

# The Coronavirus in the Middle East: State and Society in a Time of Crisis





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# The Coronavirus Crisis in the Middle East: Between Fragility and Resilience

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*Brandon Friedman*

This collection of essays focuses on how states and societies absorbed the coronavirus<sup>1</sup> shock as the first wave spread through the Middle East, from February through April 2020.

It offers a critical examination of how several different Middle East countries have coped with the crisis to date. Doha-based intellectual Azmi Bishara, in a wide ranging series of essays written in response to the pandemic, pointed out that in times of crisis people look to the state to as the only organized framework “capable of taking comprehensive and enforceable action.” Moreover, “everyone expects the state to act” and it is “the state that will be blamed for acting or not acting.”<sup>2</sup> It is these fundamental state-society dynamics that we take up in this publication. Rami G. Khouri, a veteran Middle East journalist and commentator, writing in late March, viewed the capacity of Arab governments with a great deal of skepticism, judging it “unlikely they can respond effectively to the new menaces that are upon us...”<sup>3</sup> In the long run perhaps Khouri’s pessimism may prove well-founded, but the analysis presented in this volume presents a more complex picture of the region’s immediate successes and shortcomings in its response to the crisis.

This publication, similar to several earlier studies that have attempted to address how the crisis spread through the region,<sup>4</sup> is not intended to be comprehensive or definitive, but rather representative and preliminary. Each of these essays draw on some combination of official government data, traditional local and international media, as well as social media, to provide a provisional picture of the interplay between state and society in the initial response to the crisis. Due to the global nature of the pandemic countries “varying in size, demography, socio-economic structures and politics” are all addressing the “same challenge at the same time.”<sup>5</sup> In publishing these essays together, under one cover, we have provided a comparative

snapshot that begins to identify what is both common and unique about how states and societies have reacted to the outbreak in the Middle East.

Thus far, many of the governments in the region have not proven to be “uncaring or incompetent.”<sup>6</sup> Joshua Krasna’s essay on Jordan describes how the state mobilized quickly in response to the crisis, allowing the Hashemite Kingdom to successfully contain the virus. Uzi Rabi also describes effective mobilization in the GCC states, but at the same time identified public expressions of xenophobia between Gulf citizens and their large migrant labor populations. Michael Milshtein’s essay on the Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank and Arik Rudnitzky’s essay on Arab Society in Israel both point out surprising levels of coordination and across the Israeli-Palestinian sphere, identifying an often overlooked capacity for cooperation that exists despite the persistent atmosphere of tension and conflict. This aspect of the crisis also underscores the fact that states are relying on each other to win the fight against the coronavirus.

Iran was slow to respond to the crisis and Liora Hendelman-Baavur’s essay traces the evolution of the Islamic Republic’s mobilization, identifying how its reaction has been consistent with a historic pattern of crisis-response. Joel D. Parker and Hay Eytan Cohen Yanarocak’s essays, on Lebanon and Turkey respectively, discuss how the pandemic erupted against the background of a growing economic crisis. Further, Parker and Yanarocak, respectively, show how the Hizballah-backed government in Lebanon and the Justice and Development Party (AKP) government in Turkey have both attempted to exploit the crisis to shore-up their domestic political support, while the full extent of the damage remains to be seen. Similarly, the full extent of the crisis has been hard to gauge in Egypt. Michael Barak’s essay outlines the Sisi government’s late start in its effort to curb the crisis and control the media narrative. Final-

ly, Adam Hoffman's essay on the Sunni jihadists in the region examines divergent approaches to navigating the crisis among the leading jihadi organizations.

While the coronavirus crisis has led to economic paralysis and public lockdowns in many parts of the region, war continued unabated in other parts. In Libya, Turkey's intervention appears to have dealt Haftar's Tripoli offensive a serious setback.<sup>7</sup> In Syria, Israel stepped-up the pace of its campaign against Iranian-backed forces there.<sup>8</sup> At the same time that Russia was waging a public information campaign against the Assad regime,<sup>9</sup> its decade long partner in the Syrian war, the Assad regime was shaking down its most high-profile

business tycoon, Rami Makhlouf.<sup>10</sup> And, in Yemen, a separatist movement in the south is emerging within the framework of a five-year long civil war, expanding the scope and complexity of the war.<sup>11</sup> All of these important developments are beyond the scope of this publication, but perhaps a future project will allow us to consider the intersection between the coronavirus and regional geopolitics. In the meantime, we hope these essays will provide a starting point for evaluating how state and society are coping with the coronavirus pandemic across the Middle East.

- 1 [The World Health Organization \(WHO\)](#) officially named the disease the "coronavirus (COVID-19)" on February 11, 2020. The official name of the underlying virus is "severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2)." The naming distinction between disease and virus is not unusual, for example, HIV is the virus underlying the AIDS disease.
- 2 Azmi Bishara, [Jabr al-Khawatir fi Zaman al-Makhatir](#) [Easing fears in a time of danger], April 20, 2020; Between March 20 and April 12, 2020, these essays were also published in serial as a 14-part series on Arab48.com, see [here](#) [Arabic].
- 3 Rami G. Khouri, "[Arab leaders were already incompetent, then came coronavirus](#)," *The New Arab*, March 20, 2020.
- 4 See for example, Marc Lynch, ed., "[The COVID-19 Pandemic in the Middle East and North Africa](#)," POMEPS Studies 39, April 2020; Michael Young, "[How Will the Coronavirus Crisis Affect Your Middle Eastern Focus Area in the Coming Months?](#)," *Diwan*, Carnegie Middle East Center, April 2, 2020; "[Infected: The impact of the coronavirus crisis on the Middle East and North Africa](#)," The European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR), March 19, 2020.
- 5 Lawrence Freedman, "Strategy for a Pandemic: UK and COVID-19," *Survival* 62:3 (June-July 2020), 25-76.
- 6 Rami G. Khouri, "[Arab leaders were already incompetent, then came coronavirus](#)," *The New Arab*, March 20, 2020.
- 7 Fehim Tastekin, "[Will Libya cheer up Erdogan?](#)" *Al-Monitor*, May 18, 2020.
- 8 Amos Harel, "[Under the cover of COVID-19, Israel Seems to Intensify Its Attacks on Iran in Syria](#)," *Haaretz*, May 5, 2020.
- 9 Charles Lister, "[Russia signals growing dissatisfaction with Syria's Assad regime](#)," Middle East Institute, May 7, 2020; Maxim Suchkov, "[It's not about Assad](#)," Middle East Institute, May 11, 2020.
- 10 Ibrahim Hamidi, "[The campaign against Rami Makhlouf escalates..](#)" [Arabic], *aSharq al-Awsat*, May 21, 2020.
- 11 "[South Yemen in tumult, as Yemen government, separatists face off in Abyan](#)," *Al-Monitor*, May 19, 2020.

# Jordan “Wages Siege Warfare” Against the Coronavirus

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*Joshua Krasna*

Jordan’s coronavirus response was rapid and dramatic. It recognized the danger posed by its insufficient medical capacity (1.4 hospital beds per 1,000 inhabitants), limited resources, and large refugee population, and the resulting need for severe social controls to limit infection and prevent collapse of the health system. The government mobilized its official Epidemics Committee in late January, before Jordan’s first case (March 2) of the virus.<sup>1</sup>

On March 17, King Abdullah II activated (for the first time) the Defense Law of 1992,<sup>2</sup> granting Prime Minister Omar al-Razzaz sweeping emergency powers. The next day Jordan closed borders and shut down most public life, including businesses, transport, prayers, and schools. On March 21 – after short advance notice, leading to a run on food and essential consumer goods at stores – sirens heralded a round-the-clock nation-wide curfew, enforced by the military and national police. The lockdown’s initial stages created significant confusion: inadequate planning and logistics meant the government’s neighborhood distribution network for bread didn’t reach some areas, leading to long lines, frustration, and disorder.

Within a week, the government made needed corrections, and eased restrictions between 10:00 (now 8:00) and 18:00, opening neighborhood food stores and pharmacies; allowing grocery deliveries; and permitting individuals walking (driving without a permit was forbidden until April 29) to shops. It also reopened factories producing food products, medicine, and medical supplies. Schools and universities shifted to distance and on-line learning (including dedicated channels on Jordan Television). The government executed targeted measures in “hot zones”: the military isolated the old city of Irbid (third largest city in Jordan),<sup>3</sup> and some of its surrounding towns, on March 26, after a spike in cases; and certain neighborhoods and

even buildings, including in Amman,<sup>4</sup> were and are isolated temporarily to allow epidemiological investigation and sterilization. There are also 24-hour curfews every Friday (to prevent public and family gatherings), with a ban on communal prayers and *iftar* meals during Ramadan (which began on April 23).

The government is cognizant of the effect of the rigorous containment steps on the economy, which already had low growth (around 2 percent), and unemployment close to 20 percent. 40-50 percent of those employed were in the informal workforce and lack an official safety net. Tourism, accounting for some 20 percent of Jordan’s Gross Domestic Product (GDP), and which employs 55,000, has come to a standstill. The IMF estimates the economy will contract by 3.7 percent this year, before rebounding and growing by more than three percent in 2021.<sup>5</sup>

The government has implemented steps to alleviate hardships for the public and businesses, including deferring tax and loan payments; ensuring laid-off employees receive 50 percent of their salaries, funded partially by the Social Security Corporation (there have been ongoing reports of private employers firing workers or not paying their furloughed workers);<sup>6</sup> direct assistance to the poor, elderly and ill; creating public funds which have received tens of millions of dinar (JD) in private and corporate donations; freezing public sector and military pay raises for 2020 and cutting high salaries in the public sector, including 30-40 percent of ministerial salaries; providing low-interest guaranteed loans for small and medium companies; and increasing liquidity by reducing banks’ compulsory reserve ratio on deposits.<sup>7</sup>

Jordan’s refugee population of approximately 1,000,000 (mostly Syrian) is particularly vulnerable. Some of the Syrian refugees remain in camps, but the majority now live in Jordan’s cities. They

face heightened health risks due to crowded accommodations, inadequate water and sanitation, and limited healthcare access. The lockdown reduced their employment opportunities making it more difficult for them to purchase necessities or pay rent.<sup>8</sup> Aid agencies have complained that the movement restrictions have disrupted their ability to serve their clients in Jordan; and the decision to block access to the Rukban refugee camp, which lies on the Syrian side of the border with Jordan, has received notable media attention.<sup>9</sup>

Overall, the harsh measures seem effective. As of May 7, 473 cases had been recorded, with nine deaths and over 370 recovered (the official figures are viewed as trustworthy). Contact tracing and testing, as well as random testing, are carried out, with over 97,000 tests so far. The government began easing the lockdown in less-affected regions, starting (April 19) with Aqaba, and continuing with another seven out of twelve governorates. After several gradual steps, it re-opened the economy country-wide (though not the educational system or the borders, nor restaurants/cafes, places of worship, or entertainment centers) on May 3rd, though it still dictates protective health and safety measures, and has not lifted the night curfew. It has partially reopened the airport to allow return of Jordanian students and expatriates: over 23,000 have applied, and over 3,000 have already returned, undergoing testing and being sent directly to quarantine hotels run by the military. There is public discussion and awareness of a possible second wave of infection and the government has threatened a resumption of more stringent measures if precautions are abandoned, especially after over twenty new cases were found in early May, traceable to a truck driver, and leading to new targeted closures in Mafraq Governorate and in Irbid.

