



PERSPECTIVES

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Coronavirus Threatens to Drive Wedge into US-Gulf Relations

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: It is early days, but first indications are that the global coronavirus pandemic is entrenching long-drawn Middle Eastern geopolitical, political, ethnic, and sectarian battle lines rather than serving as a vehicle to build bridges and boost confidence. Gulf states are taking contradictory approaches to the problem of ensuring that entrenched conflicts do not spiral out of control as they battle the pandemic and struggle to cope with the economic fallout.

The coronavirus crisis is changing the political landscape of the Middle East as non-governmental organizations and militants in countries like Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon fill gaps where governments have failed to cater to populations' social and health needs.

The empowerment of NGOs and militant groups, particularly in cases where they act without coordinating with a government, raises potential security issues as militants capitalize on their ability to show up states' lack of capability at a time of crisis.

The expanded role of militants takes on added significance as states like Saudi Arabia and the UAE use the pandemic to entrench many of the Middle East's fault lines, if not widen them to their advantage.

The pandemic has also not stopped the region's foremost external power, the US, from taking Iran's bait in an escalating tit-for-tat that risks a larger military conflagration.

The UAE has used the pandemic to solidify its limited outreach to Iran, which is designed to shield the Gulf state from becoming a battlefield in any US-Iranian military confrontation.

When the US reportedly [blocked](#) an Iranian request for \$5 billion from the IMF to fight the virus, the UAE was among the first nations to [deliver medical aid](#) to Iran and facilitate shipments by the WHO.

The shipments led to a rare March 15 phone call between UAE foreign minister Abdullah bin Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan and his Iranian counterpart, Muhammad Javid Zarif.

The UAE began reaching out to Iran last year when it sent a Coast Guard delegation to Tehran to discuss maritime security in the wake of alleged Iranian attacks on oil tankers off the coast of the Emirates.

The Trump administration remained silent when the UAE last October released [\\$700 million in frozen Iranian assets](#), a move that ran counter to US efforts to strangle Iran economically with harsh sanctions.

The UAE's moves amount to a lowering of the temperature. Officials insist there will be no real breakthrough in Emirati-Iranian relations as long as Iran supports proxies like Hezbollah in Lebanon, pro-Iranian militias in Iraq, and Houthi rebels in Yemen.

UAE Crown Prince Muhammad bin Zayed made that clear when he phoned Syrian president Bashar Assad in a bid to drive a wedge between Syria and Iran and complicate Turkish military interventions in Syria as well as Libya.

UAE support for Syria and Libyan rebel forces led by Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar spotlight the contradictions in the Emirates' projection of itself as a humanitarian actor. Neither Assad or Haftar has shied away from targeting hospitals and medical facilities at a time when functioning health infrastructure is a priority.

In cozying up to Syria and reaching out to Iran, the UAE and Saudi Arabia may have common goals even if they pursue them in different ways that are dictated by the degree of risk they are willing to shoulder.

As a result, Saudi Arabia, in contrast to the UAE, has maintained a hard line toward Iran, casting aside opportunities to build bridges by, for example, offering Iran medical aid.

Instead, Saudi Arabia appeared to reinforce the divide by [accusing](#) Iran of "direct responsibility" for the spread of the virus. Government-controlled

media charged that Iran's allies, Qatar and Turkey, had deliberately mismanaged the crisis.

Moreover, the kingdom, backing a US refusal to ease sanctioning of Iran, prevented the Non-Aligned Movement from condemning the Trump administration's hard line during the pandemic.

Saudi Arabia's failure to follow in the UAE's footsteps could prove costlier than meets the eye.

The coronavirus coupled with the global economic breakdown and the collapse of the oil market has somewhat levelled the playing field with Iran by undermining the kingdom's ability to manipulate oil prices and diminishing its financial muscle.

Add to that the weakening of Saudi Arabia's claim to leadership of the Islamic world as the custodian of Mecca and Medina, Islam's two holiest cities, as a result of its efforts to combat the pandemic.

One has to go far back in history to find a precedent for the kingdom's banning of the *umra*, Islam's minor pilgrimage to Mecca; the likely cancelling of the *haj*, Islam's major pilgrimage, which constitutes one of the faith's five pillars; and the closing down of mosques to avoid congregational prayer.

To make matters worse, Saudi Arabia has jeopardized its close ties to the US with an oil price war against Russia that collapsed oil markets, drove oil prices to rock bottom, and significantly undermined the US shale industry and its ten million jobs.

Nonetheless, Saudi Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman, in a twist of irony given his record on human rights and rule of law, has emerged as a model in some Muslim countries like Pakistan that have been less forceful in imposing physical distancing and lockdowns on ultra-conservative religious communities.

"What if this year's *haj* was under Imran Khan rather than Muhammad bin Salman? Would he have waffled there as indeed he has in Pakistan?" [asked](#) Pakistani nuclear scientist, political analyst, and human rights activist Pervez Hoodbhoy, referring to the Pakistan prime minister.

Saudi Arabia has so far carried the brunt of US criticism despite the fact that it remains more closely aligned with US policies than the UAE, which has succeeded in flying under the radar to date.

That is a remarkable achievement given that the Emirates backed Saudi Arabia in its debilitating price war by announcing that it too would raise oil production.

The strategy has since been put on hold with an agreement to radically reduce production among members of OPEC; non-OPEC producers, including Russia; and the Group of Twenty, which brings together the world's largest economies.

In the same vein, the UAE's outreach to Syria and Iran runs counter to US policy.

The policy contradictions stem from Gulf efforts to ensure that entrenched conflicts do not spiral out of control, particularly as they battle a pandemic and struggle to cope with the economic fallout.

That is also their core message to President Donald Trump amid heightening tensions with Iran: "Don't let this get out of hand. You live thousands of miles away. It will be us, not you, who pays the price, and you won't be there to rush to our defense," said a prominent Saudi.

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