



## PERSPECTIVES

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# Coronavirus in the Middle East: Unlearned Lessons and Missed Opportunities

by Dr. James M. Dorsey

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** There is little indication that Middle Eastern rulers are learning any lessons from the devastating coronavirus. Nor is there any suggestion that they are willing to see the pandemic as an opportunity to negotiate new social contracts at a time when the virus has temporarily taken the wind out of the sails out of mass anti-government protests.

Iran has become the poster child of what happens when the public distrusts a government that has a track record of being untransparent from the outset of a crisis, limits freedom of expression that often creates early warning systems that could have enabled authorities to take timely, preemptive measures to avert or limit the damage, and is perceived as corrupt.

Iranian spiritual leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei found himself forced last week to [bring in the military to clear the streets](#) after Iranians, already struggling under the impact of harsh US economic sanctions, refused to adhere to public health warnings regarding large gatherings, social distancing, and advice to stay at home.

Khamenei assigned the task to the regular armed forces after the Revolutionary Guards Corps failed to persuade Iranians to heed government advice regarding the epidemic, which, as of this writing, has [infected some 14,000 people and caused 724 deaths](#) and turned Iran into one of the world's hardest-hit countries.

The distrust has fueled reports and rumors [that casualties far exceed government figures](#) and that mass graves are being prepared to cope with a death toll that is much higher than stated.

The Iranian regime was slow to acknowledge the severity of the crisis, which hit mere weeks after large numbers of citizens took to the streets of Iranian cities to [denounce Khamenei and the Guards](#) in protest against the government's initial reluctance to live up to its responsibility for the mistaken downing of a Ukrainian airliner that killed 176 people.

Multiple Middle Eastern states, including Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, Kuwait, Jordan, and Israel, have ordered closures of educational facilities, issued quarantine instructions, and taken steps to curtail or entirely halt travel to and from Asian and European nations badly affected by the virus. In some cases they are temporarily interrupting all travel to their shores, regardless of country of origin.

Nonetheless, an exponential spread of the virus could stress test the national health systems of both energy-rich countries that have invested in state-of-the-art medical facilities and war-ravaged nations like Syria, Yemen, and Libya, where hospitals have been prime targets of devastating air strikes.

Stress tests that fail could prove very hazardous.

Countries like Iraq, which is particularly exposed through its close ties to neighboring Iran, as well as Algeria and Lebanon, where many (as in Iran) defy advice to stay at home, have witnessed months of sustained mass anti-government protests demanding a complete overhaul of a political system perceived as corrupt and incapable of delivering public goods such as jobs, proper healthcare, and other services.

In countries where these protests have dwindled, governments have shown little inclination to capitalize on the pause to forge new social contracts. This could be done by using the need to confront the virus threat nationally as a wedge.

Fear of the virus coupled with government repression have seen the numbers of protesters in Baghdad's Tahrir Square, where demonstrators initially insisted that Iraq's political elite was a virus worse than corona, [drop from the thousands to several hundred at best](#).

The same is true for Algeria and Lebanon (which is being hit not only by the virus but also by a financial crisis that is forcing it to default on its ballooning debt). "You [won't be of much help to Algeria if you're dead](#)," quipped one person on Twitter.

Embattled governments see the virus as an opportunity to curtail the protests for their own ends, but doing so puts a temporary lid on a boiling pot. It could explode again once the crisis is over—possibly with even greater vengeance if coronavirus exposes the authorities' and health systems' inability to cope.

“In Algeria, the government's calls for canceling the protests are not motivated by sanitary concerns as is the case in France, the US, or elsewhere,” said Riad Kaced, a US-based activist who flew to Algiers almost every second week to take part in the protests.

“The Algerian regime wants to [seize this opportunity to strangle the HIRAK and kill it off](#),” Kaced said, referring to the protest movement by its Arabic name.

The virus, which has so far infected 62 people in Saudi Arabia, did not stop Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman from rounding up potential opponents whom he suspected of plotting against him and launching an oil war with Russia that has wreaked havoc at a time when the global economy can least afford it.

Middle Eastern autocrats and discredited elites do not appear interested in using the virus crisis as a lever with which to reduce regional tensions and create political and social structures that would make their societies more resilient. A clear indicator of this lack of interest is their failure to crack down on opinion-makers, influencers, and rumor mongers who seek to weaponize the coronavirus on mainstream and new media that are otherwise tightly controlled.

The Saudi and UAE governments remained silent while pro-government voices came to the defense of [Saudi-based journalist Noura al-Moteari, who tweeted that the virus and its spread had been funded by Qatar](#) in order to undermine Prince Muhammad's plans for social and economic reform and the UAE's upcoming Expo 2020.

They also looked the other way, despite a Saudi government warning that rumor mongers could [face jail terms of up to five years and a fine of up to \\$800,000](#), after analyst Zayed al-Amri claimed on Saudi television that [Turkey and Iran were using the virus to target Arab tourists and attack countries across the globe](#).

Said [social media scholar Marc Owen Jones](#): “Coronavirus is being opportunistically weaponized through disinformation and propaganda tactics aimed at demonizing political opponents, while exposing latent prejudices.”

The coronavirus crisis is taking its toll, including the lives of many who might have been saved by good and transparent governance. Ultimately, authorities will get a grip on it, but not before it has exacted a serious cost.

Coronavirus is not the first such crisis and won't be the last. The risk is that rulers will opt to weaponize the crisis to serve their own short-term interests. This will contribute little toward building the kind of national and regional resilience and cohesion needed to confront the next one.

*Dr. James M. Dorsey, a non-resident Senior Associate at the BESA Center, is a senior fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies at Singapore's Nanyang Technological University and co-director of the University of Würzburg's Institute for Fan Culture.*