The regime seems to be making some use of the crisis to suppress criticism. Printing newspapers was suspended, ostensibly due to the danger of infection, threatening the economic viability of many media outlets. The authorities constantly warn of “fake news,” and their intention to counter it severely under the emergency legislation and the country’s far-reaching anti-terror and cyber-crimes laws: “publishing, re-publishing, or cir-

culating any news about the epidemic in order to terrify people or cause panic among them via media, telephone, or social media.” carries a penalty of up to three years in prison. Two senior managers in Roya TV, a private channel, were arrested (April 9) after highlighting workers’ complaints about the economic impact of the curfew, as was a Jordan-based Bangladeshi journalist reporting on the tribulations of Bangladeshi workers in Jordan. Human Rights Watch has noted that “The Jordanian government has acted decisively to protect its citizens and residents from coronavirus, but recent measures have created the impression that it won’t tolerate criticizing the government’s response to the pandemic.”<sup>10</sup>

The securitization of Jordan’s response has been obvious: the government has been ruling through “Defense Orders,” with the king and senior officials speaking of “war,” “struggle,” and “resistance,” against the virus.<sup>11</sup> The Coronavirus Crisis Cell of the National Center for Security and Crisis Management – set up in 2015 under the King’s brother Prince Ali, and whose board is composed of the Prime Minister and the heads of the army and all the security services – coordinates all government, military, and security services activity.<sup>12</sup> While the civilian government is clearly in control, the military and Public Security Directorate (PSD) play the major role in implementation. They enforce movement limitations through checkpoints and patrols (seizing hundreds of cars and arresting thousands of individuals – including two parliamentarians), as well as drones and surveillance cameras. They also distribute supplies to isolated populations, disinfect affected areas, and operate military hospitals. This dependence on the security forces reflects their singular organizational capabilities and resources, alongside deficiencies of civil state and local government capacity, as well as predisposition of the monarchy.

Jordan lacks resources for a major stimulus package, and in any case faces chronic structural problems in its economy. The IMF approved a 4-year, \$1.3 billion loan for Jordan before the crisis’ outbreak, adapting its terms since to cover immediate needs. The EU has proposed a €200 million loan at favorable terms (alongside a similar €500 million Euro loan approved in December 2019).

However, the country’s most significant donors, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states, may be less than generous in the short term, due to their own oil price-induced economic problems. In addition, many of the hundreds of thousands of Jordanian expatriates in the Gulf may lose their jobs and return to the kingdom, adding to unemployment and reducing foreign currency remittances (which overall were 3.7 billion dollars, over ten percent of GDP, in 2018).<sup>13</sup>

Foreign and domestic public debt, already close to 100 percent of GDP, and service of which in 2019 consumed 11 percent of government expenditure, will rise. Global recession will shrink Jordan’s export markets. Conversely, the oil price drop should reduce the kingdom’s energy bill – some 25-30 percent of imports – by 50 percent, or 1.6 billion dollars.<sup>14</sup> Nonetheless, the already precarious economy will most probably deteriorate further, with effects falling disproportionately on the poor.

The al-Razzaz government has faced high levels of public criticism and even some disturbances, since its 2018 formation: Jordanians displayed little trust in public institutions, in which they perceived rampant corruption.<sup>15</sup> This has, at least on the surface, abated, and public satisfaction with the government’s policies and performance is now reportedly over 80 percent<sup>16</sup> (though support for its economic policies seems to be significantly lower).<sup>17</sup> This seems largely due to the regime’s notable transparency – almost-daily statements by the information and health ministers, and frequent statements from the prime minister and

the king – about the crisis and its policy steps, including its willingness to admit and correct errors: there is also much self-congratulation about international praise for Jordan’s model. Success of the policies and support for the regime are also due to a relatively disciplined public, and the policies’ visible implementation by the security forces, which are prominent and unifying in the national ethos, and held in very high regard (over 90 percent) relative to other institutions.<sup>18</sup>

It is worth noting that discussion of possibly deferring parliamentary elections scheduled for this fall for a year due to the crisis, and/or extending the current parliament (the parliament’s official last day is May 9), does not yet seem to have aroused much criticism.<sup>19</sup> The Jordanian parliament, while its formal powers are extremely limited, is the only elected national body in Jordan and its most significant pulpit for public sentiments and arguments.

It remains to be seen whether these positive political effects, from the regime’s point of view, will continue, once the direct threat of the virus recedes, people return to “the public square” and to more open debate, and the economic and social fallout (as well as regional developments, like possible Israeli annexations in the Jordan Valley) take center stage.

1 Ali Younes, [“How Jordan is flattening its COVID-19 curve.”](#) *Al Jazeera*, April 22, 2020.

2 [What is the National Defence Law That Jordan Will Likely Pass to Fight Corona?](#), *Roya News*, March 17, 2020.

3 Charlie Faulkner, [“Jordan Seals Off Irbid After Wedding Causes Coronavirus Spike.”](#) *The National*, March 28, 2020.

4 [“Marqab Area of Amman to be Placed on Complete Lockdown.”](#) *Roya News*, 6 April 6, 2020.

5 Mohammad Ghazal, “IMF Predicts Jordan Economy to Rebound in 2021, Says Fund Stands Ready with Support,” *Jordan Times*, April 15, 2020; The Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) estimates GDP will contract by 3.5 percent, with growth returning to 3 percent yearly in 2022-2024, “Jordan: Country Outlook,” *EIU ViewsWire*, April 24, 2020.

6 Hadil Ghaboun, “The National Center for Human Rights: ‘Detention of Individuals for Violation of Defense Orders Must Be Carried Out in Accordance with Due Process’ [Arabic],” *al-Ghad*, April 13, 2020.

- 7 “Razzaz Donates 40% of His Salary and Ministers – 30% to Combat Corona [Arabic],” *al-Ghad*, April 17, 2020.
- 8 “UNHCR: The Majority of Refugees Are Daily Workers, and the Curfew Has Affected Them Economically and Weakened Them [Arabic],” *Amman.net*, April 2, 2020.
- 9 “Jordan Will Not Permit the Entry of Anyone from the ‘Rukban Camp’ into Its Territory or the Entry of Any Assistance from Its Territory [Arabic],” *Amman.net*, April 21, 2020.
- 10 “[Jordan Arrests 2 Roya TV Journalists Over COVID-19 Coverage](#),” *Committee to Protect Journalists*, April 10, 2020; See, also: “[Jordan: Free Speech Threats Under Covid-19 Response](#),” *Human Rights Watch*, May 6, 2020.
- 11 See: [Adam Hoffman, “The Securitization of the Coronavirus Crisis in the Middle East,”](#) POMEPS Studies 39: The COVID-19 Pandemic in the Middle East and North Africa, April 2020.
- 12 See: [The National Center for Security and Crisis Management](#) [Arabic].
- 13 [Adli Kandah](#), “Labour Migration and the Jordanian Labour Market,” *Jordan Times*, April 25, 2019; and, “[Jordanian Expatriates in the Gulf: Who Remits, How Much, and Why?](#),” *Jordan Strategy Forum*, July 2018.
- 14 Osama Al Sharif, “[Under Nationwide Curfew, Jordanians Now Ponder Economic Cost of Coronavirus](#),” *Al-Monitor*, March 23, 2020.
- 15 [Arab Barometer V Jordan Country Report 2019](#).
- 16 “87% of Jordanians are Satisfied with the Government’s Steps to Face Corona [Arabic],” *al-Ghad*, April 21, 2020.
- 17 Rana Hussein, “Gov’t Should Focus On Rescuing Economy Post COVID-19 Crisis — Study,” *Jordan Times*, May 4, 2020; and, “Poll: 39% of the Respondents are Very Satisfied With the Fairness of Government Measures in the Corona Crisis [Arabic]” *Amman.net*, May 5, 2020.
- 18 Arab Barometer V.
- 19 Mahmoud al-Tarawneh, “Sources Think the Extension of the Parliament for a Year and a Government Re-shuffle Are Likely [Arabic],” *al-Ghad*, May 5, 2020; and, Bassam Badarin, “Jordan’s ‘Elections’ Under Corona: No one is Missing Them, Neither in the State Nor on the Street [Arabic],” *al-Quds al-Arabi*, May 3, 2020.

# The GCC States and the Coronavirus: Between “Coronaphobia” and Economic Shock

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*Uzi Rabi*

The Gulf Cooperation Council<sup>1</sup> states were somewhat hesitant before assessing the seriousness of COVID-19 and taking drastic measures to combat the pandemic and contain its progress. Fears of how an outbreak would affect their ruler-ruled equations prompted them to delay their responses to the challenge. However, as the pandemic proved to be very lethal and swept the whole world, GCC leaderships were quick to implement some of the strictest isolation and containment measures.

In mid-March 2020 more than 870 COVID-19 cases were recorded across the six member-states. Facing a mounting public health threat, the GCC states began closing their borders, canceling flights, and grounding their airlines. A policy of home confinement of the population was declared and various forms of curfew were implemented in the GCC states. On March 4, Saudi Arabia suspended the *umrah* (the minor pilgrimage to Mecca) due to the coronavirus, portending things to come.

