



**THE BEGIN-SADAT CENTER
FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES**



Bar-Ilan
University

The COVID-19 Crisis: Impact and Implications

Editor: Efraim Karsh



Mideast Security and Policy Studies No. 176

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The COVID-19 Crisis: Impact and Implications

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Sociocultural and Religious Implications

How Society Will Change as the Coronavirus Crisis Abates

by Dr. Manfred Gerstenfeld

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: As they begin to ease their coronavirus lockdown and distancing measures, Western governments will be confronted with a huge set of problems, many of which cannot be foreseen. From a policy point of view, it makes sense to try to return to the pre-pandemic reality, though this will not be entirely possible.

Western governments will have many complex problems to deal with as they begin to relax their lockdown and distancing measures, many of which cannot be assessed ahead of time or even foreseen. Most government leaders in Western countries have gained popularity during the coronavirus crisis, but they will face unprecedented new challenges as the danger to public health begins to abate.

From a policy point of view, it makes sense to try to return as much as possible to the pre-pandemic reality. For the most part, pre-virus society functioned in a reasonable manner. Western economies were growing, albeit slowly. Unemployment varied between low and not very high in the major countries. The pre-virus situation was certainly much better than the untried pseudo-realities promoted by various ideologues.

A full return to the way it was before can never be completely accomplished. Governments' first priority must be the revival of the world economy. There will be battles over resources no matter how they are distributed. Words such as "optimal," "fair," and "solidarity" have limited meaning in this context. Future generations will have to carry some of the costs resulting from the economic upheaval caused by the pandemic. We do not yet know what the overall financial impact will be.

Unemployment has reached huge percentages in several countries. This has to be brought down rapidly. The general picture hides many personal tragedies, with vast numbers of lives severely disrupted by the abrupt tearing away of the former reality. An attempt has to be made to separate out the structural unemployment created by the pandemic. Some businesses will go bankrupt, while others that were marginal before the outbreak are unlikely to reopen. (Consider, for example, the “death of the department store,” as [detailed](#) by *The New York Times*.) Frictional unemployment will also present a challenge. If airlines have to wait to fly for a few more months, employees will have that much longer to wait before they are called to return to work.

There are other reasons why returning to the pre-coronavirus reality will prove impossible. A number of corporations have already announced that they will not pay dividends to strengthen their balance sheets. In the UK this was not voluntary; banks were told to do this by the Bank of England. This will influence pension funds, stock markets, and individual investors.

The International Monetary Fund (IMF) says the world is facing its worst downturn since the Great Depression and is forecasting a 3% contraction of the global economy this year. Before the outbreak of the virus, the forecast was 3.3% growth. For purposes of comparison, the global economy contracted by less than 1% during the crisis of 2008.

There is merit in concrete forecasts. Even if they are largely wrong, they prompt discussion on issues related to the pandemic. One person who has made several specific predictions is David Folkerts-Landau, chief economist of Germany’s largest bank, Deutsche Bank.

Folkerts-Landau holds that we will have to maintain physical distancing for some time in order to control future disease outbreaks. In practice, this will mean no mass concerts or sporting events with huge crowds for a long time. Restaurants will have to move their tables farther away from each other. All forms of public transportation, including airplanes, will have to leave seats free, which will lead to higher prices. Folkerts-Landau also thinks people will move away from the sharing economy. This could mean they will be more reluctant than they were before to rent out their homes on Airbnb, for example.

In the post-virus reality, there will be people who would be able to resume their businesses with timely financial help from the government but who are overlooked in the disorder. For this reason, it is essential to have a functioning non-bureaucratic hardship organization in place. It became clear during the crisis in France, for instance, that there were shortages of medical oxygen bottles and related products for people who were suffering illnesses other than coronavirus. The only EU factory, Luxfer, which is located in France, was closed a few months ago. Parliamentarians are now asking the government to nationalize and reopen it.

Whatever measures governments take, there will be dissatisfaction both initially and over the long term. That could result in protests which could themselves have unforeseen effects. Governments should therefore make an extra effort to identify those who can be helped with relatively little support and who have been overlooked.

Some believe the time has come for a radical restructuring of the economy and society in general. Many of them held those ideas before the pandemic and see the calamity as an opportunity to realize some of their goals. Environmentalists may think now is the time to shut down polluting businesses for good, all the more so as energy demand is down. Should such measures be put into effect, it will be critical to make sure they do not negatively affect employment.

Many other ideologues sense an opportunity in the world's emergence from the crisis, including supporters of a neo-Marxist revival. It would be unwise to listen to them. Current governments were not elected to enact radical changes. Adding to the uncertainties of the revival will only create further problems.

Some areas where change is inevitable are already clear. One is geopolitics. The West will have to take a thorough look at its relationship with China, for example. This will go far beyond reconsidering the purchase of materials.

De-globalization may become a fashionable word. Unless the agenda for such an idea is clearly detailed, it won't mean much. Supranational bodies have taken a beating during the coronavirus crisis, with most of them doing little other than talk while national governments acted. The EU is creaking even more than before, though it is unlikely to collapse. One indicator

that reveals these changes is the language of French president Emmanuel Macron. Over the past three years, he has frequently discussed the concept of European sovereignty. Now he is covering his back by referring to France as self-supporting in several major areas. When Chancellor Angela Merkel announced that she would not be a candidate in the next national elections in Germany, Macron set about building himself up as the dominant EU personality. (That might have been a pipe dream in any case because France is economically much weaker than Germany.)

In the meantime, concrete proposals are being put forward to solve the EU's financial solidarity problems, like the proposals of George Soros and others that the EU issue perennial bonds. Again, while these plans may not have merit, they are tools for better discussing the problem.

Many studies will be done in a host of areas. One of the most fundamental questions to arise from the crisis is why Germany had far fewer deaths than Italy, Spain, France, and the UK. Other studies will deal with the measures taken by different countries to deal with the crisis at its height and which exit strategies turned out to be best. Sooner or later, people will ask what value different countries gave to the preservation of human life. The Belgian weekly *Knack* has already published figures on the value of lives spared in the crisis thanks to government measures.

There are many other issues. What has the mental health impact been on those in lockdown? How does it compare with other periods of stress? This may lead to a deeper question: Is the current Western generation mentally weaker than those of the past because it has never struggled with huge challenges the way wartime generations had to? Another question: How much anxiety are people suffering about a second wave of coronavirus?

One issue that should be looked at on the macro level is the overall vulnerability of modern societies. Though it is now largely forgotten, there was, not too long ago, a situation of similar widespread fear over a very different potential disaster: the Y2K crisis, which many had expected to afflict the world's computers in 2000. Had that crisis materialized as anticipated, it would have severely disrupted the economies of the countries that are now the main victims of coronavirus.

