

# Weekly Insights 13 Oct 2020: PMIs, Mobility & Economic Recovery

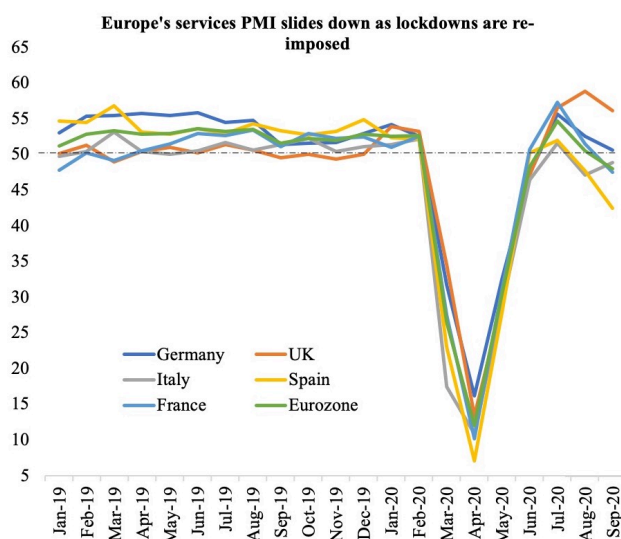
*Download a PDF copy of this week's economic commentary [here](#).*

## **1.Global PMIs, shipping & trade**

PMIs across the globe were released last week. The headline JPMorgan global composite PMI fell for the first time in five months, dipping to 52.1 in Sep (Aug: 52.4). Most manufacturing surveys still indicated an expansion (a reading above 50) though the pace of recovery has slowed as a result of capacity constraints and supply chain delays. Sector-wise, the most significant beneficiary has been the automotive sector, where production capacity increased and new orders posted the most gain since Dec 2019. On the other extreme, tourism and recreation sector continues to be the worst hit – reflecting the glaring divergence between the manufacturing and services sector PMIs (Figure below). September's PMI readings in the services sector have declined from Aug's 7-month highs, as many countries witnessed a resurgence in Covid19 cases (and in some, new record daily cases!), leading to restricted lockdowns which added on to the restrictions due to social distancing policies. Employment posted a net increase for the first time since Jan: though jobs growth was faster in the services sector in Aug-Sep, remember that the sector had also seen the steepest job cuts earlier this year.

Heatmap of Manufacturing PMIs							
	US	Germany	EU	UK	Japan	China	India
Jan-19	54.9	49.7	50.6	52.8	50.3	48.3	53.9
Feb-19	53.0	47.6	49.5	52.1	48.9	49.9	54.3
Mar-19	52.4	44.1	48.3	55.1	49.2	50.8	52.6
Apr-19	52.6	44.4	48.4	53.1	50.2	50.2	51.8
May-19	50.5	44.3	47.9	49.4	49.8	50.2	52.7
Jun-19	50.6	45.0	47.6	48.0	49.3	49.4	52.1
Jul-19	50.4	43.2	46.6	48.0	49.4	49.9	52.5
Aug-19	50.3	43.5	47.1	47.4	49.3	50.4	51.4
Sep-19	51.1	41.7	46.0	48.3	48.9	51.4	51.4
Oct-19	51.3	42.1	46.2	49.6	48.4	51.7	50.6
Nov-19	52.6	44.1	47.0	48.9	48.9	51.8	51.2
Dec-19	52.4	43.7	46.4	47.5	48.4	51.5	52.7
Jan-20	51.9	45.3	48.1	50.0	48.8	51.1	55.3
Feb-20	50.7	48.0	49.1	51.7	47.8	40.3	54.5
Mar-20	48.5	45.4	44.3	47.8	44.8	50.1	51.8
Apr-20	36.1	34.5	33.4	32.6	41.9	49.4	27.4
May-20	39.8	36.6	39.5	40.7	38.4	50.7	30.8
Jun-20	49.8	45.2	47.4	50.1	40.1	51.2	47.2
Jul-20	50.9	51.0	51.7	53.3	45.2	52.8	46.0
Aug-20	53.1	52.2	51.6	55.2	47.2	53.1	52.0
Sep-20	53.2	56.4	53.5	54.1	47.7	53.0	56.8