Government operations ground to a halt throughout the GCC, and mosques were closed and collective prayers were banned. During the second week in March, the UAE and Saudi Arabia banned *shisha* (smoking tobacco through shared water pipe, also known as a *narjilah* or *hookah*)<sup>2</sup> at cafés, bars, and restaurants. Shaking hands or kissing each other on the cheeks, a common greeting across the Arab Gulf, was quickly discouraged. The UAE and Qatar have also advised their citizens to stop the traditional “nose to nose” (*al-khashm*) greeting,<sup>3</sup> with Abu Dhabi instructing residents that a wave would suffice. Deserted streets, mosques, and shopping malls have replaced the usually vibrant markets and cultural life. The coronavirus quickly turned life upside down in Arab Gulf societies.

Measures such as suspension of work permits for foreigners and repatriation of tourists to their countries of origin were put in place. “Coronaphobia” came to the fore in the shape of accusations against the “other,” namely expatriates and foreign laborers who number in the millions in the GCC states. For example, Kuwaiti actress Hayat al-Fahd has called for foreign workers to be “kicked out” of the country “...even if I have to throw them in the desert.” She added that the country [Kuwait] has been devastated by what she called “traders of residency IDs.”<sup>4</sup>

## The Economy

There was a stark difference between the GCC states and other Arab states that were totally ill-prepared for a pandemic. The wealthy GCC states could afford massive acquisition of ventilators and testing kits. In that sense, they were among the few Middle Eastern countries that were equipped to respond effectively to the threat posed by the virus. Also, they announced measures to shield their economies, Qatar, for example, granted 75 billion riyals (\$20.5 billion) in incentives for the private sector and more state investment in the local bourse.

However, the GCC member-states were also facing an economic shock. For some of them, the implications were staggering. Home to some of the busiest airports in the world, the Gulf hubs were hard-hit by the pandemic. The long-term effects for many international firms and companies, will be significant. Dubai’s Expo 2020 was supposed to attract three million visitors over six months, beginning in October 2020, and will now be postponed, a serious blow to the local economy.

At a time when increased government spending was badly needed to offset the negative impact of the virus, an unprecedented and dramatic decline in oil prices was triggered by a pricing war for market share between Saudi Arabia and Russia. The drastic fall in prices at the height of the pandemic will put additional pressure on the GCC states' economies, pushing them to increase their deficits and borrowing, while depending on their cash reserves. It is still early to predict the impact that the pandemic will have on the GCC states, but it seems safe to assume that a recession in the Gulf is likely.

## The Geopolitics of the Coronavirus

While the pandemic has exposed some of the structural constraints and the fragility of GCC states' economies, it has not fundamentally changed the geopolitics of the region, instead it has reinforced the existing rivalries that have driven geopolitics in recent years. A more assertive and robust GCC foreign policy in the opening decades of the twenty-first century constituted a break with tradition and was meant respond to a rapidly changing regional environment. Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, adversaries of Iran, closed ranks and took aggressive steps to counter what it perceived as expanding Iranian influence, while the UAE has consistently challenged the Muslim Brotherhood's influence in both the Gulf and the broader region. Qatar, on the other hand, has played an important role in financing Hamas-run Gaza. The GCC states were pointing their fingers at Iran for spreading the virus in the Arab world

and the Kingdom of Bahrain went as far as to accuse Iran of “biological aggression” over the coronavirus.<sup>5</sup>

Meanwhile, the pandemic seems to have resulted in a dramatic reduction of violence throughout Yemen. The five-year civil war, a scene of a proxy conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran, has left millions at the brink of misery, famine and death. A widespread pandemic in such a war-torn country could be catastrophic. Against this background, a ceasefire declared by the Saudi-led coalition fighting Iran-backed Houthi rebels in Yemen went into effect in mid-April 2020. The ceasefire brings a much needed respite for the 24 million Yemenis who were exhausted and in desperate need of humanitarian aid. However, it is hard to say whether the coronavirus will reshape the foreign policies of GCC states, pushing them toward a more inward looking approach and reducing the attempts to project power that they have engaged in over the last several years.

The ways in which the GCC states have managed the coronavirus crisis has been revealing. While they have been able to manage the pandemic with some success, it is too early to say whether they will emerge from the crisis in a stronger position. It seems reasonable to suspect that any signs of failure, will deepen existing socio-political divisions and raise the stakes in what is a delicate politics of survival for many of the ruling families in the GCC.

1 The GCC includes Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

2 “Shisha: The Middle East’s favourite toxin,” *The National*, October 20, 2013.

3 Jasim al-Qamis, “*Kayfa Yuqbil al-Arab*” (How Arabs Greet Each Other) [Arabic], *Manshur*, January 4, 2017.

4 “[Kuwaiti actress Hayat Al-Fahad triggers uproar with call for expat ban over coronavirus](#),” *Arab News*, April 18, 2020.

5 “[Bahrain accuses Iran of ‘biological aggression’ over coronavirus spread](#),” *al-Arabiya*, March 11, 2020.

# The Palestinians and the Coronavirus: Between Cooperation and Escalation

*Michael Milstein*

The coronavirus challenge appeared in the Palestinian arena during a particularly sensitive time. In the West Bank, the Palestinian Authority (PA) is facing a severe and ongoing political crisis, accompanied by a mutual economic boycott between it and Israel and a deep breakdown in its relations with the U.S government. In the Gaza Strip, civilian distress, has exacerbated the security situation, making it difficult to establish a long-term strategic truce between Hamas and Israel. On the eve of the Corona crisis' outbreak, both the West Bank and the Gaza Strip were apprehensive that the existing social order could collapse and lead to a new round of violent confrontation with Israel.

Both Palestinian governments' dealings with the Corona crisis, thus far, has been perceived by them as a success, mainly because the number of confirmed patients in the Palestinian arena is among the lowest in the Arab world (some 400 patients in the West Bank, two of whom have died so far; 20 in the Gaza Strip, most of whom have recovered)<sup>1</sup>. In fact, this success is not only a result of Palestinian conduct but also of the support Israel provides. This demonstrates the close existential link between the Palestinians and Israel on all levels, as well as the importance of the civil-economic component in maintaining strategic stability in the Palestinian arena.

The PA stands out in its successful fight against the Corona challenge. Ramallah has swiftly and effectively isolated and treated patients, closed public spaces (including mosques), and promoted public information (among other things through the use of social networks, state media, and the religious establishment). It is not surprising, therefore, that in last month's public opinion polls in the West Bank, the Palestinian public gave Ramallah a high score on its dealing with the crisis.<sup>2</sup>

However, this success would not have been achieved without the extensive cooperation of the PA with Israel on all levels, led by the medical and economic sectors, a phenomenon that has gained wide public support in the West Bank.<sup>3</sup> In this framework, Palestinians are provided with medical equipment, receive training, and maintain close security and civilian coordination. Israel also provides important aid to the PA's economy, which was severely damaged by the Corona crisis (similar to Israel's).<sup>4</sup> The economic damage raised concerns that it would undermine the Palestinian public's fabric of life (along with fears of rising unemployment and poverty rates<sup>5</sup>, as well as incidents of domestic violence and crime). In light of the importance of the economic component in maintaining strategic stability in the West Bank, Israel has provided emergency financial assistance to the PA and moderated its two-year policy of withholding Palestinian tax revenue that has been used by the PA to pay the families of terrorists.

The cooperation between Israel and the Palestinian Authority has also been accompanied by tension, most notably as a result of statements from senior Palestinian officials (including Prime Minister Mohammad Shtayyeh) that Israel was deliberately spreading the coronavirus among the Palestinian population through its soldiers or through the insertion of infected Palestinian workers into the West Bank without testing or isolating them. Israel has viewed these claims as incitement and has threatened to end its cooperation with the PA if it continues, fearing that it could lead to terrorist attacks.<sup>6</sup>

The situation in the Gaza Strip is ostensibly better than in the PA, but Hamas and the public are extremely anxious. There is serious concern that the actual number of people infected with the virus is higher than what is officially reported and known (the number of tests in Gaza is very low), and that

if, or rather when, a widespread outbreak will occur, the Hamas government will not be able to manage the crisis. Hamas, for its part, has demonstrated a determined approach to the challenge thus far: 27 isolation facilities were quickly set up across Gaza, which housed some 2,500 residents; social distancing in the public domain (including mosques) has been strictly enforced; the prices of basic products in the Gaza Strip has been closely monitored; and the cease-fire with Israel has been carefully maintained (suggesting that the “quiet” depends on Hamas’s will and not its ability).

In early April, Hamas pursued a political initiative in order to ensure the rapid delivery of civilian aid from Israel that will help it deal with the Corona threat. Hamas raised the possibility of providing information to Israel about the two Israeli civilians who are in its custody (as well as returning the bodies of two IDF soldiers who were killed in the Gaza Strip during Operation Protective Edge in the summer of 2014) in exchange for releasing sick and old Palestinian prisoners who are in danger of being infected by the coronavirus, and receiving widespread medical assistance from Israel.<sup>7</sup> Hamas’s unusual call to advance a “deal” reflects the depth of its distress, but it also constitutes a “window of opportunity” for advancing negotiations on an issue that has been in deep stagnation for several years. However, as both Israel and Hamas slowly emerge from the coronavirus crisis, the discourse about a prospective “prisoners deal” is gradually dying.

Another prominent Corona-related arena is East Jerusalem. In this area, there is friction between Israel and the Palestinians, with each party claiming that, under the pretext of the Corona crisis, the other side is trying to increase its control over the city and undermine the other’s presence there. According to the Palestinians, the Israeli effort is focused on changing the status quo on the Temple Mount/*al-Haram al-Sharif*, while Israel claims the PA is expanding its civilian activity in the city (in response to the growing effort of the PA to strength its influence in East Jerusalem, Israel has also arrested a number of Palestinian officials from the city). There is a growing tension among the residents of East Jerusalem, who do not receive the same assistance being offered to

residents in West Jerusalem, despite an increase in the number of confirmed patients (about 150 so far, 2 of the, died) in East Jerusalem. However, exceptional cooperation is taking place in the neighborhoods located beyond the security barrier (where approximately 120,000 Palestinians reside out of 350,000 Palestinians who live in East Jerusalem). In view of a wave of crime and violence in those neighborhoods during the Corona crisis, Israel has taken the unusual step of allowing Palestinian security forces to deploy there for a month (during April), in order to enforce public order.<sup>8</sup>

The relative stability in the Palestinian arena is very fragile and depends on two key factors. The first is maintaining the relatively low rate of infection in both regions (especially in the Gaza Strip), while containing the geographical spread of the virus. The second is preserving a basic standard of living for the Palestinian populations (with an emphasis on food, water, and medical services). Undermining either component could affect the stability of both Palestinian governments and further strengthen the likelihood of an escalation with Israel.