Monotheistic Religions and the Coronavirus Crisis

by Dr. Manfred Gerstenfeld

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The coronavirus pandemic has had a profound impact on the world of religion. This can be seen in three major areas: attitudes of religious leaders, behavior and rituals of believers, and efforts to give a theological meaning to the pandemic. Spiritual leaders may have squandered an opportunity to reinforce their religions through their responses to the crisis.

The largest number of coronavirus deaths in Western Europe has been in Italy, Spain, France, the UK, Germany, Belgium, and the Netherlands. These are all countries that have seen a great increase in secularization in recent decades.

Is it too bold to suggest that the pandemic created a unique opportunity for religious leaders to call upon their believers to pioneer efforts to assist health workers, organize charities, help those who are alone, and so on? While this may have occurred on a local scale, it has not been an international movement encouraged by religious leaders. Has an opportunity to reinforce the place of religion in society been squandered?

Secularization has been greatly helped by the widespread belief that individuals determine their own futures. Yet the coronavirus has created huge uncertainties. How is the sickness passed from one person to another? Even those who display no symptoms can infect others. Why is there such a difference in the degree of sickness that befalls victims? When will there be a vaccine, and when will the pandemic end?

Secular people are often spiritually alone when confronted with death. In monotheistic religions, to varying degrees, community is important. In periods of uncertainty, religion has, at least theoretically, a new chance to make inroads. The American theology professor Marcellino D'Ambrosio compares the current plague to the one that devastated Rome in the third

century, and describes the inspiring way the Christian community of that time was transformed into a battalion of nurses.

Perhaps the reason modern-day Christian leaders are not leaders of society is that it has been a very long time since religious leaders were opinion leaders in Europe. Nowadays, they are the opposite: they are opinion followers. Now that the opportunity for a comeback has presented itself, they find themselves unable to make a fast paradigm shift. They are stuck in the mire of general societal debates like climate change and immigration.

Catholicism is the most hierarchical religion in Europe. In his Easter message, delivered to an empty St. Peter's Basilica, Pope Francis called for global solidarity to fight the coronavirus, warned that the EU risks collapse, urged debt relief for poor nations, and called for the relaxing of international sanctions. None of these topics touch on religious issues, and his authority in these areas is weak at best.

UN Secretary General António Guterres called for a global ceasefire at the end of March, and the Pope supported this appeal in his weekly blessing. This was a typical example of being an opinion follower rather than a leader. The Pope did take one action: he established an emergency fund at the Pontifical Mission Societies. This fund supports the presence of the Catholic Church in mission territories, which are far from the countries hardest hit by the virus. He also created a special prayer.

The Pope's statement about the cause of the pandemic was not theological but ecological. Speaking of catastrophes, he said, "I don't know if these are events of nature, but they are certainly nature's responses." He could have stressed that nature is, theologically speaking, a creation of God, but he made no such point.

The UK's Queen Elizabeth is not a religious leader, though she is the head of the Church of England. This year, she gave her first-ever address to mark the Easter holiday, and it contained a spiritual appeal: she said the "discovery of the risen Christ on the first Easter Day gave his followers new hope and fresh purpose, and we can all take heart from this."

The tenor Andrea Bocelli sang at Milan's empty cathedral in an online concert watched by millions around the globe. Jews worldwide were called upon to participate in the writing of a unity Torah scroll.

The White House called on faith-based groups and churches to instruct their worshippers to follow health guidelines. This was an important step, as in some cases the guidelines interfere with the execution of rituals. The world's leading Sunni cleric, Yusuf Qaradawi, called for mosques around the world to suspend all gatherings of congregations for worship including Friday prayers.

Orthodox American Jewish sociologist Samuel Heilman pointed out that the Jewish religion is deeply wrapped up in communal life. Feeling a physical closeness to the community is critical to feeling a spiritual connection to God. For Orthodox Jews, therefore, quarantine poses a significant religious danger. This is particularly true for the ultra-Orthodox, some of whom are resisting the health guidelines. There is an above average percentage of ultra-Orthodox victims of coronavirus both in Israel and abroad as a result of their customs and beliefs.

A mega-church gathering of evangelicals in France is believed to have been the source of the country's major outbreak. In Bourtzwiller, a community within the town of Mulhouse, a gathering took place in February of more than 2,000 worshippers from all over France. Germans also participated. These believers carried the virus throughout France and into Germany.

The coronavirus outbreak and subsequent government measures affect believers in very different ways. Muslims and Jews, even if they cannot go to their mosques or synagogues, can say their prayers at home. For a Christian, not being able to go to church on Sunday may be more problematic. Churches that rely to any significant extent on collecting money from those present on Sunday may face financial difficulties.

There are many other problems farther from the public eye. For example, many North African Muslims in France expect, when they die, to be buried in their country of origin. In the absence of flights this has become extremely difficult if not impossible.

It may be too early for theological explanations of the coronavirus crisis to be given by mainstream figures. There has been an upswing, however, in extremists who are eager to explain God's purpose in sending the pandemic. One Muslim preacher speaking on Palestinian Authority TV said coronavirus is a soldier of Allah being used to punish sinners, who include those who attack his believers. Extremist pastors and rabbis blame the pandemic on homosexuals. The Chief Rabbi of the Israeli town of Safed said coronavirus happened because the world is approaching the days of the Messiah.

Over the course of time, believers will begin to talk to the media about how the virus and the lockdown influenced their spirituality and relationship to God.

Coronavirus, God, and Science

by Maj. Gen. (res.) Gershon Hacohen

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: When PM Benjamin Netanyahu said, in a March 21 TV interview, that “with God’s help we’ll get through” the coronavirus crisis, the interviewer interrupted him with these words: “With the help of the Weizmann Institute...The modern Temple of Zionism is at the Weizmann Institute.” This exchange reveals the gap between the modern state’s promise of efficient management even in the face of great adversity and the elements of randomness and surprise that can render the most powerful and advanced states helpless.

From the outset, the modern state has depended on science and human rationality as the means to a stable and secure future. As the French sociologist Bruno Latour described the modern era: “The laws of nature enabled the first Enlightenment to demolish the groundless pretensions of the ancient human conceptions...All thoughts of the past were rendered foolish or hypothetical...A shining dawn arrived.” Similarly, Theodor Herzl envisioned a modern state that would succeed on the basis of scientific knowledge. As he wrote in his book *The Jewish State*: “The founding of a Jewish State, as I conceive it, presupposes the application of scientific methods. We cannot journey out of Egypt today in the primitive fashion of ancient times.”

For the devotees of science and human rationality, this is the essence of the promise of stability, prosperity, and security. If something spins completely out of control, it is not—according to the “religion of rationality”—because the promise was overblown but because someone was negligent, did not do his job right, or failed to consult the right expert in time. It is a “foul-up,” a phenomenon that in our era requires an investigation.

The French philosopher Paul Virilio described at length how rational scientific thought strives to achieve control over the world of phenomena,

seeking to control even the uncontrollable. In his view, however, this thralldom to the great promise of technology and science may well lead to an “integral accident” that not only will change the human perception of technology but could even bring about the end of the “modern project.”

