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Turkey has not become like Italy. Was it science or luck?

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Pandemics could be considered serial killers, which do not discriminate between the lives they claim, and leave no place on earth untouched. When there's death, there are no winners or victories to talk about. Rather, we should take this time forced upon us to reflect on the meaning of life.

It has been almost two months since Turkey admitted on March 11 it had its first confirmed case of Coronavirus. And now, even though it is among the top 10 countries with the most infections,¹ its official death rate from COVID-19 is the second lowest in this group. Even if the official death rate were to be doubled, which would be the theoretical maximum number possible,² it would not significantly affect its overall standing on that measure.

In early March, Turkey was focused almost entirely on Syria's Idlib province, where 36 Turkish soldiers had been killed the month before by the Russian-backed Syrian regime. Though the crisis brought Turkey to the brink of a full-fledged war with Syria, it was resolved in Moscow on March 5, when Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Russian President Vladimir Putin agreed to a cease-fire. At the height of the conflict, Turkey declared it no longer has the will to solely bear the burden of Syrian refugees, and said it would not stop any who wanted to leave the country. That created horrifying pictures mainly at the Greek border and European Union member countries expressed a loud and deep concern over handling this new wave of refugees flooding in from Turkey. Erdoğan visited Brussels on March 9 to hammer out the details to end this standoff with the EU.

Turkey's coronavirus timeline started on March 11 against the background of these intense changes. The Turkish newspapers printed the day before excerpts from Erdoğan's usual in-flight press conference, where he was asked about the rapid spread of the coronavirus. "As soon as an outbreak became certain, we did not hesitate to take all measures, in a decisive manner," he said. "Indeed, not having any cases from an outbreak that affected 114 countries points out how appropriate the measures we've taken were."³ Health Minister Fahrettin Koca sounded cautious when he went before the cameras during the day-time, saying, "Although there is no registered coronavirus case in Turkey, I cannot attest to the

virus's presence or absence in the country but I can tell you that it's highly likely that this outbreak has already spread in Turkey."⁴ And at midnight, Koca officially announced Turkey's first case of coronavirus.

From day one, Koca, who is a doctor himself, has been an exceptional communicator. His demeanor, soft talk, and choice of words not only helped people better understand the challenging situation but also earned respect and empathy from all segments of society regardless of their place on the political spectrum. "I lost my first patient today,"⁵ he said on March 18. Personalizing this loss as a doctor resonated with people who distrust government and who were worried that the pandemic in Turkey could be even worse than it was in Italy. Since then Turkey has lost over 3,000 citizens to COVID-19, and according to the Johns Hopkins Corona Resource center, there are more than 3 million confirmed cases and about 220,000 dead globally in 185 affected countries and regions.⁶

THE MEASURES

Around the world, no leaders really seem to know how to push back against this viral threat. The common tactic is to wear masks, which was also debated in many countries including Turkey, and to keep a physical distance of at the least 2 meters. But the fear of sudden death has created such panic that leaders took exceptional measures: most economic activity has been frozen, borders have been closed, schools were shut down and moved to online education, and people have been pushed to self-isolate – whether willingly or under state orders. Despite the world's experience with the 1918 Spanish flu pandemic, nothing in living memory compares to this.

In these circumstances, the reaction of every country with regard to health care, budget, savings, infrastructure and the general welfare of its population is critical. These things determine what the state can offer its citizens. President Erdoğan praised himself on April 28, saying that this outbreak proved once again that there is no alternative to the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP).⁷ So what is this exceptional success based upon? Is there any truth into this assessment?

First, the Turkish Health Ministry set up a Corona Virus Scientific Advisory Board on January 10 – only 10 days after China informed the World Health Organization about the virus and long before it closed its borders with Iran, Iraq and Syria. Turkey continued to stop all air and land traffic to and from foreign countries by mid-March.⁸

Health Minister Koca moved in February to stockpile one million boxes of hydroxychloroquine, the long-used malaria drug. And Koca said Turkey's success in fighting the coronavirus depended mainly on using this drug from the moment a patient's diagnosis was confirmed, as opposed to protocols in other countries where it is only used in intensive care units. While the "doctors on the front lines of coronavirus say it's just another tool in desperate times" and "that there are no rigorous clinical trials showing that the drug works,"⁹ it is better to say the results demand more scientific research.