Source: Refinitiv Datastream, Nasser Saidi & Associates

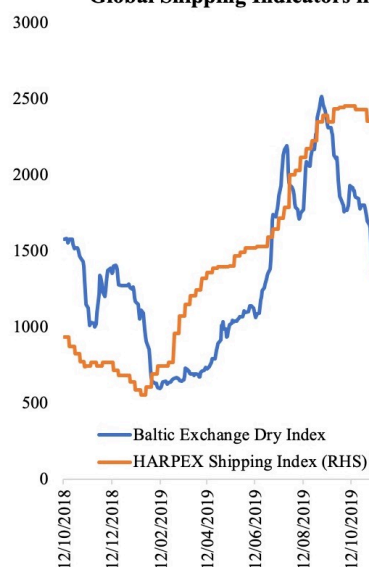


Source: Refinitiv Datastream, Nasser Saidi & Associates

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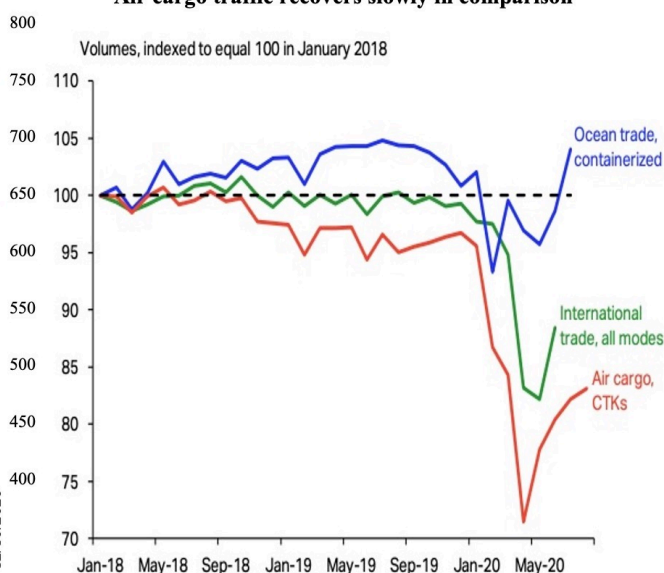
facturing PMI readings have shown an increase in new export orders, supported by a pickup in demand. Global shipping indicators have improved during the summer, with both the Baltic Exchange Dry Index (tracks rates for ships carrying dry bulk commodities) and the Harpex shipping index (index created using container shipping rates across different classes of ship) picking up pace. Both indices rose to its highest in more than a year last week, after having touched 3-year highs in mid-2019 and declining sharply during the Feb-Jun period. However, the air freight sector has not recovered in tandem with shipping (Figure below), a result of cheaper ocean trade – a pattern visible during downturns – as well as insufficient air cargo capacity (according to IATA).

Global Shipping Indicators improve over the summer



Source: Refinitiv Datastream, Nasser Saidi &amp; Associates

Air cargo traffic recovers slowly in comparison



Source: IATA Air Freight Analysis report, Aug 2020

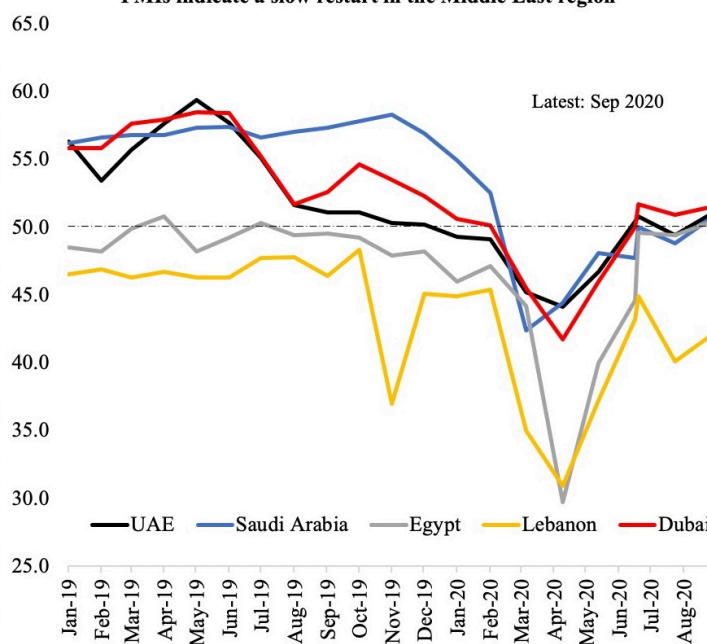
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Heatmap of non-oil private sector PMIs