Virilio was not, of course, hoping for such an “accident,” but warned of it: the crisis would be as deep as the promise was great. Modern humanity’s expectations of science and the state collide again and again with a defiant reality, and the coronavirus crisis is a dramatic example of such a clash.

In times of distress and extremity, the ultimate test of a national leadership lies first and foremost in its ability to function properly in the eye of the storm while taking resolute decisions and actions that are attuned to the state of emergency as the full scale of the disaster gradually emerges. And it is here that the basic behavioral problems of the modern state reveal themselves: at a time when the “great accident” has actually occurred, it has trouble dealing with it because of procedural and legal restrictions, stubborn cognitive stipulations, a failure to understand the unprecedented event, and an impulse to try to achieve centralized control over the crisis when it is not clear that it is controllable at all.

Egyptian hieroglyphics, which were once at the scientific forefront, were well able to account for the crisis of the descent of plagues upon Egypt: “It is the finger of God.” The humility that is needed in extreme crisis conditions of this magnitude is not only between man and God but also between humanity and the forces of nature. It is here that the path to coping with the crisis begins: in the awareness that not everything is controllable by human beings. The great scientists know how much even the scientific pursuit requires profound humility and the hope of salvation by the Creator.

This is an edited version of an article published in The Liberal in April 2020.

European Jewish Communities and the Coronavirus Crisis

by Prof. Shlomo Shpiro

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The coronavirus crisis has shaken many European Jewish communities to the core. As the EU member states try to return to normal in the aftermath of the most severe threat to the lives of their citizens since WWII, the continent's Jewish communities struggle to come to terms with the devastating events of the past months.

The coronavirus crisis has had a profound impact on economic, social, and security aspects of Jewish life all over Europe. The European Jewish Congress, through its Security and Crisis Centre (SACC), provided training and education in crisis management and crisis communication for numerous Jewish communities across the continent. This enabled many communities to develop their own crisis management teams that were deployed early and assisted community leaders in providing a timely and effective response to the many challenges posed by the outbreak.

Communities quickly set up food distribution for the needy and those in quarantine, as well as trauma counseling and guidance for those most affected. The growth of antisemitic propaganda, which mixed traditional antisemitic tropes with new conspiracy theories about the spread of the virus, increased the threat of lone wolf attacks against Jewish facilities. Jewish communities all over Europe are now at their most vulnerable in both economic and security terms and require substantial assistance from the EU, their national governments, and regional authorities—not only for a return to normal but to mitigate economic hardship and prevent deadly terror attacks.

Coronavirus has taken a heavy human toll on Jewish communities across Europe, many of which lost longstanding members, leaders, and activists to the disease. While the final death toll is not yet known, it is clear that communities in France and Britain and, to a lesser extent, Italy, Belgium, and Spain, suffered many deaths. However, the effects of coronavirus are not only measured in loss of life. It has also had a profound impact on economic, social, and security aspects of almost every European Jewish community.

The institutional structure and activities of organized Jewish communities have been a major strength as well as a focal point of Jewish life throughout two millennia of Diaspora. Jews traditionally turned to the community for help at times of need, economic hardship, or war. As more and more European countries shut down their economies in early March and social life throughout Europe came to a standstill, Jews all over the continent turned to their community for help and support.

Luckily, many Jewish communities did not enter the crisis unprepared. In the aftermath of the 2012 Toulouse terror attack against a Jewish school in France, the European Jewish Congress established a Security and Crisis Centre (SACC) to enhance the security and crisis capabilities of Jewish communities across Europe. Initially located in Vienna and more recently moved to Brussels, SACC set up programs and initiatives to assist, instruct, and equip Jewish communities for crisis management. Over the past several years, SACC has conducted a range of crisis management training workshops, seminars, and realistic crisis simulations in a number of major cities all over the EU. SACC also initiated joint training for Jewish community officials and local law enforcement agencies together.

As a result, many Jewish communities developed their own crisis management teams (CMT) consisting of core community leadership assisted by local experts, ranging from security officials and medical experts to social workers and psychologists. Community crisis management teams were trained to deal with a range of potential crises and disasters, including terrorist attacks, natural disasters, and large-scale catastrophes. Although not specifically trained for a pandemic, community CMTs were mobilized at the onset of the coronavirus outbreak and provided many communities with effective crisis management and communication. This early reaction saved many lives and rapidly disseminated advice within

the communities on social distancing, access to medical facilities, and psychological ways of dealing with the lockdown.

One of the social effects of the coronavirus crisis was a rapid increase in the number of people each community had to care for, as many Jews who had traditionally stayed outside formal community structures found their way back to them for both economic and moral support. Community crisis management teams were able to provide not only food, personal protective equipment, and other necessary supplies but also counseling, guidance, and other forms of social and psychological assistance to those most affected.

The economic impact of the crisis has been massive in many communities, as many members lost their jobs and have had to subsist on minimal unemployment support. Communities reacted rapidly by providing food packages for the elderly and the homebound, kosher food deliveries to hospital staff and patients, catering services and home delivery for those in quarantine, and in many cases helping to arrange short-term credits for local businesses that suffered the most during the crisis. These activities demanded more budgetary resources than are normally available at a time when much of the communities' traditional income, which is based on donations from wealthier members, was declining significantly.

Beyond its economic impact, the coronavirus crisis also had a major effect on the security of many Jewish communities all over Europe. The crisis brought in its wake a substantial rise in radical antisemitism, both online and in person. Rabid antisemites found the crisis an effective vehicle with which to disseminate their messages of hatred against Jews, mixing traditional antisemitic tropes with new conspiracy theories revolving around the spread of the virus.

The crisis has led to a further radicalization of certain sectors of European countries that were already hostile to Jews, and this radicalization increases the threat to Jewish communities across the continent. Many Jewish communities find themselves in urgent need of better security, which is inevitably costly, at the very time when their income and budgets are severely stretched. This means a greater dependency on assistance from national governments and regional authorities, as well as from the

EU, to be able to maintain an effective security posture to thwart the expanding threats.

The results of effective and well-managed community crisis management and crisis communication, based to a large extent on CMT procedures and realistic scenario simulations, played a major role in saving lives and maintaining effective continuity of operation of community institutions and services even during the worst days of the crisis. Although in two countries—France and Britain—the numbers of Jews who have died of coronavirus is quite high, other communities, such as those of Italy, Spain, and Hungary, came out of the peak of the crisis with relatively few deaths.

The immediate outlook for Jewish communities in Europe shows three main challenges in parallel:

- Alleviating the economic hardship of community members
- Countering radicalization and antisemitic trends in their regions
- Enhancing physical security to stop lone wolf attacks of the type seen in the Halle Synagogue terror attack of October 2019.

