



Coronavirus and the Arab Culture of Secrecy

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The quality of healthcare systems in the Arab world varies from country to country. Egypt and Sudan are considered to have the worst, while the UAE and Saudi Arabia are seen as having the most advanced. Whether their domestic health services are high quality or not, many Arab leaders and members of the elites routinely address their personal health needs outside the region, usually going to Western countries for the purpose. The health status of Arab leaders is treated as a closely guarded secret.

Misinformation is a pillar of governance in most Arab regimes.

Anyone trying to follow current events in the Arab world could be misled into believing the royal families and political leaders never get sick. Illness among officials is treated as a state secret, possibly to avoid creating an image of weakness that could invite coup attempts.

Even without that concern, a strong and respected personal image is highly valued among Arab leaders and they go to great lengths to preserve it. Most of them dye their hair to downplay the appearance of aging. In the Arab world, old age symbolizes weakness, whereas in Western culture it often denotes wisdom and a rich sense of life experience. (Mahmoud Abbas, president of the Palestinian Authority, is one of the few Arab leaders to keep his natural hair color.)

Sickness that befalls an Arab leader is routinely kept secret from the public. On average, an Arab leader remains in power for about thirty years. They almost invariably use hospitals and healthcare outside their borders. They do this for two reasons: first, they don't trust their local healthcare systems; and second, they fear the negative public image that might accompany news of the leader's illness.

Many Arab leaders have sought medical treatment abroad. Former Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak was accustomed to receiving medical care in Germany,

and the royal Jordanian Hashemite family receives its primary health care in the UK. Jordanian King Hussein was treated in New York, and the Saudi and Kuwaiti royal families are known to go to the US for medical treatment. The list goes on.

An interesting case that illustrates Arab leaders' distrust of Arab medical staff, no matter where they are located, is the case of Algerian president Abdelaziz Bouteflika. In September 2018, while he was receiving urgent care in Geneva, the Swiss hospital's staff was surprised to see Bouteflika's brother step in to keep a doctor and nurse of Tunisian and Moroccan origin, respectively, away from the Algerian leader.

The vast majority of media outlets in Arab countries are state-controlled, and they serve to protect and preserve the regime in power. There is often an official representative from the government whose role is to stay in direct contact with broadcasters and authorize any content released to the public, which is viewed with suspicion. The intelligence services in Arab countries were established in great measure to protect the regimes from domestic threats.

In the Arab world, media do not criticize the government—on the contrary; they are regime mouthpieces. Anyone who dares speak out against the regime is likely to find him- or herself in prison or expelled from the country. Citizens wanting to voice their opinions must be very careful on social media platforms as well. They can face harsh punishments and even death for posting critical opinions about the regime.

For the time being, Arab leaders have no choice but to remain at home, even in cases when they need medical attention. Western countries have closed their borders to stem the spread of coronavirus and their hospitals are at maximum capacity. Even if an Arab leader were to manage to leave his country at this time, the media—censored by the regime—would likely report falsely that he was still at home.

There are currently rumors circulating on Arab social media asserting that several heads of royal families have abandoned their countries for fear of infection with coronavirus. They include Jordanian King Abdullah, who is suspected of going to Ascension Island, and Saudi King Salman bin Abdulaziz al-Saud, who is claimed to be on an island in the Red Sea.

Accurate information about the state is always hard to come by in the Arab world. Misinformation is a fundamental tenet of the political culture of Arab authoritarian regimes. This is particularly evident today, when it is impossible to gain any reliable sense of the true extent of coronavirus infection and death in the Arab world.

This is an edited version of an [article](#) that appeared in Israel Today on April 22, 2020.

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