While some members of this Scientific Board speak to the media, the public does not really know how it advises the government. On April 7, almost a month after the first case was announced and with 725 people dead,¹⁰ Health Minister Koca included for the first time in his daily press briefing a map of Turkey configuring the spread of the outbreak in detail. That was the only time Koca shared such detailed information, including the gender distribution of the cases and of the deceased, as on that day he declared that the virus had affected all of Turkey's 81 provinces. Unsurprisingly, Istanbul was hit the hardest. In Ankara, murmurs grew louder that the Scientific Board was demanding at least a lockdown for Istanbul to contain the spread. Koca's press briefings became prime-time programming, and his good rapport with the public also brought rumors that some in the ruling party were unhappy about his popularity.

On April 10, Koca once again delivered a successful press briefing during the nightly main news hour and stopped short of announcing a lockdown. Two hours later, Interior Minister Süleyman Soylu announced on social media that 31 big cities would shut down for the weekend,¹¹ sending so many of those who had physically distanced and self-isolated out on anxiety-driven trips to stock up on food and supplies. "Responsibility for implementing the weekend curfew decision, which was aimed at preventing the epidemic, belongs entirely to me," said Soylu posting on his Twitter account late Sunday and announced his resignation. That triggered an unprecedented tsunami of support to Soylu from people like Devlet Bahçeli, leader of Nationalist Movement Party. Such grandiose show of power was something new in Erdoğan's party and the president as a result did not accept the resignation. Soylu deleted his resignation tweet and posted a new one, expressing how humbled and motivated he felt by continuing to deserve people's trust.

Two weeks later, with many wondering whether that night would cost people's lives, Turkey turned a corner. Since April 24, the number of patients who have recovered has surpassed the number of detected cases per day. Interestingly, the number of tests required started to go down as well, as fewer and fewer patients are going to hospitals with symptoms. Was it science or luck?

Since then Turkey has been ordering lockdowns for the weekends – two to four days at maximum – but for an infectious disease with an incubation period of two weeks, this policy remains nothing more than following herd immunity. This is because once the lockdowns are over, besides those younger than 20 and older than 65 years old, there is a rush to fill the streets and even public transportation, and eventually a relaxation of social distancing at most places. Yet, Turkey has not become like Italy. Was it science or luck?

One could say that Turkey really has reached its peak during the outbreak and that the viral spread has finally turned downward. And even in Istanbul, the emergency wards and intensive care units are not functioning at full capacity. Assuming all of this is fact; then why did the government decide to build a hospital on Atatürk Airport's runways? Did our leaders not foresee success on the horizon? What was the rush about tearing down this landmark? Again, was this science or luck?

Since the new Istanbul Airport opened last year, Atatürk Airport was designated for protocol flights only. Now the hospital construction occupies two of the airport's three runways while the third could still be used for cargo flights. But what is the point of destroying an operational runway when the terminal buildings of the airport remain empty and easier to turn into a temporary hospital?

Even more interestingly, while it is not clear how much this hospital will cost, the government asked people to donate money to rise to meet the challenge of this exceptional pandemic time. If there were budget discipline and accountability, people would expect their tax money to be there at a time of need. Things did not work that way. Take this as a simple example. The government banned the sale of masks and promised people that it would provide them for free. It is unknown how many people did indeed receive their free masks, but many certainly did not get them. No one still has a clue how this mystery will get resolved. Yet the government's base simply considers this all natural.

Recall that Erdoğan's loss of Ankara and Istanbul Metropolitan Municipalities seems to continue bother him. These local governments first came up with the idea of raising funds to help people in need. Even though the laws do permit them to collect money from the people, Interior Minister Soylu accused them of attempting to create a state within a state and now they face a legal investigation into whether their work has a connection with terrorism. This showed once again that the government has no desire or intent to work with their opposing parties' representatives, rather it works to prevent the opposition from practicing politics or governing at any level. Put simply, this does not equate to responsible governance, which would otherwise prioritize people's unity, safety, and well-being.