The European Jewish Congress has a central role to play in assisting Jewish communities, especially the smaller ones, in dealing with these almost insurmountable challenges. The EU must support the European Jewish Congress, as well as directly support the most hard-hit Jewish communities, in order to mitigate the greatest threat to the institutional continuity of Jewish life in Europe since WWII.

Coronavirus in the Eyes of Muslim Clerics

by Dr. Edy Cohen

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The devastating onslaught of the coronavirus is being exploited by some Muslim clerics to instill fear in their followers and compel stricter religious observance. At the same time, parts of the Arab world are looking to Israel and the Jews to find a cure.

On hearing initial reports of the deadly spread of coronavirus in China, many in the Arab world rejoiced. Arab social media threads called the virus Allah's will to punish the Chinese for their cruel treatment of the Uighur Muslims of western China.

When the virus broke through China's borders and landed in Iran, the Arab world was even happier. Images of Iran's suffering as a result of coronavirus, and discussion of its rapid spread throughout the country, went viral on social media. Again, many Arabs claimed this was Allah's wrath, this time over Iran's heinous treatment of Sunni Muslims in Iraq, Yemen, and Syria.

When the coronavirus first began infiltrating the wider Middle East after its initial outbreak in Iran, many in the Arab world thought it might be an Iranian conspiracy. Arab populations succumbed to widespread panic and fear. Governments throughout the region, scrambling to contain the virus, closed mosques and shut down most of society. Even Islam's holy cities of Mecca and Medina closed their sacred sites—the first time public prayer has ceased in those cities since the time of Muhammad.

It's hard to discern the current extent of coronavirus infection in these countries due to a lack of governmental transparency. Egypt and Jordan remain in complete denial about the threat of the virus, falsely telling their people and the world that they have yet to identify a single case.

The International Union for Muslim Scholars (IUM) released a religious edict forbidding Muslims from praying at mosques and calling on them to protect themselves from infection. The IUM urged Muslims to pray at home and stay away from holy sites.

Finding hope in Israel

On social media, it appears that many are placing their hope on Israel and the Jews to find a cure or develop a vaccine for the virus. A survey was distributed among Arabs asking whether they would purchase a vaccine developed in Israel. Placing their health first, the majority answered in the affirmative.

Iran's Ayatollah Nasir Makarim Shirazi released a surprising statement on this matter. He said there is no prohibition in Islamic law against purchasing medicine or a vaccine from Israel, provided there is no other country from which to acquire it. In other words, the prohibition against doing business with the Zionist entity has exceptions.

Coronavirus, a soldier of Allah

In an unusual sermon, Jordanian MP, former minister, and lecturer at the University of Amman Muhammad Abdulhamid Qudah called the coronavirus a "soldier of Allah" and said it had been sent to punish both the West and Muslims. He claimed Allah is angry with the world, especially Muslims, because they have failed to obey him.

Bashir bin Hassan, a controversial Salafist cleric in Tunisia, posted on his Facebook account, which has 500,000 followers, that the Chinese are being punished by Allah because of the siege they have set against the Uighur Muslims. According to the radical cleric, Allah has many soldiers, including both angels and viruses. He said that just as Allah drowned Pharaoh's soldiers in the sea, he is similarly granting victory to the Uighurs.

Religion as cure

Kuwaiti cleric Othman Khamis stated in a sermon on his YouTube channel that this is not the first time Allah has visited his wrath upon the world: he also sent a mosquito to kill Nimrod and unleashed the ten plagues to punish the Egyptians. The coronavirus is thus another warning

to humanity from Allah. The only solution is to return to him and follow his ways; only then will the virus disappear.

There is no doubt that coronavirus is a matter of serious concern not just to the West, but to the Arab world as well. Unfortunately, Muslim clerics are exploiting the precarious situation and inciting their constituencies throughout the region. They have millions of followers on their social media channels and can spread their messages to huge numbers very quickly. The clerics' sermons have the ultimate purpose of instilling fear in their listeners to convince them to adopt a religious way of life.

This is an edited version of an [article](#) that appeared in Israel Today on March 18, 2020.

How Coronavirus Policy and Environmental Policy Intersect

by Dr. Manfred Gerstenfeld

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: There are several intersections between policy responses to the coronavirus pandemic and environmental issues. The decision to maintain social distancing measures, for example, has implications for the environment that need to be considered. The clash of economic and environmental interests, which was already an issue before the outbreak, will undoubtedly heat up further as the world emerges from the worst of the crisis.

The intersections between the coronavirus pandemic and environmental issues fall into several categories, including the environmental consequences of measures taken to contain the virus and the environmental repercussions of different exit strategies. Preventing climate change was an important issue in the years leading up to the outbreak, but it has been overshadowed by coronavirus. One wonders how the climate change issue will reassert itself in the post-coronavirus world.

One much-heard claim is that human misbehavior and neglect of nature are responsible for the outbreak of the pandemic. This is often accompanied by statements from environmentalists to the effect that if humanity does not change its behavior, disease outbreaks will become regular events. (This argument will lose much of its power if definitive evidence is found that the virus originated, as some suspect, in a laboratory in Wuhan, China.)

The coronavirus and measures to combat it have had several direct and indirect environmental impacts, some of which were highly publicized. There were reports, for example, that the inhabitants of Venice could suddenly see marine life in their canals as a result of the lack of tourists and boat traffic, though those images have been disputed as doctored.

On a much broader scale, the positive environmental impact of closing many industries down and severely reducing air traffic is proving to be significant. The decline in car travel has similarly reduced air pollution. Some experts claim that it may now be easier for countries to meet their Paris Climate Accord goals due to the reduction in emissions. This is only one side of the crisis-related environmental impact of the virus, however. In the US, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has relaxed ecological standards as well as rules that penalize polluters.

The new coronavirus reality is temporary, and (we hope) largely behind us. One may assume that government exit strategies will aim to return society to pre-virus conditions as much as possible. Western economies were growing, albeit slightly, and unemployment was low to not very high in most countries. While it remains to be seen whether or not there will be a second wave of the pandemic, exit strategies cannot be based on the assumption that there will.

Regarding exit strategies and their impact on the environment, the big question is how long social distancing will be maintained. The continuation of this practice will have huge repercussions. To what extent is social distancing practically enforceable, and how long can societies live with it?

If social distancing is maintained and passengers on public transport are required indefinitely to keep well apart, local traffic in many places at certain hours of the day will be unable to meet demand. Will people who need to use public transport at certain hours be given priority? If society is to function, employees have to be able to reach their places of work.

Ongoing social distancing will have many other consequences for public transport. Separations between seats will have to be created to keep travelers from sitting too close together. NS, the Dutch national railway company, is working on a program for that purpose. It is doing trials on trains where only some seats can be occupied and plastic screens are placed between compartments. The company estimates that trains will only be able to take a quarter of the number of passengers who were traveling before the pandemic.