	UAE	Saudi Arabia	Egypt	Lebanon	Dubai
Jan-19	56.3	56.2	48.5	46.5	55.8
Feb-19	53.4	56.6	48.2	46.9	55.8
Mar-19	55.7	56.8	49.9	46.3	57.6
Apr-19	57.6	56.8	50.8	46.7	57.9
May-19	59.4	57.3	48.2	46.3	58.5
Jun-19	57.7	57.4	49.2	46.3	58.4
Jul-19	55.1	56.6	50.3	47.7	55.2
Aug-19	51.6	57.0	49.4	47.8	51.7
Sep-19	51.1	57.3	49.5	46.4	52.6
Oct-19	51.1	57.8	49.2	48.3	54.6
Nov-19	50.3	58.3	47.9	37.0	53.5
Dec-19	50.2	56.9	48.2	45.1	52.3
Jan-20	49.3	54.9	46.0	44.9	50.6
Feb-20	49.1	52.5	47.1	45.4	50.1
Mar-20	45.2	42.4	44.2	35.0	45.5
Apr-20	44.1	44.4	29.7	30.9	41.7
May-20	46.7	48.1	40.0	37.2	46
Jun-20	50.4	47.7	44.6	43.2	50
Jul-20	50.8	50.0	49.6	44.9	51.7
Aug-20	49.4	48.8	49.4	40.1	50.9
Sep-20	51.0	50.7	50.4	42.1	51.5

Source: Refinitiv Datastream, Nasser Saidi &amp; Associates

PMIs indicate a slow restart in the Middle East region



Source: Refinitiv Datastream, Nasser Saidi &amp; Associates

oil private sector PMI's indicate a slow restart: Sep's modest improvement followed Aug when four of the countries moved into the contractionary territory (i.e. below the 50-mark). Significantly, demand growth has been picking up and the significant price discounting on offer has led to an increase in sales.

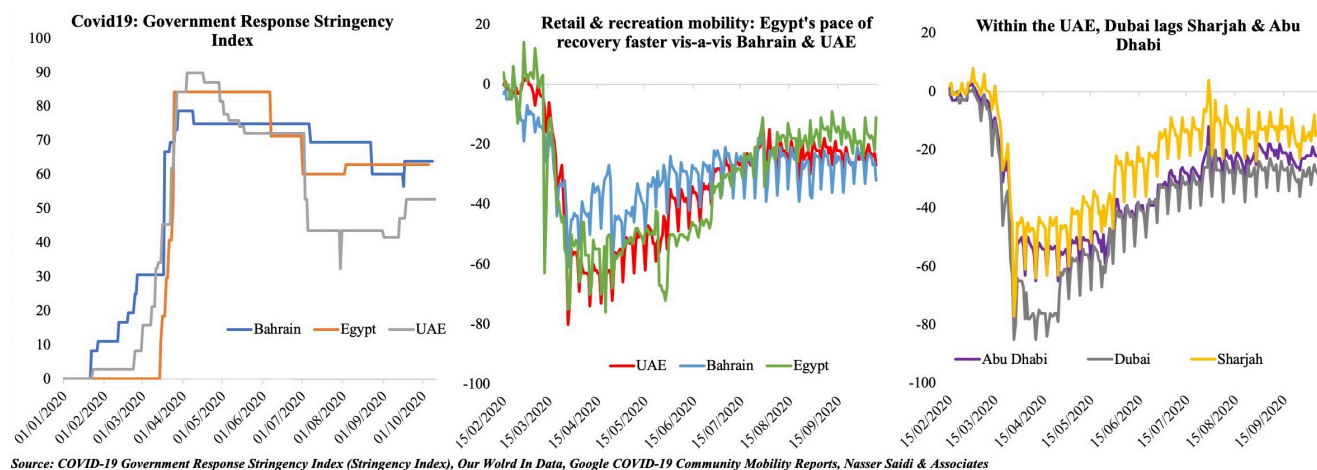
Job cuts are still occurring, as businesses adjust to reduce operating costs. The ILO estimates that Arab states witnessed a 2.3% drop in working hour losses in Q1 this year, followed