The opposition continues to bring under the spotlight the government's mismanagement of this health crisis. Veli Ağbaba, deputy chairman of the Republican People's Party (CHP) says, "to tell the people to stay home, without providing the much needed financial support, is to tell them starve at home, (and) die."¹² According to Ağbaba, the number of employees at the closed barbers, hairdressers and beauty salons are 504,000; at the cafes 213,000; at the school canteens and dormitories 150,000. There are about six million street workers, around one million housemaids, and about 500,000 motorcycle couriers. In addition, there are almost 525,000 people working in the shopping centers; 42,350 working at various types of restaurants; 350,000 security guards throughout the country. While the list could continue, the opposition says the government is leaving these people unprotected and worse, distributing the little money there is to its own supporters.

The government paid, in the words of Erdoğan, 1,000 TL first to 2,100,000 households, and then a second wave to another 2,300,000 households, for a total of 4,400,000 households. These households were registered in state records as falling below the poverty line. Erdoğan's government has now announced that a third wave of payments are coming; they will pay 1,000 TL each to those who lost their jobs and are in need. Information is scarce about how many applied for this assistance and how much will be distributed. In any case, 1,000 TL is roughly \$143 U.S., and it hardly helps anyone to make ends meet when they cannot go out during a pandemic. This does not seem like enough help at all.

However, if people think it is, then Erdoğan's government could be considered successful on this front.

Last but not the least, Turkey needs problem solvers more than ever, which means that, ultimately, this polarizing and destructive political maneuvering needs to end. It is not the way to save lives, but rather serves the public with the emptiness of buzz words, and cheap feel-good moments. The uncertainty over when this virus will stop being a threat to human longevity is increasing economic pressure. As for those politicians who make their belief system a statement guiding their individual and professional lives, they should honestly refrain from taking credit but rather start taking responsibility for those who did not survive because they lacked physical, economic or medical protection. Put simply, the number of people who survive this pandemic is not due to the actions of the politicians; lost lives, on the other hand, should be considered their burden if and when the state fails to do everything it can to protect lives. But if there is anyone to humbly take credit for the low death rate in Turkey, it should be the country's doctors who were educated in the "Old Turkey" that the Erdoğan governments do best at any given opportunity to put down, insult and belittle. If there has been any kind of success in this situation, the credit for it belongs solely to those professionals.

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Notes

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² "İlker Karagöz ile Çalar Saat Hafta Sonu", FoxTV, <https://www.fox.com.tr/Ilker-Karagoz-ile-Calar-Saat-Hafta-Sonu-bolum/224/Salginda-ikinci-dalga-daha-buyuk-olabilir-Ilker-Karagoz-ile-Calar-Saat-Hafta-Sonu-26-Nisan-2020>

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⁴ Fahrettin Koca: "Türkiye'de corona virüs yok diyemem", Yeni Çağ Gazetesi, March 10, 2020,

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⁶ COVID-19 Dashboard by the Center for Systems Science and Engineering (CSSE) at Johns Hopkins University (JHU), <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/map.html>

⁷ "Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan: "Salgın tedbirlerini belirlediğimiz takvime göre aşamalı olarak kaldırdıkça inşallah ülkemizde üretim çarkları yeniden tam hız dönmeye başlayacaktır"" , İletişim Başkanlığı, April 28, 2020, <https://www.iletisim.gov.tr/turkce/haberler/detay/cumhurbaskani-erdogan-salgin-tedbirlerini-belirledigimiz-takvime-gore-asamali-olarak-kaldirdikca-insallah-ulkemizde-uretim-carklari-yeniden-tam-hiz-donmeye-baslayacaktır>

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¹² "CHP'li Ağbaba: 'Evde kal' demek, 'Evde aç kal, öl' demektir", MSN, April 7, 2020, <https://www.msn.com/tr-tr/video/unluler/chpli-a%C4%9Fbaba-evde-kal-demek-evde-a%C3%A7-kal-%C3%B6l-demektir/vi-BB12hOXe>