



# PERSPECTIVES

THE BEGIN-SADAT CENTER FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES

## Coronavirus and the Middle East

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** The coronavirus crisis has exposed Arab and Islamic notions of fraternity, mutual commitment, and solidarity as hollow rhetorical slogans. Each country in the region is focused entirely on its own efforts to survive economically, socially, and politically as the pandemic continues to wreak havoc.

According to official statistics, the scourge of coronavirus has spared much of the Middle East in terms of mortality (though not prevalence). Israel has seen 279 deaths while Egypt, the hardest-hit member of the Arab League, has had 735 fatalities. In contrast, according to official statistics, Turkey has had 4,308 deaths and Iran 7,359—much higher mortality rates than their Middle Eastern counterparts.

The reasons for the low rate of coronavirus mortality in the Middle East as compared to Europe range from claims of early preventive measures (Israel); massive testing campaigns (Bahrain, Qatar, UAE); the influence of a desert climate; some population immunity left over from the 2012-15 MERS epidemic, which ranged almost exclusively within the Middle East; the relatively low level of international tourism in many of these states; and the lack of official disclosure—not unlike other authoritarian and dictatorial regimes throughout the world.

Whatever the reasons, the collateral damage of the pandemic will be extremely meaningful for the Middle East beyond the direct medical implications.

Economic damage stemming from the pandemic-caused global drop in energy consumption brought about a sharp fall in oil prices. This factor,

combined with flagrant Russo-Saudi competition in the oil markets, has badly hit the economies of oil-producing Arab countries across the region. In addition, Saudi overproduction beyond market needs have caused tensions in American-Saudi relations.

Countries that rely heavily on tourism (Egypt, Turkey, Tunisia, Morocco, Jordan, and, to a lesser extent, Israel) have suffered severely from the total halt in visitors.

Government credibility all over the region has been challenged because of suspiciously low official figures on coronavirus victims. This renewal of a lack of confidence in leadership comes in an era of chronic malaise in relations between governments and populations of the area, as manifested in the “Arab Spring” political turmoil. The add-on effect of this new source of friction has significant potential for destabilization.

Lebanon has seen deep economic and civil unrest over the past year. Unemployment passed 40%, banks and other financial institutions were overrun by protesters, and there is a general expectation of a Hezbollah takeover.

Iraq is mired in a political crisis and has been unable to form a government for over a year.

The Turkish lira has fallen again to a low exchange rate of \$1 = 7.03 TYR and 1 euro = 7.68 TYR, reflecting a lack of trust in President Erdoğan’s economic leadership. Turkey’s tourism industry—one of the cornerstones of its economy—is suffering from a total freeze without any foreseeable relief. It is almost certain that Turkey’s economic problems will have a significant influence on its intervention in Syria and Libya. Erdogan’s popularity is in sharp decline and his grip on political freedoms is tightening.

Important questions need to be considered. How will the coronavirus crisis influence badly hit Iran in its Middle Eastern dealings? So far, no easing of Iranian intervention has been detected in Yemen, Syria, Iraq, or Lebanon. What are the implications of the crisis for the stability of Middle Eastern governments (including Iran’s)? How will Israel’s geopolitical stance in the region be influenced by the relative increase in the importance of economic over political challenges? Will the fall in oil prices affect Russia’s ability to intervene so massively in Syria?

The Palestinian issue has been pushed to the sidelines by coronavirus, and one sees more and more people—mainly on social media—saying openly that they no longer care about the “Palestinian cause.” The Arabic hashtag

“Palestine is not my problem” has spread all over social media, though many oppose it.

The Iranian man in the street is believed to think this is not the time for regime change. The Islamist regime, which is accused of having neglected coronavirus during its first phase, is trying to ease the people’s suffering by providing free food and healthcare. As hated and discredited as it is, it is viewed as better than a state of overwhelming chaos in which hundreds of thousands are infected by the virus, thousands have lost their lives, and millions have lost their jobs. Right now, most Iranians feel the revolution can wait.

The most salient phenomenon in the Middle East since the eruption of the pandemic is that every state in the region stands alone in its struggle against the virus and its ramifications. No one speaks of an Arab—let alone an Islamic—fraternity, commitment, or solidarity, ideas that have been revealed once again as hollow rhetorical slogans. Each country is focused on its own problems as it attempts to survive economically, socially, and politically. Even Israel has lost its status as the unifying element.

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