NS is also evaluating a special ticket for people who have essential jobs and who must get to their workplaces. This could serve as an example of how to accommodate priority travelers. Another possibility being investigated is whether travelers will be willing to reserve train seats ahead of time.

But what about non-priority travelers? Children have to get to and from school. School buses will take fewer passengers, so more trips might have to be made. One alternative is staggered class hours.

For decades, remote employment has been promoted for both full- and part-time workers. The concept has made inroads in several countries. In the US, before the pandemic, 3.4% of the workforce was working at least half the week from home. During the pandemic, many people have used Zoom as a substitute for face-to-face meetings and become familiar with it. The aftermath of the pandemic is likely to see a continued increase in remote working, but not to the extent that it can compensate for the decline in transportation. The cost of public transport will have to increase substantially. In addition to the expense of seat rearrangement, the decline in passengers will distort the pre-coronavirus cost-income ratio.

What will people do who find themselves excluded from public transport? Many cities would like to see more citizens on bicycles. Mayors from three continents are collaborating under the chairpersonship of the mayor of Milan to develop environmental programs for their cities to keep air pollution from rapidly accelerating again. One possible step is to rearrange car routes so they either avoid cities entirely or are cumbersome when they cut through cities. A well-known through road in Paris, the Rue de Rivoli, will soon be closed to car traffic.

Yet whatever measures are taken, the use of private cars by their owners will increase, and with it air pollution. As mentioned, social distancing will require the reduction of seats on public transportation. If that goes on, more and more people will likely choose to take their own car rather than ride the bus or train, which carry not only greater inconvenience but a greater risk of infection. Lower fuel prices should further boost this trend.

It is not easy to predict what this array of changes will do to cities. It is quite possible that the rise in the number of people opting to drive their own cars rather than risk the logistical headache and infection hazard of public transportation will result in traffic jams that will not only bring air pollution back to pre-virus levels but possibly even increase them.

Air travel is a major polluter. In several countries it has been environmental policy to gradually replace short-term air traffic with fast trains. If the number of available train seats radically decreases, this could affect those policies.

As far as long distance air traffic is concerned, demand is likely to decrease substantially. The need to social distance will inhibit some travelers who do not want to be on a plane with strangers for hours on end. Because seat demand is in decline, the leaving of empty seats is less of an issue, but it comes at a cost. EasyJet has announced that it would like to leave all its middle seats free and resume flying. That might work on the planes themselves, but the CEO of Heathrow Airport has said social distancing at airports will mean kilometer-long queues to board each jumbo jet. Such a prospect will certainly give prospective travelers pause.

Many airlines will need government help through loans and guarantees. In a market where demand is dramatically down, placing additional environmental pressure on airlines may make recovery even more difficult. Yet politics are pushing in that direction. Air France is in advanced financing discussions with the French government. KLM's future remains uncertain. One of the Dutch government parties, D66, wants to include a condition for government finance to KLM: that it stop traveling to holiday destinations. If this does become a condition for government assistance, it will amount to an environmental policy destroying employment, and at a critical moment.

It remains unclear what is going to happen to global emissions after all this. A researcher at the Center for International Climate and Environment Research in Oslo claims that estimates of global emissions will decrease no more than 0.3% in 2020, less than in the crash of 2008-09.

There are other fundamental problems with green policies. The conceptual ideal is sustainable growth; i.e., to keep the world economy expanding while cutting back significantly on the use of the planet's limited resources. It has never been proven that this ideal is feasible.

There are also political aspects concerning the environment arising from the coronavirus crisis and the way it was handled. This can best be seen in Germany, which has a long tradition of environmental concern. The world's first major environmental laws go back to the Nazi era. In the pre-coronavirus societal mood of preventing climate change, public support for Germany's Green Party—the biggest such party in Western Europe—was increasing in the polls. In January 2020, it was the second-largest party in the country, only a few percentage points below Chancellor Angela Merkel's Christian Democrats (CDU/CSU), which had fallen to 25-28%. The Green Party leader, Robert Habeck, was often discussed as the likely next Chancellor. But Merkel's handling of the coronavirus crisis brought about a revival of her party's popularity. Polls in April gave the Christian Democrats 37-38%, while the Green Party is not polling at even half that.

Many other environment-related issues will come to the fore as the world moves out of the coronavirus crisis. The conflict between economic and environmental interests, which was already intense before the pandemic, will heat up further.

Coronavirus: Improvisation Is the Key to a Successful Response

by Dr. Efraim Laor and Maj. Gen. (res.) Gershon Hacohen

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The coronavirus crisis is the kind of exceedingly rare and massively consequential event that overshadows all the lessons we have learned in the past. Tackling it requires an open, flexible, multidimensional, decentralized, and multicentric system of thought that is free of fixed organizational paradigms.

Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* opens with the well-known sentence: "All happy families are alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way." Applying this logic to emergency situations, one can say, "All routine situations are alike; but every emergency situation is an emergency in its own way."

Despite the fact that this unprecedented crisis has gone well beyond even the most outlandish predictions, experts continue to call for centralized management by an authoritative state organization that is prepared to deal with emergency situations. These experts assume that emergencies are fundamentally similar, have generic components, and can be handled by designated experts, organizations, and structures that were prepared in advance for the task—even in the case of an agent of destruction that none of these experts had even heard of before December 7, 2019.

The coronavirus can be defined as a surprise mass casualty incident (SMCI)—a unique phenomenon that differs from scenarios on the "calm to war" spectrum in that each stage of the event is "routine-breaking." Although the virus is not a case of a completely random chaotic phenomenon, it is an unprecedented SMCI with characteristics that humanity has neither researched nor experienced to date. This is evidenced by the multitude of diverse and even contradictory approaches and methods with which dozens of countries are attempting to contend with the virus.

Whereas life during periods of both calm and war is conducted in a relatively orderly and stable fashion within the contours of familiar and organized patterns, an SMCI entails more complex situations that characterize dynamic, nonlinear systems. Hundreds of variables can be involved simultaneously. SMCI situations should therefore not be compared to war, which differs diametrically in terms of operational logic, rules, doctrines, methods of operation, rates of response, and management tools. Viewing an SMCI as a case of war is fundamentally erroneous and likely to exact far more victims than those caused by the disaster itself. Unfortunately, many security officials have a hard time distinguishing between the two and are thus considerably hampering the struggle to overcome the coronavirus.

As noted, an SMCI is unprecedented by nature. This means that basic facts and assumptions have been upended, along with the sets of rules that regularize, channel, and impel operations. Those who turn to familiar frameworks and formats to tackle the current crisis—that is, who are resorting to tools and means that were prepared and used in the past—ignore the uniqueness of the event. Barring a miracle, this is a sure recipe for failure.

Uzi Arad, for example, who is a former national security adviser to PM Benjamin Netanyahu, has harshly criticized the government's handling of the coronavirus crisis, characterizing it as the sort of improvisation that he claims has always typified Israel's behavior. In his view, the name of the game is prior preparedness—organizational preparedness, preparedness in emergency stockpiles, and conceptual preparedness.