At least for now, the Corona crisis in the Palestinian arena presents more challenges than opportunities. However, if stability is established over time, the crisis may be present more concrete opportunities. The first of these, mentioned above, is the prisoners and missing persons deal. Its potential depends on timing. If it occurs when Hamas maintains full control over the spread of the virus, Hamas’s motivation to make a deal may decline; but if there is a spike in infections, then it might lead to a deterioration in Hamas’s position in Gaza. This, in turn, would allow Israel to advance the idea of strategic truce in the Gaza Strip, which would be accompanied by support for Hamas re-asserting its authority over other factions in Gaza.

In the West Bank, the Corona crisis had served as a basis for close cooperation between the two sides for three months. But this cooperation is gradually giving way to intense Palestinian preoccupation with the politics of annexation and Mahmoud Abbas’ recent declaration that the PA would end its

the civil and military coordination with Israel (the PA is worried that the Israeli unity government will soon formally annex parts of the West Bank). The Annexation process and the PA's reaction to it could result in escalation and confrontation between the parties that will make the coronavirus

cooperation seem like a distant memory. However, delaying or limiting annexation may help rehabilitate the relationship between the two parties and allow for cooperation on additional challenges that may develop in the Corona context (a second wave), in the near future.

- 1 Editor's note: These numbers, and the others that appear in the remainder of this article, reflect the state of affairs through May 14, 2020.
- 2 According to a survey by the JMCC Institute from early April, the public confidence in the conduct of the Palestinian government in the face of the Corona crisis stands at 96% (see the survey on the Institute's website: [www.jmcc.org](http://www.jmcc.org)), and a similar survey by the AWRAD Institute from the end of March indicated a rate of 82% (see website Institute: [www.awrad.org](http://www.awrad.org)).
- 3 According to a March 24 poll by the Palestinian Center for Public Knowledge (PCPO), 68% of the Palestinian public supports cooperation with Israel in the fight against the Corona. See the survey on the Institute's website: [www.pcpo.org](http://www.pcpo.org).
- 4 According to Palestinian Prime Minister Mohammad Shtayyeh, the losses of the Palestinian Authority on April 9 stood at \$ 3.8 billion, see: *al-Ayyam* (Ramallah), April 9, 2020.
- 5 As a result of the Coronavirus crisis the official unemployment rate in the West Bank has increased from 17 to 35 percent. See: [www.pcbs.gov.ps](http://www.pcbs.gov.ps)
- 6 See an article on this incitement and the Israeli threats: Samanews, April 12, 2020.
- 7 See a presentation of the initiative as part of an extensive April 2 interview with Yahya Sinwar, head of the Hamas political bureau in the Gaza Strip - [www.alwatanvoice.com](http://www.alwatanvoice.com).
- 8 *al-Quds* (East Jerusalem), March 31, 2020.

# Arab Society in Israel and the Coronavirus Crisis

Arik Rudnitzky

The month of Ramadan is usually filled with a family atmosphere. This month is also characterized by economic boom in Arab communities. Many people visit local markets to shop for food to break the fast, and the coffee shops and late night entertainment centers are usually filled. This year, things are different. In the evenings, Arab communities are under complete lockdown and the residents obey the social distancing regulations in order to maintain public health. Arab religious leaders, doctors, and Knesset members – all conveyed the same message to their public: *elzam beitak* – “Stay at home.” The public has complied. The gates of the mosques remain locked and prayers during Ramadan are held at home. Celebrations of *Eid al-Fitr* at the end of Ramadan will also be limited.

It’s not just the Muslim community (who constitute the majority of the Arab population — 85% of 2 million people), who have been affected by the pandemic. Christians (7%) and Druze (8%) have also adjusted to the new reality. During Easter, which took place about two weeks before Ramadan, the doors of the Christian churches remained closed and the colorful parades on the streets were canceled. The Druze community has also set a historical precedent: the traditional festivities of the Nabi Shu’ayib holiday, celebrated every year at the end of April, were canceled for the first time in the history of the Druze community.

Israel’s first case of the coronavirus was reported in late February. At the end of March, the number of coronavirus patients in Arab localities was less than 60, and the proportion of these cases was negligible, only 1% of about 5,400 cases in total. However, by the beginning of May the number of coronavirus patients in the Arab communities exceeded 1,000, representing 6% of more than 16,000 cases.<sup>1</sup>

Date	Arab morbidity cases	Total morbidity cases in Israel	% Arab
March 31	56	5,358	1.05
April 10	278	10,408	2.67
April 17	505	13,107	3.85
April 28	855	15,728	5.44
May 5	1,016	16,289	6.24

The low morbidity rate of Arab communities has been due to their location on Israel’s geographical periphery, far from the epidemic’s first outbreak, providing Arabs with a “natural quarantine”.<sup>2</sup> More than 90% of Israel’s Arab citizens live in three major areas: the Galilee (northern Israel), the Triangle region (central Israel), and the Negev (southern Israel).

## Arab Society’s Response to the Coronavirus Crisis

However, Arab public figures claim that the low morbidity rate should not be attributed to Arabs “natural immunity,” but was the result of low-test rate carried out in Arab localities. For example, during the first month of the outbreak, only 6 percent of all tests were conducted in Arab communities, significantly lower than their 20 percent share of the population. Further, it is claimed that the government has not provided the public with information about the disease and ways to contain it in Arabic.<sup>3</sup> According to the Supreme Monitoring Committee, the highest extra-parliamentary political body of the Arab public, the state’s health services prioritized treatment and testing in Jewish communities while testing in Arab communities began only in the outbreak’s second

phase in late March. The impression was that “the treatment of Arabs is only intended to prevent contagion among Jews.”<sup>4</sup>

At the end of March, the Supreme Monitoring Committee and the National Committee of the Heads of Arab Local Authorities in Israel launched the “Arab Emergency Committee,” which established an operational headquarters and Arabic language call center in Shefar’am to provide the Arab public with professional healthcare information and support.<sup>5</sup> The committee set-up its operational center at the Galilee Society offices in Shefar’am, which is the oldest registered Arab association in Israel. It was established by Arab doctors in 1981, and it engages in public health and environmental studies. It is considered one of the most professional Arab civil society institutes in Israel.<sup>6</sup> The Arab Emergency Committee has helped coordinate the police and military’s enforcement measures with the local population; tests and gathers data on coronavirus patients and those they have been in contact with; and, conducts public awareness campaigns in Arabic.

The Islamic Movement has also been active among the Arab population. Following the well-known statement of its founder in the 1980s, the late Sheikh Abdullah Nimer Darwish, “If the state does not help us, we shall help ourselves,” the Islamic Movement formed its own action committee: “The Nationwide Emergency Committee.” The Islamic Movement’s committee works in cooperation with the Arab Emergency Committee, but it is an independent body. It provides food for needy families who are financially affected by the crisis or in quarantine and cannot provide for themselves. It also provides medical, legal, economic, and psychological counseling services, as well as answers to questions on religious issues, especially during the month of Ramadan. The Islamic Emergency Committee has also set up a call center with dozens of activists answering questions from the Arab public. The committee’s branches are spread across 65 Arab localities throughout the country: Galilee, the Triangle, Negev and the mixed Jewish-Arab cities. In total, the committee employs some 6,000 volunteers.<sup>7</sup>

The effective measures undertaken by the Arab leadership and civil society organization fill a void left by state authorities. Nevertheless, contrary to past patterns where Arab organizations usually operated autonomously, without coordination with state authorities and sometimes contrary to their opinion, in the current coronavirus crisis the activities of Arab organizations and institutions have been coordinated with state authorities.



*Jewish and Arab paramedics during prayer time. Photo courtesy: Mohammed al-Nabari, MDA spokesperson office*

## The Relations Between Arab Public and State Authorities

For the first time in the history of the State of Israel, extraordinary cooperation has been established between state authorities and the Arab public. In Arab communities, IDF soldiers and police personnel are openly walking around, enforcing emergency health regulations. The Arab political leadership is backing Israeli enforcement agencies and the Arab public is fully complying.

According to a comprehensive public opinion poll conducted last summer by Konrad Adenauer Stiftung among Arab citizens of Israel, a large majority of them are satisfied with their living standards in the State of Israel (71.5%), believe they are generally treated equally as citizens of the state (65.2%), and overall have a positive impression of the state (64.7%). However, their sense of belonging to the state is somewhat low (4.04 on a scale of 1 to 10).<sup>8</sup>

The lives of Jews and Arabs in the State of Israel are almost completely separated: Separate

places of residence, separate education systems, and some separation is also evident in the labor market as about half of the Arab workers are self-employed within the Arab communities. In contrast, Arabs are far more integrated into the public health system workforce.<sup>9</sup> The proportion of Arabs working there is greater than the proportion of Arab workers in all civil service sectors (11.3%). At present, 17 percent of Israeli doctors come from Arab society, as well as 24 percent of nurses and 47 percent of pharmacists.<sup>10</sup> One of the best-known doctors is Mas'ad Barhum (60), director of the Galilee Medical Center in Nahariya. Appointed in 2007, Barhum is the first Arab doctor to run a government hospital.<sup>11</sup> Quite a few Arab doctors currently hold senior management positions in Israeli medical centers. One of them, whose name recently made headlines, is Dr. Khitam Hussein (45). She is the director of the infections department at Rambam Hospital in Haifa, the largest hospital in northern Israel, and heads the new anti-coronavirus department.<sup>12</sup> Shortly

after the outbreak of the coronavirus crisis, social media networks circulated short clips featuring Arab medical personnel wearing surgical masks with the caption in Hebrew and Arabic: "Partners in Destiny, Partners in Government."<sup>13</sup>



Photo courtesy of "Have you seen the horizon" Facebook page

Should state authorities and Arab leadership take advantage of the cooperation that has been established under these unusual circumstances, the coronavirus crisis might well introduce a new, more optimistic chapter of Jewish-Arab relations in Israel.