by 16.9% and 12.4% respectively in Q2 and Q3. Job postings are slowly ticking up, though anecdotal evidence suggests that potential employees are willing to accept a significant pay cut to undertake similar work. This will lead to a wider disparity in public-private sector wages, not to mention the impact it would have on wider gender disparities (during Covid19, women are already more likely than men to witness a larger drop in mobility to lose jobs in the informal economy or see a reduction in working time).

Furthermore, with lack of access to finance/ liquidity, not all businesses will recover or survive in the next few months, should uncertainty remain. This could result in a structural change brought about due to Covid19 (e.g. the increase in number of online shopping platforms which are relatively less labour-intensive versus actual physical stores). Being faced with limited financial capabilities (due to job losses or salary cuts and depletion of savings), expatriates could also decide to return to their home countries (negatively affecting consumer spending in the region).

### **3. Stringency Index vs. Retail and Recreation sector activity**

The Middle East has seen a resurgence in Covid19 cases in the recent weeks, and many nations are in the process of reimposing partial lockdowns or shorter nationwide lockdowns: the first panel in the figure below shows that the Government Response Stringency Index<sup>[1]</sup> has increased for the UAE in the past month (in line with the increase in cases). This is the best way forward, if we are to take into consideration the IMF's recent World Economic Outlook analysis which found that early adoption of stringent and short-lived lockdowns curbed infections and could be preferable to mild and prolonged measures. The enforcement of lockdowns and social distancing policies was an important factor contributing to a recession: however, such short-term costs of lockdowns may lead to medium-term gains if the virus is contained.



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ility indicator for retail and recreation show that none of the three nations – Bahrain, Egypt, or UAE – have yet returned fully to the pre-Covid19 baseline. Among the three, Egypt, which had declined the most initially, recovered faster in comparison. More interestingly, within the UAE, recovery in retail sector mobility in Sharjah (-14% from baseline in Oct) and Abu Dhabi (-21% from baseline) has outpaced Dubai (-23%). This could potentially be due to higher confidence in these emirates – given mass testing in Sharjah, border controls in Abu Dhabi and a relatively longer lockdown period – compared to Dubai.

What next? Note that a second (or even third) wave of Covid19 is unfolding, as we enter the cold winter months: given the likelihood of resurgence of Covid19, partial recovery – as indicated by PMIs – may be temporary. If further virus containment measures are introduced, though it will dampen economic activity in the short-term, medium-term gains might be achieved. Initial restrictions will likely affect the customer-facing service sectors more than others, but risks to other sectors will increase if further restrictions are imposed. Overall, an air of uncertainty is unlikely to boost confidence among firms, negatively affecting investment decisions and economic activity. Governments need to signal willingness to continue stimulus measures if required and take decisions to introduce “circuit-breakers” if necessary.

