from Turkey this year.

Deniz Senol Sert, a migration expert from Ozyegin University, said the migration wave following the US decision will mainly comprise highly educated Afghans.

"These people will come to Turkey following visa procedures, and they will not cross the border by land but, most likely, by plane. However, Afghanistan's passport still ranks as the world's least powerful," she told Arab News.

According to Sert, Afghan migrants who have already applied for asylum will have to wait at least one year before their procedures finish.

"It is still unknown whether we have the capacity to handle all these migrants. This wave will continue for months depending on the moves of the Taliban, although Turkey has traditionally faced an influx of Afghan migrants in the summer," she said.

Neva Ovunc Ozturk, a law expert working on transnational migration at Ankara University, said: "The US ranks among the countries that make the most settlements. It is not the first time that the US resettles Afghan migrants under this procedure. This time, it is focusing on Afghans who are affiliated with the US," she told Arab News.

According to Ozturk, such settlement programs have served as pull factors in the past for immigration waves.

"However, Turkey already has a legal framework for conditional refugee status for those who will be resettled in third countries. Therefore, legally speaking, we have already been serving as a waiting room for some categories of refugees," she said.

However, experts underline that the latest US decision should accompany diplomacy that promotes fair burden-sharing among countries that are neighboring war-torn Afghanistan.

“The UN High Commissioner for Refugees can encourage states to increase their refugee resettlement quotas. The US may also encourage countries close to Afghanistan, like Pakistan and Bangladesh, to host a certain number of refugees fleeing the Taliban,” Ozturk said.



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Wed, 2021-08-04 01:56

UNITED NATIONS: Secretary-General Antonio Guterres says in a new report that the threat to international peace and security from extremist group Daesh is rising, pointing to an “alarming” expansion of its affiliates in Africa and

its focus on a comeback in its former self-declared "caliphate" in Syria and Iraq.

The report to the UN Security Council, which was circulated Tuesday, said Daesh and other terrorist groups have taken advantage of "the disruption, grievances and development setbacks" caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, both on the ground and online.

While lockdowns in non-conflict areas suppressed terrorist activity, in conflict areas where pandemic restrictions have less impact the threat from Daesh "has already increased," Guterres said.

"As pandemic-related restrictions gradually ease, there is an elevated near-term threat of Daesh-inspired attacks outside conflict zones by lone actors or small groups that have been radicalized, incited and possibly directly remotely online," he said.

The UN chief said this exemplifies a wider and evolving risk from the accelerated use of digital technologies during the pandemic, and the potential for "new and emerging technologies to be used for terrorist purposes."

In assessing Daesh's threat, Guterres said its leader, Amir Muhammad Sa'id Abdal-Rahman Al-Mawla, "remains reluctant to communicate directly with supporters," and "the group's command and control over its global affiliates has loosened, even though it continues to provide guidance and some financial support."

He said the autonomy of regional affiliates has strengthened especially in West Africa and the Sahel, East and Central Africa, Afghanistan and South Asia. This evolution will be an important factor in Daesh's future global impact, he quoted unidentified UN member states as saying.

Member states also assess that the extremist group "will continue to prioritize regrouping and seeking resurgence" in Iraq and Syria as its core area of operations, he said.

The 16-page report, prepared by Security Council counter-terrorism committee and by experts monitoring sanctions on Daesh, said the group remains active in wide swaths of Syria, where it is seeking to rebuild its combat capabilities and expand its insurgency.

Guterres said Daesh wages hit-and-run operations against checkpoints from hideouts on both sides of the Euphrates River in the eastern province of Deir Ezzor and continues operations against government forces and in the Syrian desert.

In Iraq, Daesh remains under constant counter-terrorism pressure but continues to carry out hit-and-run operations "seeking to undermine critical infrastructure projects, inflame sectarian divisions and communal grievances and generate media coverage," he said.

As for the extremist group's finances, the UN chief said estimates of financial reserves available to Daesh in Iraq and Syria range between \$25 million and \$50 million, with one unidentified UN member state saying most funds are in Iraq.

The secretary-general said the most striking development in the first half of 2021 has been the expansion of Daesh in Africa, where terrorist groups have inflicted the largest number of casualties.

He said some of the most effective Daesh affiliates are spreading their influence and activities from Mali into Burkina Faso and Niger, from Nigeria into Niger, Chad and Cameroon, and from Mozambique into Tanzania.

“It highlights that the interplay between terrorism, fragility and conflict has grown stronger, and underscores the need for an urgent, global response to support African countries and regional organizations,” Guterres said. In Afghanistan, he said, the Daesh affiliate has expanded its presence in several provinces and in and around the capital Kabul, “despite leadership, human and financial losses during 2020.” In Kabul, most of its attacks have targeted minorities, civil society actors, government employees and security forces, he said.

In Daesh’s efforts to regroup and rebuild in Afghanistan, Guterres said the group has prioritized the recruitment and training of new supporters and hopes to attract Taliban members and other militants who reject the US-Taliban agreement as well as fighters from Iraq.

Estimates of Daesh strength in Afghanistan range widely, from 500 to 1,500 fighters, with one unidentified UN member state saying its strength may rise to 10,000 in the medium term, he said.

Guterres said UN member states have already warned “that Daesh could regain the ability to orchestrate international attacks if either its core or one of its regional affiliates became strong enough.”

“This scenario has only become more plausible,” the UN chief warned.



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8-year-old girl born under Daesh control to return to USEgypt officials say
Daesh militants attack kills 5 troops in Sinai