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# Iran and the Coronavirus: From Denial to National Mobilization

*Liora Hendelman-Baavur*

Iran has been badly battered by the coronavirus and the Middle East country hardest hit by the crisis to date. By mid-March, according to an Iranian local health spokesperson, one person was dying from the coronavirus every 10 minutes, and some 50 people were becoming infected with the virus every hour.<sup>1</sup> These figures, which occurred in the aftermath of the outbreaks in China and Italy, made Iran an early target of international media attention.<sup>2</sup> Early assessments of Iran's initial reaction to the coronavirus were negative and primarily leveled against the regime's indifference and proclivity to prioritize ideology over public health. Much of the blame was attributed to the government's mounting failure to contain the virus; its inability to coordinate effectively with the provinces; and its failure to inform the public of the gravity of the situation. However, by the end of March, the regime had shifted from indifference to national mobilization with the assistance of the armed forces and international aid.

Iran reported its first confirmed cases of infections on February 19, yet the regime made no decisive attempt to break chains of transmission in order to mitigate the outbreak.<sup>3</sup> As the situation rapidly deteriorated and the leadership scrambled to explain the situation, some reports pointed to Chinese clerical students and workers in the holy city of Qom (which has a population of 1.2 million) as the possible source. Later accounts claimed it originated with an Iranian businessperson who returned infected from China. Government officials blamed the outbreak on international economic sanctions, and there were those, like the IRGC's Commander Hossein Salami, who went as far as accusing the U.S. of waging biological warfare on Iran. Foreign Minister Javad Zarif tweeted that American economic terrorism is supplemented by its medical terrorism, and relentlessly tried to convince European states and other countries to pressure the U.S. to ease its "maximum pres-

sure" policy on Iran during the crisis on humanitarian grounds.<sup>4</sup>

On February 21, three days after the government's first acknowledgment of the outbreak and public confirmation that two people had died from the coronavirus, elections were held for the Islamic Republic's 11<sup>th</sup> parliament without administering any health precautions taken to protect voters. Although the turnout was relatively low (42.57%, the first-time turnout dipped below 50% since 1979), the elections had a significant role in the spread of the epidemic which infected scores of officials, including 23 members of parliament.<sup>5</sup>

On February 23, the government began implementing preventive measures, including canceling public events and gatherings and closing schools and universities but only in half of the country's provinces.<sup>6</sup> In Tehran (which has about 9 million residents), snack shops and water fountains were ordered to close, and public transportation to be disinfected daily.<sup>7</sup> Shortly after, the parliament was temporarily closed down as well. However, even after the media reported the virus has spread throughout the country and Iran's deputy health minister, Iraj Harirchi, and the head of the country's emergency medical services, Pirhossein Kolivand, were both infected with Covid-19, the government downplayed the gravity of the crisis and merely recommended citizens to maintain personal hygiene and stay home.<sup>8</sup>

Iran's restricted media environment generated a surge of rumors, disinformation, and fake news. Two recent episodes —the November 2019 popular protests, and the January 2020 downing of a passenger plane by the IRGC's air defense— have shown that in the face of major crises, the Islamic Republic does not shy away from concealing and even fabricating reality. Social media reports claim the official tally vastly underestimates the true number of coronavirus cases in the country.<sup>9</sup>

Tweets by local health workers exposed the regime's efforts to downplay the impact of the virus, the shortage of medical staff, lack of protection measures and test kits in clinics and hospitals. To curb this kind of "fake information," and prevent coronavirus panic, the Iranian Cyber Police joined the crisis management taskforce. By the end of February, the police unit announced the arrest of 24 suspects for distributing false news and warning issued to additional 118 internet users, among them nurses and other public health workers.<sup>10</sup>

The government's policy of withholding information reduced public confidence, leading many Iranians to ignore official guidance that could have helped contain the pandemic. The Health Ministry's announcement that checkpoints would be used to limit travel between major cities during the two-week vacation of Nowruz (the Persian New Year), starting March 20, was disregarded by citizens and according to reports three to four million people in Iran were traveling during the holiday without any restrictions.<sup>11</sup>

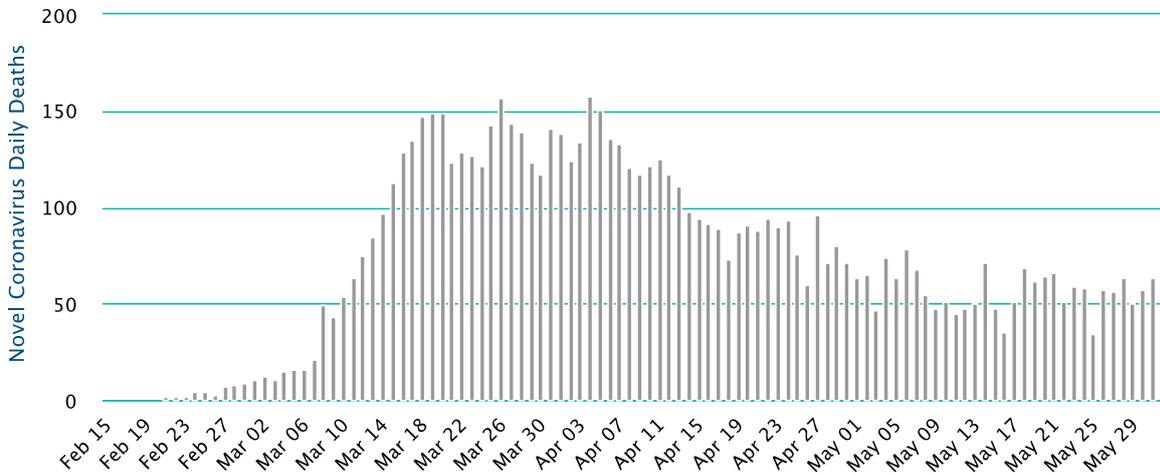
During the fatal period of the initial outbreak, President Rouhani's government was hesitant and vague in responding to the crisis. On February 1, the Interior Minister Abdolreza Rahmani Fazli announced that all flights to and from China have been halted until further notice.<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, between February 4 and February 23, Mahan Air, which is believed to be under the direct control of the IRGC, had 55 flights to Beijing, Shanghai, Gwangju, and Shenzhen.<sup>13</sup> The exposure of Mahan Air's mysterious flights sparked a public outrage, yet China was the first country to send health specialists, humanitarian supplies and medical equipment to assist Iran in its fight against the pandemic.<sup>14</sup>

The outbreak has also sparked intense debate between the government and ultra-conservative Shi'i clerics, who strongly resisted the cancellation of religious events including Friday prayers. In Qom, for example, Ayatollah Mohammad Saeedi, head of the Fatima Masumeh mausoleum, insisted that places of worship should remain open despite the outbreak.<sup>15</sup>

By mid-March, the alarming rates of infection and death in Iran forced the regime to change its tactics and launch a national mobilization campaign and a "smart social distancing" plan. The army, IRGC and the paramilitary Basij forces were authorized to take command of the country's response to the pandemic, including the enforcement of quarantine regulations, setting up a field hospital at the international exhibition center in North Tehran, and inaugurating a factory reportedly capable of producing 4 million masks per day.<sup>16</sup> As the struggle to contain the Corona-virus continues, on April 14, the death toll in Iran dropped to double-digit figures for the first time in a month, and the state gradually reopened the economy.<sup>17</sup> On April 27, Iran reopened its borders (except with Turkmenistan) to renew regional trade.<sup>18</sup>

For the past 41 years, the Islamic Republic has proved resilient in the face of domestic and foreign pressures. In 2019 alone, Iran faced full-scale crises streaming from political unrest, regional tensions, economic sanctions, and a series of natural disasters (floods, locusts, air pollution and earthquakes). The Covid-19 outbreak activated the Islamic Republic's default strategy in confronting crises. For several weeks, the leadership denied and downplayed the spread of the virus. Official indifference was followed by Tehran's trademark tactic of shifting the blame to the regime's adversaries. Casting fault on others was coupled with restrictions on information (curtailing what it deemed as fake news and silencing critics), and then came complacency and propaganda underscoring the regime's achievements in containing the crisis via internal solidarity and national resilience. The latest figures indicate a drop in new virus infections in Iran [see Figure 1 and Figure 2]; however, just as Iran's endemic corruption, economic mismanagement, and currency crisis have contributed to triggering civil protests in the country since at least 2017, the lingering effects of the coronavirus are likely to gnaw at the Islamic Republic's legitimacy in unpredictable ways.

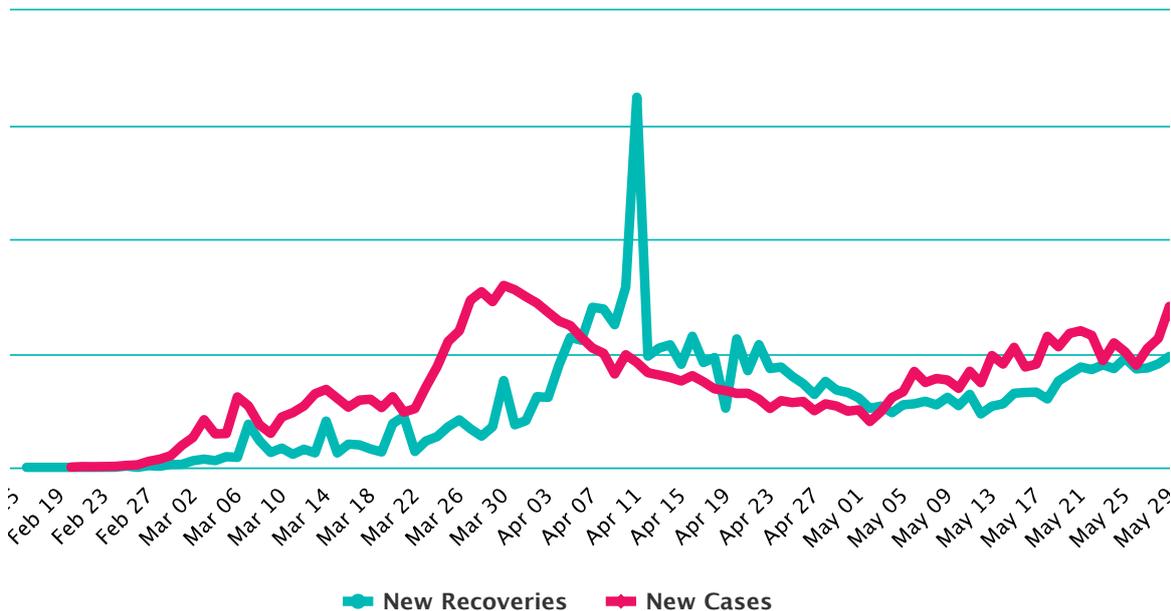
## Daily New Deaths in Iran



Source: [World Meters Info](#), June 2, 2020

## New Cases vs. New Recoveries in Iran

Number of newly infected vs. number of recovered and discharged patients each day.