That argument reflects a basic misunderstanding of the unprecedented nature of an SMCI. To contend with a massive development that has never occurred before, decision-makers must employ an open, flexible, multidimensional, decentralized, and multicentric system of thought that is free of fixed paradigms. In an SMCI, thinking must be dynamic, intensive, and resolute at a pace of hours and even minutes, not weeks. That in turn necessitates a system that can form an instant picture of the situation and reach a diagnosis. A deeper picture will eventually emerge for leaders and managers, but that will take years of research and analysis of the event that will necessarily be conducted in hindsight. Right now, a managerial approach is needed.

Some see the defense establishment as the body best suited to fight the coronavirus, but it would probably fail, because an SMCI undercuts the basic defense mechanisms that underlie Israeli citizens' sense of security. The intelligence community cannot warn; the air force cannot intercept; ground forces cannot win; and Home Front Command would have a very hard time playing the role of rescuer.

The defense establishment carried out an extraordinary civilian-government policy when it evacuated Gush Katif in the summer of 2005. That was not, however, a case of an SMCI but a political decision that gave the IDF and the defense establishment wide margins of security: they had a year to get organized and half a year to train.

Because no SMCI had occurred in Israel before the coronavirus, the defense establishment has no experience in handling one. It has had to learn from others' experience while avoiding blind imitation. That experience is likely to indicate, among other things, that under SMCI conditions, resorting to standards that have been prepared and determined in advance is unnecessary and can even be constraining and damaging.

In an SMCI, what is presented as a purportedly "serious" solution—i.e., one that was not improvised on the fly in response to the developing situation—will likely turn out to be not just irrelevant but counterproductive, while what is contemptuously described as improvisation will turn out to have been the right response. This is the crux of the basic debate with those who criticize the leading role of the National Security Council in tackling the coronavirus. They characterize its decision-making as improvisation that does not exist in any advanced country with an organized national security council (such as Britain or the US), while noting that in such countries, the struggle to overcome the virus has not been entrusted to that body.

The concept of improvisation calls for critical consideration. There is no question that modern systems based on technology, such as rail and aviation systems, require organized and systematic centralized management. When an accident occurs in one of these, a specific failure can be diagnosed—technical, human, or managerial—stemming from a fault in the requisite systematic preparation. And here precisely is

the difference between handling a systemic accident and dealing with a multidimensional surprise disaster that by nature includes more than technical aspects and necessitates (unlike a train or plane accident) rapid holistic adjustment to a situation that is without precedent. The natural urge to rely on familiar organizational formats that were prepared in advance is an obstacle to the proper handling of a serious crisis.

Coronavirus: State Responses and Cultural Dimensions

by Alex Joffe

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The coronavirus crisis has demonstrated the strengths and weaknesses of many global systems but has fundamentally challenged individual states, which have responded with contradictory policies grounded in local cultures. In general, education systems and experts have been exposed as inadequate while the information environment has been thoroughly politicized and manipulated. Contrary to a century of expectations, administrative and regulatory states have been shown to be too complex and cumbersome to respond swiftly to a crisis of this magnitude. Decoupling regions and redistributing economic and medical capabilities should be accompanied by a thorough rethinking of the power and responsibilities assigned to states.

As the coronavirus outbreak spreads around the world, it has become clear that the event is a global inflection point. A preliminary assessment of the social and cultural dimensions of the crisis is therefore in order.

Unpacking these dimensions from purely medical or scientific ones is difficult, as hard facts are immediately engulfed by unstated positions and expectations. The submergence of science and the spread of panic underscore the woefully low levels of public scientific and medical knowledge, the product of decades of under-education in science, mathematics, and history, which could provide individuals with tools to assess the many claims.

Media and policymakers appear even less educated, but their compulsion to satisfy a 24-hour information environment propels streams of misinformation. Information environments are profoundly susceptible to manipulations, such as the suppression of information on the origins and

extent of the crisis by the Chinese and Iranian governments, and now their promotion of the idea that the virus is an [American biological weapon](#). The [millions of tweets and hashtags](#)—probably from state actors—promoting conspiracy theories point to the deliberate weaponization of information.

Finally, politics are a crushing overburden, in the policy-oriented sense of what “government should do” but also the pathological antipathies that are now permanent in the US, particularly among the media. These disconnects, always evident during a crisis, are now inescapable.

The situation also points to what might be called a collapse of expertise, at least outside the medical and scientific communities. The number of “experts” who have emerged in the global media is vast, and has been intensified by the impact of politics. Outside of virology and epidemiology, crypto-disciplines such as political science and economics, not to mention the political and economic classes, appear in complete disarray, pursuing ideological and often self-interested positions in the name of reason and the public good.

These problems point to systemic issues inherent in overly complex systems: the overwhelming tide of disaggregated and disparate information, the baroque complexity of administrative and regulatory systems—innumerable agencies and departments, laws and regulations—with overlapping and contradictory areas of responsibility that leave gaps, and the inability of anyone, specialist or non-specialist, to fully comprehend the breadth of the crisis. That incomprehension is founded on the nature of the modern state itself.

In the US, the federal state is the product of a century of relentless growth. From the progressive state that emerged in the early 20th century, the New Deal state of the Depression era, the wartime state of WWII, and then the postwar state, the Leviathan has expanded relentlessly into every aspect of social, economic, technological, community, family, and personal life. Lower levels of the state expand its reach still further. Through education, regulation, and administration, the state set out to optimize and maximize the health, welfare, safety, and prosperity of the populace. On many measures it succeeded—witness, for example, the dramatic improvement in lifespans—but on others it failed, particularly

in terms of education. The state became vast, complex, and barely accountable, while expectations of its unfailing speed, efficiency, and success were unquestioned.

Indeed, in the current crisis, the state has functioned as intended. Federal regulators deliberately [resisted changes](#) to an existing flu study that suspected the virus was at large in order to prevent resources from being misused and to protect test subjects. An inflexible system based on science worked the way it was originally designed, but then prevented early detection of the virus in Washington State and throughout the US. Similarly, authorizing commercial and research laboratories [to undertake virus testing](#) required overcoming countless regulations designed to assure quality and oversight.

The system worked as intended until it didn't. Even science and reason, translated into dispassionate policy and administered by dedicated professionals, failed. Because the unanticipated cannot, by definition, be foreseen (at least in full), the state could not do otherwise. Other choices, for example to limit the number of critical care beds or to move pharmaceutical products offshore, were made on rational bases, to lower costs and allocate resources elsewhere.

