



PERSPECTIVES

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Facing a Pandemic of Crises, Few Middle Eastern Leaders Step Up

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The Middle East is at a crossroads. The coronavirus pandemic and its economic fallout confront regional leaders with a stark choice: dial down tensions to open the door toward cooperation in tackling existential challenges, or risk ever more aggravated political and economic threats enhanced by a potential wave of social protest.

A second wave of the coronavirus pandemic is raising its ugly head. It is putting Middle Eastern leaders at a crossroads as they struggle to contain the disease and tackle its economic fallout.

The question is whether they are getting the message: neither containing and controlling the virus nor economic recovery is a straight shot. Both are likely to involve a process of two steps forward, one step back, and no state can successfully tackle the multiple crises on its own.

The Middle East is a region in which conflicts and problems are not just complex but inherently interconnected. The pandemic poses not only political, economic, and social challenges. It also calls into question regional security arrangements that reinforce fault lines rather than create an environment that allows rivals to collectively manage disputes as well as diseases whose spread is not halted by physical or other boundaries.

At stake is not just regional but also global security. Focused on their own healthcare and economic crises, Western nations ignore Middle Eastern and North African instability at their peril. They risk waking up to threats that could have been anticipated.

Suspected Russian hopes that an end to the Libyan war would allow for the creation of a Russian military base on the southern shore of the Mediterranean that would complement facilities in Syria would be one such impending threat.

“Russia wants a foothold in Libya, and that’s a fact,” [said](#) Pavel Felgenhauer, a Russian military analyst at the Jamestown Foundation. US officials warn that a permanent Russian presence would enhance Russia’s efforts to weaken the already strained trans-Atlantic alliance.

The prospect of increased Russian influence in the Mediterranean coupled with China’s expanding sway over ports in the Eastern Mediterranean could further embolden Turkey, which is aggressively seeking to grow its control over energy-rich waters in the region in violation of international law.

“To avoid the worst outcomes for an already fraught region, there is no substitute and frankly no alternative to some form of cooperation among regional actors. . . . With the Middle East likely to emerge from the COVID-19 crisis more fragile and potentially explosive than before, a cooperative architecture that can build regional resilience is an imperative,” [said](#) strategist Steven Kenney and international relations scholar Ross Harrison in a recently released Washington-based Middle East Institute report.

The economic part of the message is already evident: ending the pandemic and achieving economic recovery will be a long and painful process.

Countries like Saudi Arabia, Iran, Lebanon, and Israel are witnessing first signs of the pandemic’s second wave.

Increasing the likelihood of a cancellation of this year’s *hajj* (the Muslim pilgrimage to the holy city of Mecca) scheduled for late July, Saudi Arabia reimposed a lockdown in the Red Sea port of Jeddah, the *hajj*’s major gateway, after a spike in coronavirus infections. The lockdown involves a two-week, 15-hour curfew from 15:00 p.m. to 06:00 a.m.

A dramatic surge in infections in Iran, averaging 3,000 new cases a day, has rekindled the Middle East’s largest outbreak, weeks after the country appeared to have tamed the virus.

Israel closed dozens of schools and ordered any school reporting a virus case to shut down following a surge in coronavirus cases that swept through classrooms two weeks after they were allowed to reopen.

Mass social and economic protests in Lebanon, a country on the brink of financial collapse, have heightened the risk of a second wave of the pandemic.

The surge bodes ill for economic recovery.

Based on a survey of 1,228 CEOs, the [Dubai Chamber of Commerce](#) warned that a staggering 70% of businesses in the emirate expect to close their doors within the next six months.

The warning came as the UAE government extended a nightly curfew following a doubling of infections after it eased lockdown restrictions.

Government-backed UAE carriers Emirates and Etihad Airways have since extended reduced pay for staff until September as they try to preserve cash.

Austerity measures threaten to bring the social unrest that has roiled the Middle East and North Africa for the past decade closer to the Gulf.

“If it’s temporary, one or two years, I can adapt. My concern is that more taxes will be permanent—and that will be an issue,” [said](#) Muhammad, a Saudi government worker, after his \$266 monthly cost of living allowance was canceled and sales taxes tripled as part of painful austerity measures announced by FM Muhammad Jadaan.

The government worker’s words were echoed in a rare pushback against the government by columnist [Khalid Sulaiman](#), writing in the *Okaz* daily, one of the kingdom’s tightly controlled media outlets. “I was hoping [the minister] would say [the tax hike] would be reviewed after the coronavirus crisis is gone or contained, or when oil prices improve, but he did not say that. Citizens are feeling concerned that pressure on their living standards will last longer than the current crisis,” Sulaiman said.

The challenges Gulf States face—an ongoing healthcare crisis and a painful, protracted, and complex road toward economic recovery—coupled with debilitating regional conflicts that not only fester but appear to be expanding are almost insurmountable obstacles.

Kuwaiti efforts to resolve the rift in the Gulf and pressure by US President Donald Trump on Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Bahrain to lift their three-year air embargo of Qatar have raised the hope of an end to that conflict. These hopes may be premature, as there has been no public indication that the parties are willing to seriously engage.

The proxy war in Libya, in which the UAE-backed forces of rebel commander Khalifa Haftar are on the defensive, is extending into the Eastern Mediterranean as Turkey claims rights to energy-rich territorial waters in violation of international law.

Meanwhile, Abu Dhabi-based English language newspaper *The National*, despite UAE efforts to reduce tension with Iran, seemed to stop just short of inviting Israel to attack the “Glass House,” an Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps command and control center on the outskirts of the main airport of Damascus, the capital of Syria. “For now, the Glass House remains unshattered,” *The National* [said](#) in a detailed expose of the center.

Middle Eastern leaders are confronting the worst pandemic of crises since independence.

Addressing those predicaments requires regional and global leadership that looks beyond immediate survival and ideological and geopolitical rivalries: a leadership that recognizes that stability and solutions to shared threats must be vested in longer-term management and cooperation in tackling common challenges rather than maintaining conflict.

The problem is that few leaders seem willing or able to step up to the plate.

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