Source: [World Meters Info](#), June 2, 2020

- 1 ["In Iran, every 10 minutes one person dies from the coronavirus - health official,"](#) Reuters, March 19, 2020.
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- 3 ["The death of two people in Qom from Coronavirus is confirmed \[Persian\],"](#) Young Journalists Club, February 19, 2020.
- 4 ["Iranian nation will get through this biological warfare: Salami,"](#) Mehr News, March 5, 2020; ["U.S. sanctions against Iran is 'medical terrorism': Zarif,"](#) Tehran Times, March 8, 2020.

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- 18 Najmeh Bozorgmehr ["Iran's borders reopen as government seeks to revive regional trade"](#), *Financial Times*, April 27, 2020.

# The Coronavirus in Lebanon: A Crisis?

*Joel D. Parker*

Since mid-April 2020, the official numbers show that the new cases of novel coronavirus is in steady decline.<sup>1</sup> Given the fact that Lebanon has a densely populated territory with over a million citizens living below the poverty line, 1.5 million Syrian refugees, and about 300,000 Palestinian refugees, Lebanese officials began to worry about a public health crisis from the end of February, and effectively shut down urban areas in mid-March. With just 25 deaths officially reported by early May, observers such as Liz Sly of the Washington Post have written that Lebanon appears to have emerged with a much better situation than anyone would have predicted.<sup>2</sup> Others, such as Tony Badran at Foundation for Defense of Democracies, argue that the official numbers are not to be trusted given divisions in the Lebanese public healthcare system, the fact that the Minister of Health is Hezbollah-backed, and due to the sensitivity of the issue in a deeply unstable socio-political environment, where a “technocratic” government was formed in January to replace the one that resigned following mass popular protests last year.<sup>3</sup> Either way, the public health threat has been a serious challenge, occurring just as the government emerged ostensibly to stabilize and reform the failing economic system.

The Ministry of Health announced around 750 cases and 25 deaths by early May.<sup>4</sup> The first confirmed case, which was announced on February 21, was of a woman who had traveled to Iran.<sup>5</sup> However incoming flights from Iran (along with China, Italy, and South Korea) were not banned until March 11, three weeks later. The next day officials closed all land crossings into Syria, while the government in Jordan closed its borders to travel with Lebanon and Syria on March 17. In mid-March, the government imposed a curfew from 19:00-05:00, and loosened that to 21:00-05:00 on April 24. However, a sudden spike of 36 new cases led to a reversal on May 10 back to the original curfew for the indefinite future.<sup>6</sup> The international airport of Beirut was officially closed to non-citizens on March 19. From then until

mid-April a repatriation effort took place, which returned 2,317 on commercial flights and 356 on private jets. This effort was suspended on April 10 until April 27 after a rash of new cases, following the return of students from universities in Europe and North America.<sup>7</sup> Some 1,200 Lebanese citizens were repatriated from Iran, many of whom were studying at the Shi'i seminaries (hawzas) in Qom, which was the center of the coronavirus outbreak in Iran. Hezbollah's health network took responsibility for testing this group; perhaps unsurprisingly, none of them were reported to have been infected.<sup>8</sup>

The current government is dominated by the March 8<sup>th</sup> political alliance that includes Hezbollah, Amal, and the President's son-in-law Gibran Bassil's party the Free Patriotic Union as well as independent politicians, and the Minister of Health, Hamad Hassan from Baalbek, was picked by Hezbollah for the job.<sup>9</sup> In addition, Hezbollah runs its own hospitals and clinics located in its strongholds of southern Lebanon, Baalbek and south Beirut. The organization even announced that it was testing its fighters going into Syria.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, despite the low official numbers, Hezbollah has made a very public demonstration that it is leaving no stone unturned in its effort to help locate and treat coronavirus victims, especially among the supporters of the party. It has reportedly mobilized thousands of party activists to visit towns throughout southern Lebanon and readied a reported 1,500 doctors and 3,000 nurses along with 100 ambulances to “wage war” on the virus.<sup>11</sup>

Lebanese political activists appear more concerned with their social welfare than social distancing. Many perceive the overall economic crisis and government corruption as the most urgent threats. The deep economic contraction in 2018-2019 (-1.9% and -6.9% respectively), is expected to deepen significantly in 2020 with a projected negative growth of 9-14%.<sup>12</sup> In March, the government announced that it would not be able to continue to pay its foreign debts, essentially forcing a re-

structuring of Lebanon's debt that is feared will trigger a significant reduction in foreign investment for the short-to-medium term. However, the United States has committed to \$13.3 million in aid for COVID-19 treatment and prevention, with \$8 million slated to protect the refugee communities through the UNHCR.<sup>13</sup> Also on March 12, the World Bank approved a fast track aid package worth \$40 million to help Lebanon face the threat of the virus and continue to focus on its general economic crisis.<sup>14</sup>

Due to the economic crisis, it took several weeks for Lebanon to get testing up to speed, and it was only in mid-April that the government announced it was able to expand testing to around 1,500 people a day, including some randomized samples, which are needed to see if the country can move towards opening up key economic sectors.<sup>15</sup> Other reports suggest that only around 500 tests a day were actually done though until mid-April, giving a rate of 2.5 tests per thousand. By mid-April, over 18,000 total tests had been done. Yet the positive cases only came back around 3.7 percent of the time, which is a much lower ratio of tests to positive results than, for instance, those observed in most U.S. states.<sup>16</sup> However, in the rural town of Bsharri, which has a population of 24,000, there were at least 600 tests done and 60 turned out positive. This amounted to nearly 10 percent of the total cases in Lebanon at the time. Local officials in the Christian-majority resort town denied

that Bsharri was an anomaly and suggested that if similar testing rates of 25 per thousand went on throughout the country the official numbers would be much higher than they are.<sup>17</sup>

Despite the assumption that the picture painted by the Hezbollah-backed Ministry of Health is overly rosy, and that the coronavirus situation may be considerably worse, there have not been reports of overwhelmed Lebanese hospitals or leaked images that would imply a high death rate. Yet the stirrings of the October 2019 protest movement that appeared dormant have revived, as seen at the end of April with explosive riots in Tripoli carried out by demonstrators shouting that they were too hungry to worry about virus restrictions.<sup>18</sup> Large segments of the population are bracing for deeper economic pain in the coming months following the weakening of the Lebanese pound, a global recession, and an effective end to the tourism industry which accounted for 19 percent of the total GDP in 2016.<sup>19</sup> It is likely that despair and unrest will overtake brief moments of near national unity that were experienced in March and April as healthcare workers were embraced as heroes for working with little pay to save lives and prevent what could have been a catastrophe.<sup>20</sup>

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- 18 Michal Kranz, "[In Lebanon's new wave of protests and riots, Tropolli is leading the way](#)," *Al-Monitor*, May 6, 2020.
- 19 Sarah Abdallah, "Cash-strapped Lebanon struggles amid the coronavirus crisis," *Al-Monitor*, April 26, 2020.
- 20 See Liz Sly on *Twitter*, [April 17](#), showing Lebanese musicians playing outside a hospital in support of healthcare professionals and the ill patients inside.

# Turkey's Struggle with the Coronavirus

*Hay Eytan Cohen Yanaracak*

Due to its unique geography and its increasing role as a hub for the world's commercial air traffic, inevitably, Turkey succumbed to the coronavirus pandemic. Given the fact that last year alone Istanbul's two airports, Sabiha Gökçen<sup>1</sup> and Istanbul Grand Airport (IGA),<sup>2</sup> hosted 90.4 million passengers in aggregate, the coronavirus' arrival was expected.

However, unlike its neighbors Iran and Greece, which officially reported their first infections in February, Turkey's first cases of the virus were officially reported on March 11. In early April, rumors swirled on social media that Turkey had adopted the downplaying of the number of cases in order to preserve its fragile economy from the effects of the pandemic. Even established media channels like CNN Türk, which typically avoid challenging the official government narrative, began to question - indirectly - Turkey's immunity from the disease by publishing a map showing all of Turkey's neighbors (apart from Syria, whose northern border is under Turkish occupation) as corona infected, while Turkey was portrayed as immune from the coronavirus.<sup>3</sup>



*The Turkish headline states: "The Coronavirus has surrounded us from all directions."*

Certainly the growing critics began to threaten the government's credibility at home and abroad. In light of criticism, Turkey's Health Minister Fahrettin Koca chose to make gradual announcements to prepare of the public for the pandemic.<sup>4</sup>

On March 17, Koca announced the first confirmed death of a 89 year-old Turkish national who was infected by his employee who returned from China.<sup>5</sup>



*Habertürk News Channel: "Can the Turkish gene provide protection from the virus?" (Screenshot)*

In the midst of uncertainty, conspiracies took root and began to spread fear in Turkish society. This phenomenon reached its peak when in Yeni Şafak İbrahim Karagül - who is considered as one of the closest journalists to the president - argued that the coronavirus was produced in a laboratory to raise a new superior race and to destroy the economies of the adversaries of the West, meaning China, Russia, Iran, and Turkey.<sup>6</sup> Inevitably this complex picture triggered xenophobia. The social media discourse has revealed the anti-Chinese, anti-Syrian, and even antisemitic sentiments in Turkey. While the Chinese and the Syrians were portrayed as usual suspects for infecting Turkish nationals, the Jews were branded as the rich owners of the medicine companies who seek to profit from this pandemic worldwide by selling the their hidden "unreleased vaccine."<sup>7</sup>

Public hysteria grew even further when Ankara University's İbni Sina (Avicenna) Hospital's Dr. Güle Çınar's briefing to healthcare staff was leaked to the public. In a short video, Dr. Çınar claimed that the number of confirmed cases in Turkey had reached thousands and not hundreds as was reported by the government. She went on to express her hope that Turkey would not become like

Italy and underlined the deteriorating situation in Istanbul, Ankara, Kayseri, and Van - which is located at the Turkish-Iranian border that was closed in February 23.<sup>8</sup> Dr. Çınar's briefing ended with a serious accusation that the government was not taking the necessary health measures to deal with Turkish pilgrims who were returning from the *umrah* pilgrimage in Saudi Arabia.<sup>9</sup> The video resulted in a public outcry that called into question the government's Corona reporting. The government forced Dr. Çınar to apologize for her viral video,<sup>10</sup> but as a result, the Turkish Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet) took the unprecedented step of closing all of the mosques, including the Friday prayers<sup>11\*</sup> on March 16.<sup>12</sup> In mid-March, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's week-long media silence fueled concern that the government was concealing the extent of the damage from the public.