Conversely, fulsome praise doled out to [tiny island city-states](#) like Singapore (population 5.76 million) or [Senegal](#) (population 15.85 million) for the speed and efficiency of their virus testing programs, in contrast to the US (population 327.2 million), unwittingly demonstrates both the organizational illiteracy of those offering the praise and the scalar nature of the problem. The manner in which state-run medical systems were overrun in China, Italy, and perhaps soon Britain (some 10% of GDP in the latter two cases) indicate that hierarchy and centralization, beyond a certain scale, are impediments rather than benefit. But cultural factors also play into the equation. Korea's ethnic homogeneity and Israel's experience with wartime crises stand in sharp contrast to French and Italian norms of political chaos that stand in contradiction with popular devotion to welfare statism.

The praise [offered to China by intellectuals](#) for its utterly brutal response to the crisis at home and for offering medical aid to Italy, which [echoes Chinese state](#) propaganda, is upsetting. The intellectual eagerness to

betray principles and reward an arsonist in order to score political points is shocking, but it also represents the implicit belief that ever-larger states offer salvation, even for crises they created.

Fundamentally, the modern state set out to expunge uncertainty, and in the process populations were desensitized to that unhappy constant of human life. With their myriad parts submerged in incommensurable bureaucracies and rules, institutions too were inured to uncertainty. Both states and citizens overestimate the ability of the state to respond to crises but retain the long-cultivated expectation that this can and will be done with speed and efficiency.

But the unknowable and ever-shifting line between under- and overreaction, which moves too swiftly for institutions and individuals to comprehend, has confounded expectations. The only available response is “more,” in terms of larger and more complex systems. Not coincidentally, this serves the needs of the state.

The fact that there is no “correct” response for the state is an unfortunate truth. Every response is “wrong” because it is an over- or under-reaction, arrived at too early or too late. The [political criticism](#) heaped on the US for closing its borders to China was vast, but the [export of the crisis to Iran](#) and then Europe shows that that response may have been too late. Similar criticism now comes from [Europe](#) regarding the latest air closures. Had the US closed its borders earlier it would have prevented the spread, to some unknowable extent and expense. Waiting to do so expanded exposure and raised costs. There is no right answer, nor is one knowable, by individuals or the state.

Most fundamentally, the crisis has exposed once again the differences between open and closed societies. Chinese prevarication regarding the origins and timing of the outbreak made that country and the world less prepared. Secrecy and lying made the outcome worse in China as well as in Iran, where the impacts were compounded by religious superstition. Turkey has admitted [only one case](#).

Only brutal measures, the quarantining of hundreds of millions, appear to have stemmed the spread of the virus in China. But in Italy the situation is similarly disastrous. The advantages of that country’s openness

have been offset by its connectivity with the world, particularly China. Still, certain tragedies should have been foreseen. The domination of global supply chains by Chinese manufacturers in medical supplies and pharmaceuticals has been exposed as a flaw—one built on the twin fallacies of global economic rationalism and the political belief that globalization would temper Chinese political culture.

Trade and tourism, foundations of modern economies, have now undone entire countries, including in the medical sense. These features of modernity will have to be rethought, along with the depth of economic, financial, and demographic interconnections between states brought about by globalization. Rebuilding global systems to survive a health crisis requires an ability to impose and enforce borders, distribute manufacturing and supply chains, adjust wage and profit expectations to local levels, build shared surge capacity, enhance rapid research and development capacities, and relocate strategically important industries to national territories.

Ironically, national goals of disaggregation and decoupling must be facilitated or even directed by states. There are reasons why states have been permanent fixtures for the past 5,000 years.

But curbing states' excesses is vital. The dominance of the imperial Chinese state and its model, in particular its totalizing surveillance system, has been touted as a means to stem the current health crisis and prevent future ones. This totalitarian temptation holds an inevitable appeal for states, some of which have already implemented widespread surveillance in the name of "public safety". Their surveillance measures complement those exercised by corporations that are themselves more wealthy and powerful than most states. There must be limits on this power, which means tradeoffs.

The opportunity for citizens to rethink what states are for may be one of the few silver linings to the ongoing crisis. These questions should be at the forefront of political discussions. But the answer is not to automatically give them more responsibilities and resources.

Coronavirus Fabrications Around the World

by Dr. Edy Cohen and Dr. Frank Musmar

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The many fabrications circulating around the world about coronavirus (COVID-19) are stoking fear and threatening public health. They vary from accusations of biological warfare to myths about the ways the virus spreads and what medications might be helpful to combat it.

Several conspiracy theories about coronavirus have emerged in China. A Chinese government spokesman [said](#) on March 12, 2020, without citing any evidence, that “it might be the US Army who brought the epidemic to Wuhan during the 2019 Military World Games, which was held from October 18–27, 2019 in Wuhan, Hubei, China.” Some Chinese have [claimed](#) that the US created the virus to destroy China’s economy. (Some Americans in turn have suggested that the virus is cover for a Chinese attempt to destroy America's economy.) As these theories proliferate, American companies continue to donate toward China’s fight against the pandemic, more so than all other global multinational companies.

[Iran portrays](#) the virus as a conspiracy orchestrated by the US and Israel. This accusation is a consistent theme for the regime, which always tries to stoke the anti-Americanism and anti-Zionism at the heart of its ideology when it needs to distract the Iranian people from the failures of the leadership.

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo responded that such accusations put Iranians, Americans, and the rest of the world at risk. Tweeting that “facts matter,” he [listed several](#):

1. **FACT:** In February, Iran’s chief terror airline, Mahan Air, continued to fly at least 55 times between Tehran and China, spreading the

Wuhan Virus. At least five countries' first cases of COVID19 were a direct result of the Iranian regime's disregard for everyone's health.

2. FACT: The Iranian regime ignored repeated warnings from its own health officials, and denied its first death from the Wuhan Virus for at least nine days. The regime continues to lie to the Iranian people and the world about the number of cases and deaths.
3. FACT: As Iran asks for more money, remember: since 2012, the regime sent \$16B+ to its terrorist proxies in the Middle East. Officials stole 1B+ Euros intended for medical supplies, and continue to hoard desperately needed masks, gloves, and equipment for sale on the black market.
4. FACT: The U.S. has offered \$100M+ in medical aid to other nations including Iran and our scientists are working 24/7 to develop a vaccine. Khamenei has rejected American offers and spends 24/7 concocting conspiracy theories. How does that help the Iranian people?"

Racist extremist groups, including neo-Nazis and other white supremacists, blame Jews and Jewish leaders for both coronavirus and the global response to it, including the shutdown of all but essential government functions in places like New York, New Jersey, and California. "From pushing the idea that Jews created the coronavirus to sell vaccines to encouraging infected followers to try to spread the illness to the Jewish community and law enforcement, as the coronavirus has spread, we have observed how white supremacists, neo-Nazis and others have used this to drive their conspiracy theories, spread disinformation and incite violence on their online platforms," said Michael Masters, head of Secure Communities Network, an umbrella group that coordinates security for Jewish organizations and synagogues around the country.

There are **two versions** of the myth that coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2) is a bioweapon. One claims that coronavirus was deliberately engineered by humans in a level 4 (i.e., the highest biosafety level) research laboratory in Wuhan; the other asserts that the virus was being studied in that lab (after having been isolated from animals) and then "escaped" because of poor safety protocol.