[\[1\]](#) The Stringency Index is a composite measure based on nine



response indicators that include school closures, workplace closures, and travel bans; the index ranges from 0 to 100 with 100 being the strictest. This index does not track the effectiveness of the response. More: <https://www.bsg.ox.ac.uk/research/research-projects/coronavirus-government-response-tracker>

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## Weekly Insights 14 Sep 2020: A Balance Act as UAE remains open amid Covid19 surge

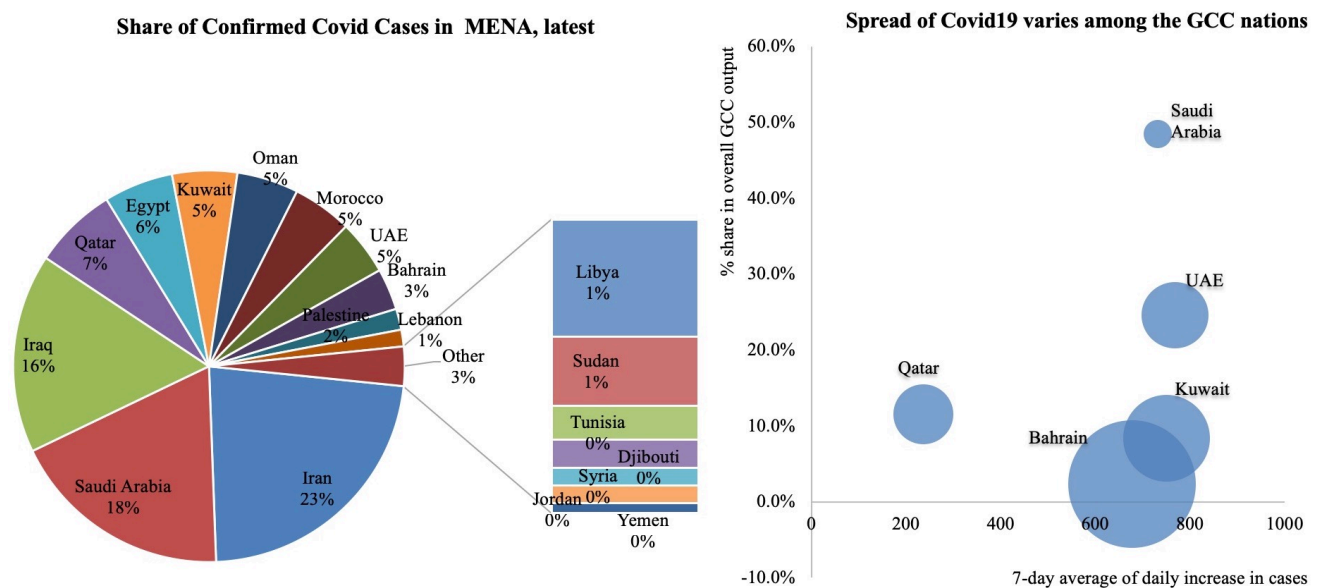
*Charts of the Week: This is a crucial period for GCC, including the UAE. How can one decide on the balance between reopening the economy, supporting economic activity, while also containing the spread of Covid19? What policy measures should top the list to support businesses and consumers?*

### **1. Spread of Covid19 in the GCC/ UAE**

Confirmed Covid19 cases in the Middle East has crossed 1.75mn, with the GCC nations accounting for 43.7% of total cases. Many of these nations have seen a recent spike in cases, after stay-at-home orders and travel restrictions were lifted in addition to reopening previously constrained activities (e.g. mosques, gyms, salons). Among the GCC nations, the spread of the outbreak is still varied. The chart on the right maps the share in total daily increase in confirmed cases per million persons (x-axis) against the share of the country in overall output (y-axis), with the size of the bubble denoting the 7-

day average of the daily increase in cases.

Among the GCC nations, Oman seems to be relatively better off – when it comes to both the 7-day average of daily increase in Covid19 cases as well as the daily confirmed cases per million people; not surprising considering that it is the most “stringent” among the group – the Oxford Covid-19 government response stringency index<sup>[1]</sup> places Oman at 86.11 vs the least stringent being UAE at 36.11 (Sep 2020). The UAE, which accounts for one-fourth of GCC’s GDP, has the highest 7-day average of daily increase in Covid19 cases (size of bubble). While officials have stressed the need for greater adherence to social distancing measures, no lockdown has been imposed as yet. Within UAE, Dubai is already welcoming tourists subject to Covid19 negative tests.