On March 18, Erdoğan finally broke his silence and urged the Turkish people to obey the social distancing instructions, to pray, and to exercise patience.<sup>13</sup> Erdoğan's excessive optimism coupled with a lack of binding measures against the pandemic created public indifference. In order to preserve economic stability, Erdoğan allowed the public to go to work. This put the populations of Turkey's large urban centers at risk. In Istanbul, Ankara, and Izmir people continued to commute to work using crowded public transportation. Moreover, the majority of the public continued to go to the parks and the beach. In mid-March, Turkey began to gradually implement restrictions. On March 12, schools were closed;<sup>14</sup> on March 19, the Turkish football Super League was shut down;<sup>15</sup> and, on March 22, restaurants and cafes reduced activity to take-away customers, which collectively had the biggest impact on daily life in Turkey.<sup>16</sup>

In the wake of the public support, the government began to take further measures. For instance Turkish Airlines suspended all of its international flights until May 28.<sup>17</sup> A similar measure was also adopted domestically when the Ministry of Interior decided to subject all inter-city transportation to special permits.<sup>18</sup> Inevitably these measures accelerated the deterioration of the economy. The public expected a government aid package to offset some of their losses, similar to practices that

were implemented in other countries like Germany. However these hopes were dashed when President Erdoğan asked the public to donate money for the needy in the framework of a new public campaign, called "We are self-sufficient, my Turkey" (*Biz Bize Yeteriz Türkiyem*).<sup>19</sup> Erdoğan donated 7 month's of his presidential salary, and asked Turkish notables to follow him. By April 13, the initiative had raised approximately \$240 million.<sup>20</sup>



"We are self-sufficient, my Turkey" poster asked for donations. Bank details were also provided.

This public campaign was interpreted as the government's inability to raise capital in the Turkish market. This perception was further reinforced when President Erdoğan reminded the public of the national tax (*Tekalif-i Milliye*) measure during the Turkish War of Independence that provided the state with the power to confiscate the money and property of its citizens.<sup>21</sup> Many believe Turkey will ultimately turn to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for aid. As of April 16, the Turkish administration declared that the government had no intention of borrowing from the IMF,<sup>22</sup> which triggered another wave of currency devaluation, leading to an exchange rate of 7.20 (as of May 7) Turkish Lira to the dollar, the sharpest devaluation

since the Pasteur Brunson crisis between Turkey and the U.S. in 2018.<sup>23</sup>

The government's credibility suffered another blow when the public realized that the ratio between the infected and deaths remained equal each and every day based on the Health Ministry's statistics. Accordingly, since April 4, the ratio between the number of deaths and confirmed infection rates was fixed to 0.021%. Since this rate had to fluctuate, the constant, unchanging value paved the way for growing skepticism and a crisis of confidence regarding government transparency and accountability.<sup>24</sup>

A parliamentary pardon for prison inmates in an effort to lower the population density in prisons further damaged the public's confidence in the government. While those imprisoned for terrorism, sexual assault, violence against women, and commercial crimes were excluded from the scope of the pardon, journalists and other imprisoned political inmates, such as the philanthropist and human rights activist Osman Kavala - who is accused of orchestrating the Gezi Park protests - were also excluded from the pardon.<sup>25</sup> Thanks to "coronavirus pardon," 90 thousand inmates<sup>26</sup> including a top ultra-nationalist mafia boss Alaattin Çakıcı<sup>27</sup> whose name was mentioned previously in prison pardon bills by the Nationalist Movement Party, were set free from the prison.

Turkey also attempted to capitalize on the crisis to improve its foreign relations. It launched medical aid shipments to the United Kingdom<sup>28</sup> and to European Union countries such as Italy and Spain, attempting to improve its deteriorating relations with the West.<sup>29</sup> Turkey's multilateral relations with the European countries had hit to an unprecedented low when Turkey opened its border with Greece in February, sending refugees across the border ostensibly to threaten Europe. Greece used force to prevent the refugees from crossing the border, stranding them in the buffer zone between Greece and Turkey. When the coronavirus crisis emerged, Turkey chose not to escalate the situation further and removed the refugees from the border to repatriation centers in Malatya, Kocaeli, Kirklareli and Osmaniye provinces.<sup>30</sup>

Turkey, like much of the world, is struggling to contain the coronavirus, while at the same time searching for a way to rescue the country's very fragile economy. Unless an economic miracle

Türkiye Nisan	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
kümülatif vaka	23934	27069	30217	34109	38226	42282	47029	52167	56956	61049
kümülatif ölüm	501	574	649	725	812	908	1006	1101	1198	1296
ölüm/vaka oranı	0,021	0,021	0,021	0,021	0,021	0,021	0,021	0,021	0,021	0,021

Almanya Nisan	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
kümülatif vaka	96092	100123	103325	107663	113296	118235	122171	125452	127854	128208
kümülatif ölüm	1444	1584	1810	2016	2349	2607	2636	2871	3022	3043
ölüm/vaka oranı	0,015	0,016	0,018	0,019	0,021	0,022	0,022	0,023	0,024	0,024

İtalya Nisan	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
kümülatif vaka	124632	128948	132517	135586	139422	143626	147577	152271	156363	159516
kümülatif ölüm	15362	15887	16523	17127	17669	18279	18849	19468	19899	20465
ölüm/vaka oranı	0,123	0,123	0,125	0,126	0,127	0,127	0,128	0,128	0,127	0,128

ABD Nisan	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
kümülatif vaka	313229	338729	370019	403521	435518	469124	502876	532879	560300	583870
kümülatif ölüm	8469	9636	10895	12868	14811	16712	18747	20577	22105	23485
ölüm/vaka oranı	0,027	0,028	0,029	0,032	0,034	0,036	0,037	0,039	0,039	0,040

Yunanistan Nisan	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
kümülatif vaka	1673	1735	1755	1832	1884	1955	2011	2081	2114	2145
kümülatif ölüm	68	73	79	81	83	87	92	93	98	99
ölüm/vaka oranı	0,041	0,042	0,045	0,044	0,044	0,045	0,046	0,045	0,046	0,046

Comparative graph: The listed countries are Turkey, Germany, Italy, USA and Greece. The infection and casualty rates were provided from April 4 to 13.

takes place, or Qatari money flows into the Turkish markets as in the previous economic crises, the coronavirus may pave the way for social change if there is a rash of personal bankruptcies and mass protests. In order to prevent the ongoing economic deterioration, the government appears to be minimizing its transparency and accountability. While these measures may help the government control public unrest in the short-term, it will also deter the flow of foreign investment from the West into the Turkish market. Turkey's "coronavirus diplomatic humanitarian aid campaign" reflects decision makers' main strategy. First and foremost, they want to demonstrate power at home. By sending humanitarian aid to the wealthy European countries, Ankara seeks to create the impression to its domestic constituency that the situation in the West is worse than Turkey. A second objective appears to be improving relations with the Western countries that may be soon asked to rescue the Turkish economy and to strengthen Turkish diplomatic position in Syria vis-a-vis Russia in the aftermath of the Corona crisis.

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# Egypt and the Coronavirus: A Fragile Stability

Michael Barak

The first case of the coronavirus was discovered in Egypt in mid-February 2020. However, it was only in mid-March that the Egyptian regime began to take significant measures to confront it. The government has shut schools, clubs, airports, and places of worship including imposing a nightly curfew until the end of Ramadan on May 23.<sup>1</sup>

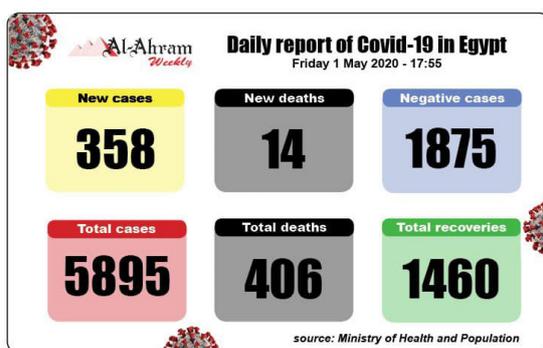
On May 1, the Egyptian Health Ministry reported 5,895 infected and 406 deaths from the virus.<sup>2</sup> According to the Egyptian authorities, the low rate of infection indicates that the regime is equipped with efficient tools to prevent the spread of the epidemic in the country. However, Western media reports cast doubt on the official narrative and argue that a lack of transparency indicates an attempt to conceal a much higher rate of infection.<sup>3</sup> Egyptian citizens have raised similar doubts, as well.<sup>4</sup>

The government has warned Egyptians to be cautious about consuming “fake news” produced by the Muslim Brotherhood or by the foreign media.<sup>5</sup> The Egyptian parliament’s decision to expand the emergency laws on April 22 in response to the coronavirus outbreak and to take steps such as suspending schools suggests that the crisis is more serious than the government is willing to admit.<sup>6</sup>

## Egyptian Society’s Responsiveness to the Coronavirus Restrictions

The preventive measures taken by the government have received support from large sectors of the Egyptian society. In mid-March, the *Al-Azhar* religious establishment issued a fatwa banning mass prayer in mosques as a precaution. Shaykh Alami Shawki, Mufti of Egypt, supported this fatwa and called on Egyptians to pray at home with relatives.<sup>8</sup> The Sufi orders announced on the abolition the annual *Mawalid* celebrations, which attract hundreds of thousands of pilgrims every year. Further, some Sufi orders have volunteered to clean and disinfect public spaces, such as the *Azmiyya* Sufi order. This order, for example, launched a “Sufis against the Corona” campaign, in which they began to disinfect mosques, grocery stores, and vehicles in major cities beginning in Alexandria.<sup>9</sup> The Coptic Orthodox Church instructed their believers to celebrate Easter in their homes, and closed its monasteries and churches to the public.<sup>10</sup>

Nevertheless, there are indications that some citizens have not followed the restrictions. An Egyptian doctor from the Dakahliya Governorate warned that “the level of health awareness in many areas of Egypt is close to zero” and people are gathering in the streets.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, by the end of April 2020, the Egyptian regime approved a law punishing those who refuse to wear masks outside their homes.<sup>12</sup> Some Salafi religious scholars have not followed the regime’s precautions, calling on their followers to pray in mosques or in the streets. In response, they have been arrested and held for trial.<sup>13</sup> The Ministry of Endowments, Al-Azhar, and social media activists have accused them of ignorance and of putting peoples’ lives at risk.



A daily report of Covid-19 in Egypt, May 1, 2020 (Al-Ahram Weekly)<sup>7</sup>

The defiance of these dissident Salafi scholars may deepen its suspicion towards the state, which it views as an oppressor of Islam. It also fuels the propaganda of anti-Islamist Egyptians, who would like to delegitimize the Islamists.

The coronavirus has led some sectors of Egyptian society to bully doctors and nurses suspected of spreading the virus. In Dakahliya, for example, citizens prevented the burial of a doctor who passed away after falling ill with the coronavirus. As documented on social media, the Egyptian police has intervened facilitated the doctor's burial.<sup>14</sup>

This incident reflects a trend suggesting that some Egyptians have changed their perception of doctors, from heroes on the front line of the battle against the virus to carriers of the virus. In order to combat this phenomenon, al-Azhar issued a fatwa ruling that deceased persons infected with the virus were martyrs, and therefore it was prohibited to cause any harm to their bodies. The Mufti of Egypt Shawqi Alam supported this fatwa adding that it was forbidden to harass people infected with Corona.<sup>15</sup> *Sawt al-Umma* newspaper, politicians, artists and other public figures have been trying to counter this phenomenon by promoting campaigns named "Stop bullying," and "Corona is not a crime."<sup>16</sup>

## Economic Implications

Since the virus has become a global pandemic, Egypt has had to face both global and domestic economic challenges. The abrupt halt to tourism, the return of thousands of overseas Egyptian workers and their remittance income, as well as the shrinking economic aid coming from the Gulf states are threatening Egypt's economic stability. Egyptian businessmen such as Naguib Sawaris

have warned that if the imposed Corona restrictions continue it would lead to a catastrophe and to "economic bloodshed."<sup>17</sup>

President al-Sisi has emphasized that his government was doing everything in its power to preserve economic stability. On April 7, he announced a government plan to dispense a monthly payment of EGP 500 (€29) to laborers and others for three months. He also called on public and private sector organizations "not to cut staff salaries."<sup>18</sup>

Indeed, there have been efforts by the state to support domestic production. For example, on April 28 Egypt set aside 57,217,523 EGP (€3,346,904) for the tourism sector.<sup>19</sup> However, this support is mainly limited to large economic enterprises and does address small business. On social media, Egyptian citizens complain of widespread economic hardship, unemployment, and distress.<sup>20</sup>

## A Fragile Stability

Currently, there are no signs of instability leading to protests or anarchy. Moreover, the ongoing support of Al-Azhar and the Coptic Church to President Sisi has been an important factor that has allowed the government to maintain stability. Nevertheless, as long as the coronavirus remains a deadly threat, there is a strong possibility that Egypt will face severe challenges to its health system, economic stability, and social order. Finally, political adversaries like the Muslim Brotherhood are making every effort to exploit the crisis and fuel social unrest and anger toward the Sisi regime. Therefore, more transparency and economic support will be critical if the Sisi government is going to overcome these challenges.

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# Sunni Jihadists and the Coronavirus: Staying the Course

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Since early 2020, jihadist groups have closely followed the news about the coronavirus. Much of the existing analysis on Sunni jihadi groups' responses to the coronavirus has argued that jihadists see the virus as an opportunity,<sup>1</sup> as they seek to exploit the temporary weakness of their enemies to carry out attacks. While there is certainly evidence to support this claim, a broader analysis of jihadists' reactions to the coronavirus shows a variety of responses to the pandemic.

Similarly, an editorial in *Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham's Iba'* magazine reported in late March on the Italian prime minister, Giuseppe Conte's, statement days earlier, "We have lost control entirely and the epidemic is destroying us" (the quote was later proved to be fabricated).<sup>3</sup> Alexandra Phelan, Nuri Veronika, Helen Stenger and Irine Gayatri argue that by updating their followers on the spread of the coronavirus through such reports, jihadi groups have tried to demonstrate good governance, which could significantly enhance their legitimacy.<sup>4</sup>

In addition to publishing news on the pandemic, various jihadi groups have also issued public health guidance to prevent the virus from spreading among their followers. In an infographic published in *al-Naba'* [see Figure 1, left], IS advised its followers that "the healthy should not enter the land of the epidemic and the infected should not exit from it."<sup>5</sup> Contrary to these instructions, IS supporters on Telegram published another infographic which called on Muslim women to wear the *niqab* instead of face masks, urging them to "fear Allah" instead of the virus [see Figure 2,<sup>6</sup> below].<sup>7</sup>



Figure 1

The Islamic State [IS]'s Arabic-language magazine, *al-Naba'*, reported in late January that the Chinese government said that "the number of those killed by coronavirus has reached 132 until now, while the number of infected has reached up to 6000," and reported on the "decisive measures" taken by the Chinese government to contain the



Figure 2

This public health guidance suggests that jihadists recognized the global nature of the coronavirus crisis: a statement published by *al-Qa'ida's*

central leadership noted that “today, if someone sneezes in China, those in New York suffer from its consequences.”<sup>8</sup> A statement published by the Gaza-based group *Jama’at Jaysh al-Islam* similarly noted that “the danger of the epidemic that has befallen the land of China today is not confined to the disbelievers alone,” but it is also possible it will spread beyond them to Muslims living in China or those who visit it.<sup>9</sup>

While jihadists were clearly aware of the global spread of the pandemic, they diverged in their interpretations of the causes and meaning of the coronavirus. One dominant view was that the pandemic was a divine punishment inflicted on God’s enemies. In reference to widespread reports of the Chinese government’s internment of millions of Muslim Uyghurs in “re-education camps,” an editorial in *al-Naba’* argued that “the epidemic is a punishment from God Almighty on the Chinese government on account of the crimes it has committed against the Muslims there, including killing, imprisonment, displacement, and tempting them away from their religion.”<sup>10</sup> An *al-Qa’ida* statement similarly argued that “the pandemic is a punishment from the Lord of the Worlds for the injustice and oppression committed against Muslims specifically and mankind generally by governments you elect.”<sup>11</sup>

Another theme was that the coronavirus is a soldier of god that was released on the world to punish god’s enemies. This message was also echoed by some of the IS’ women supporters in the al-Hawl prison camp in northeastern Syria, who claimed that the coronavirus “is just one soldier sent by Allah” as a punishment to infidels and Muslim rulers who oppress other Muslims. By this logic, these women argued that any Muslims who have died from the coronavirus had been infected by it because they weren’t true Muslims.<sup>12</sup>

Another interpretation for the pandemic was proposed by *al-Qa’ida*, which argued that the coronavirus was the result of Muslims’ own moral corruption and failure to practice the true Islam.<sup>13</sup> Yet another interpretation was offered by Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, one of the leading ideologues of the salafi-jihadi movement. Maqdisi argued that the coronavirus is “a blessing in the

disguise of tribulation,” and listed the many benefits of the pandemic: the people have become isolated from Arab rulers, it has covered the faces of women, and closed bars and nightclubs and places of corruption, among other benefits.<sup>14</sup>

Finally, the IS and other jihadi groups viewed the pandemic as an opportunity to reorganize and attack the West. An editorial in *al-Naba’* described the coronavirus as “the worst nightmares of the Crusaders” and noted that “security has become among the most important preoccupations of the governments” of Western countries. According to the IS, the last thing these governments want to deal with during this crisis is the threat of a fresh wave of IS violence at home.<sup>15</sup> In another publication, *Jama’at Jaysh al-Islam* described the pandemic as a gift from God to jihadis “to organize their ranks ... in order that they may seize the opportunity to assault their enemy.”<sup>16</sup>

Much like jihadists offered different interpretations of the pandemic, different groups also called for different responses to it. The Islamic State, unsurprisingly, called on its followers to carry out attacks in the West. It asks its adherents to “intensify the pressure” on its enemies, and reminded its followers that “the most beloved form of acts of obedience to God Almighty is jihad in His path and inflicting damage on His enemies.”<sup>17</sup> For the IS, jihad against the enemies of God continues, even during the coronavirus crisis – and the distractions, confusion, and panic in Western states are the perfect opportunity for carrying out new attacks.

In a remarkably different response, *al-Qa’ida*’s central leadership argued that “at this time of uncertainty, we must show greater mercy to the *um-mah* than ever” and issued “a general call for the masses in the Western world to embrace Islam.” In an attempt to show the advantages of Islam in dealing with pandemics in comparison with other solutions to the coronavirus, *al-Qa’ida* stressed that “Islam is a hygiene-oriented religion,” adding that “it lays great stress on principles of prevention so as to protect one from all forms of disease.”<sup>18</sup>

Jason Burke, a prominent journalist who covers the jihadi scene, argues that those jihadi groups that have shown little interest in winning the support of local communities were often those that have taken the hardest line.<sup>19</sup> More broadly, the different responses in the jihadi ecosystem reflect existing differences between various jihadi groups: the IS always advocated brutal and violent action to implement its radical ideology, and it should come as no surprise that it urges its fol-

lowers to carry out attacks at this time of global crisis. In the same vein, al-Qa'ida's call on Westerners to embrace Islam is consistent with its political approach since the September 11 attacks, which prioritized the consolidation of popular support over short-term military victories. As such, while Sunni jihadists are no doubt closely following the coronavirus crisis and seek to exploit it, their various responses largely reflect their existing political strategies.

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