**Source: Worldometers, Our World in Data, Nasser Saidi & Associates. The size of the bubbles on the RHS chart denotes the 7-day average of daily increase in cases.**

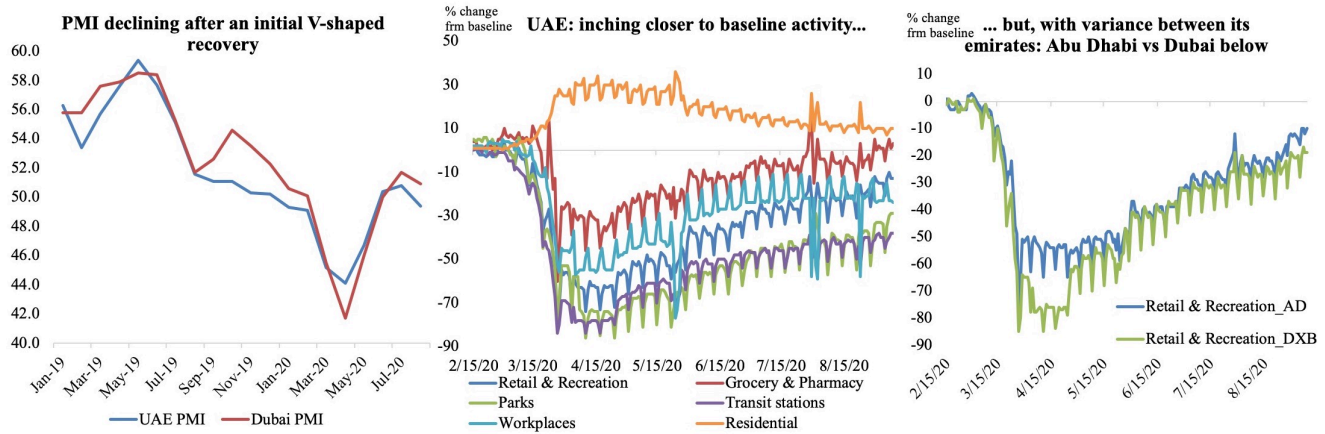
This implies a sharper downturn in GDP this year due to the outbreak, while the effects of lower oil prices and the OPEC+ led cut in oil production will worsen the growth outlook. Given the large proportion of expat population in the country, a dip in growth will also spillover into the labour-importing nations: ranging from job losses (& the return of these

residents to home countries), as well as lower remittances. In anticipation of lower growth this year, the government and central bank have rolled out private sector stimulus packages to support the economy, while reducing expenditures (UAE posted a record budget surplus of AED 9.75bn in Q2 this year). The Federal ministries have reduced spending (including compensation of employees), with overall cuts in capital and infrastructure spending will be detrimental to economic growth.

To compensate from lower oil prices and lower non-oil fiscal revenues, borrowing from international capital markets has gathered steam: so far this year, Abu Dhabi issued a USD 5bn multi-tranche bond (that included a 50-year tranche – the longest term for a bond issued by a GCC sovereign issuer) after having raised USD 10bn previously this year, while Dubai government sold a USD 2bn dual-tranche in early-Sep (the prospectus also disclosed that the emirate had raised over USD 3.6bn in debt this year through several instruments, used to support Emirates Airlines and expenses related to the Expo). An important point to highlight is that though Dubai government debt is placed at USD 34bn, the exposure of government-related enterprises (GREs) were not disclosed – an amount estimated at more than USD 120bn by the IMF. A related point was mentioned in the [previous weekly insights](#): bank credit to the public sector and government are rising, threatening to crowd out lending to the private sector (which recorded a 0.1% yoy dip in Jun).

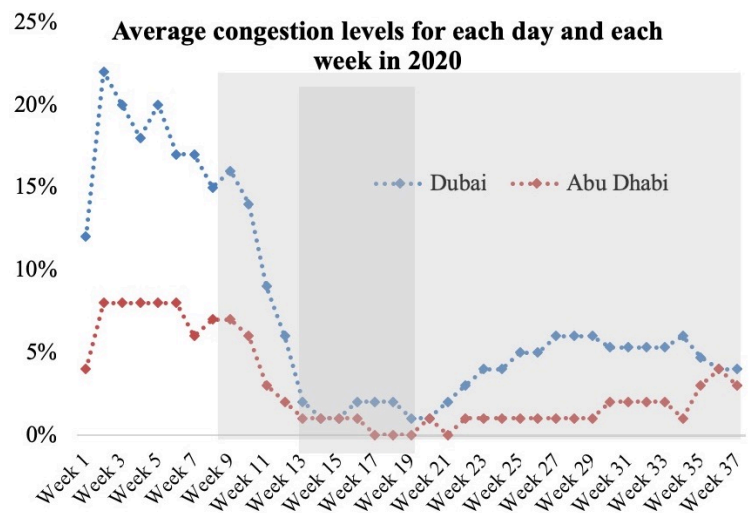
## **2. Economic Activity in the UAE: PMI, Mobility Indicators & Traffic Congestion**





Source: IHS Markit, Refinitiv Eikon, Google Mobility reports (data till 8th Sep), Nasser Saidi & Associates.

th UAE and Dubai (most dependent on non-oil sectors) declined the most in Apr – to 44.1 and 41.7 respectively. Following that dip, the PMI readings have been rising in both UAE and Dubai, though it came to a halt in Aug. Employment continues to be the biggest drag on the index (the sub-index was at the lowest in 11 years in the UAE while in a 6<sup>th</sup> consecutive month of contraction in Dubai) while a rise in sales and related spending was attributed to steeper price discounting (respondent firms generally pointed towards subdued customer demand, not surprising given the wider economic uncertainties).



Source: TomTom Traffic Congestion Index, Nasser Saidi & Associates. Grey areas indicate Covid19 restrictions, with the darkest shaded area the severe restriction dates.

Retail and recreation readings are just under 15% lower than the baseline case in the UAE. There is however a slight difference between Dubai and Abu Dhabi with the latter having recovered faster – probably more confidence as result of

specific lockdown restrictions (i.e. need to provide a negative test result to enter the emirate). Workplace is still 25% lower compared to the baseline – possibly the result of working from home policies in many firms. Congestion statistics already show a slow pickup – but below pre-Covid19 levels – more so in Dubai than Abu Dhabi.

### **3. Policy recommendations for the UAE**

As businesses adjust, governments can provide stimulus support to facilitate transition to the new normal. **The focus in this section is businesses and consumers.** The main immediate concern for firms is operating costs and cash flow: lowering rents/ license fees or offering installment plans for payment of license fees/ rents would help ease financial burdens. Additionally, the government could offer grants to support firms' digitalization/ roll out of innovative processes. Strains on businesses could have a spillover effect on the banking sector via non-performing loans or increased flight risk of business owners unable to meet repayments. Towards this end, an extension of loan repayments deferment should be considered by the central bank (this has already been done by other GCC nations). Banks should also be nudged to lend to the SMEs and not just already "established" firms with a better financial standing: this could take the form of working capital loans or trade loans, with a SME guarantee scheme (specifying criteria for eligible lenders and the assessment process).

As firms' lower headcount to adjust, it would be beneficial to remove barriers to labour mobility (e.g. allowing part-time work visas/ freelancing options versus being tied to a specific company): this would allow employees (and families) to remain in the country to search for alternative jobs (and continue school, visit malls and use hospitals among others thereby contributing to overall consumer spending). Ensuring that sudden job losses will not require a move back to their native country, will increase confidence to invest in the

economy (be it real estate or starting new business ventures). A longer-term policy would be to establish social security nets and/or unemployment insurance to reduce financial burdens alongside jobs support schemes.

[1]

*Check*

<https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/covid-stringency-index?year=latest&time=2020-01-22..latest>

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