Similar rumors are running rampant online accusing Israel and the US of weaponizing the virus and speculating that Israel, the US, and China already possess either a cure or an antidote. “Conspiracy theories about human-made viruses are not new. We saw this with HIV, the rumor that the US made it, and introduced it into Africa. But they are really dangerous kinds of things to get spread around,” said Gerald Keusch, professor of medicine and international health and associate director of Boston University's National Emerging Infectious Diseases Laboratories. Dr. Tom Inglesby, Director of Johns Hopkins Center for Health Security, rebuts the suggestion of malicious design:

At this point, there is no genetic evidence of anything other than a naturally occurring virus. It is true that there is a major laboratory in Wuhan that studies coronaviruses and has a large collection of coronaviruses. But from the [analyses](#) that have been done, there isn't any evidence that this virus has been engineered or is different from something that has been found in nature.

Anti-Jewish Coronavirus Conspiracy Theories in Historical Context

by Dr. Manfred Gerstenfeld

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: A number of conspiracy theories have quickly emerged linking Jews and Israel to the coronavirus pandemic. These are new mutations of historical strains of antisemitic conspiracy theories, including the “poisoning of gentiles” motif and the accusation that the Jews want to control the world. These theories are all linked to the most popular antisemitic conspiracy theory of all, the modern mutation of the ancient blood libel that claims that Israel behaves like the Nazis and has Nazi-esque intentions toward the Palestinians.

The outburst of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has led to the rapid proliferation of a host of antisemitic conspiracy theories. This is unfortunately hardly surprising, as the tendency to blame the Jews for widespread misfortune dates back centuries. One of the earliest recorded anti-Jewish conspiracy theories was written about by Roman-era Jewish historian Flavius Josephus. He tells us that according to the Jew-hater Apion, a Greek who lived in Egypt, the Jews kidnapped a Greek, held him captive in the Temple in Jerusalem, sacrificed him, and ate him. This was the forerunner of the blood libel, one of the major strains of antisemitic conspiracy theories.

Fast forward to today. Nathan Sharansky recently said, “They are blaming the Jews [for coronavirus], accusing us of trying to destroy the economy in order to make money.” He noted that recent virulent antisemitic propaganda blaming Jews for the virus outbreak originated in Iran, Turkey, and other countries that are unfriendly to Israel and the Jews. In Iran, the state-controlled media is blaming “Zionists” for the epidemic and warning people not to use a coronavirus vaccine if it is developed by Israeli scientists (though this message is somewhat inconsistent: top

Iranian cleric Grand Ayatollah Nasser Makarem Shirazi has said using an Israeli vaccine is permissible if there is no substitute).

The ADL cites the claim by white supremacists that Jews created the virus to increase their control over a decimated population and profit financially, a message that is spreading on mainstream platforms like Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, and Reddit. Some conspiracy theorists suggest that the virus was manufactured by the US and Israel to target political rivals like China and Iran.

A guest on Turkish state television said, “Jews, Zionists, have organized and engineered the novel coronavirus as a biological weapon just like the bird flu ‘to design the world, seize countries, and neuter the world’s population.’” The Palestinians, too, are busy promoting conspiracy theories at a time when they receive Israeli support for fighting the pandemic. The Palestinian Authority daily *al-Hayat al-Jadida* carried a cartoon on March 16 of the coronavirus in the form of a big Israeli tank pursuing a small Palestinian carrying an infant. The *al-Quds* daily in East Jerusalem wrote that the coronavirus is a biological weapon that the US and Israel decided to deploy against China and Iran after failing to harm them by conventional means. Continuing this theme, Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei said American medicine is being used to spread the virus and alleges that the virus was specifically built to target Iran by using Iranian genetic data somehow obtained by the US. He also says the US wants to send doctors to Iran not to assist in the crisis but to witness the effects of the poison they produced.

Swiss cult leader and lay preacher Ivo Sasek, founder of the Swiss-based group “Organic Christian Generation,” has claimed in the past that Jewish conspirators are preparing to reduce the world’s population to 500 million through a billion-fold mass murder. During the current crisis, the group disseminated a flyer that claims that coronavirus is a biological weapon unleashed on the world by US-based Jewish Holocaust survivor George Soros.

Austrian right-wing extremist Martin Sellner, a member of the neo-fascist “Identitäre” group and a figure with thousands of followers, is spreading the similar idea that the Soros Open Society Foundation is responsible

for the coronavirus crisis. Nor is this notion reserved for European fringe antisemites. US Republican Congressional candidate Joanne Wright has said the virus is linked to Soros and Bill Gates.

Antisemitic conspiracy theories have a long history. The claim that the Jews are connected with the spread of disease is the second major strain of conspiracy theory following the blood libel. It dates back to the Middle Ages, when Jews were blamed for plagues, including the Black Death of the 14th century. At that time, the Jews were accused of having poisoned the wells.

The poison and sickness motif was given new life by Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas at a plenary of the European Parliament in 2016, where he told the assembly that a rabbi had asked the Israeli government to poison Palestinian drinking water. He received a standing ovation for this speech from many European parliamentarians. The chairman of the European parliament at that time, German socialist Martin Schulz, called Abbas's speech "inspiring." Two days later, Abbas admitted there was no such rabbi.

Palestinian Media Watch has published a long list of contemporary Palestinian mutations of the ancient poison libel. These include the accusation that Israel spread AIDS within the Palestinian community via promiscuous women. Other mutations of this motif include claims that doctors have been paid to spread disease among Palestinians. This echoes Stalin's Soviet Union, where Jewish doctors were arrested and indicted on the accusation that they planned to poison Stalin and the Soviet leadership.

The variant that Jews and Israel want to dominate the world is a third major category of antisemitic conspiracy theory. The main document accusing the Jews of conspiring to this end is *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, a tsarist-era forgery that has been reprinted in large numbers for decades. It is regularly republished and disseminated, both in the Muslim world and in the West. A few weeks ago, the British charity Oxfam removed two editions of the Protocols from its online shop after a complaint by Mark Regev, Israel's ambassador to the UK.

The earlier mentioned major blood libel variant in the Christian world goes back to the town of Norwich, UK in the year 1144. Over the centuries it has recurred across Europe. The Italian city of Trent in the fifteenth century is an infamous example.

Raphael Israeli, in his book *Blood Libel and its Derivatives: The Scourge of Anti-Semitism*, says:

Christians introduced the blood libel to the Islamic world. In 1840, the French consul in Damascus and some of the monks falsely claimed that a Christian priest in that city, Father Thomas, was murdered by Jews who used his blood. The blood libel was also promoted by the Nazis. The antisemitic publication *Der Stürmer* published a special issue in 1934. The front page featured an illustration of a German boy lying on a table surrounded by Jews with long beards and earlocks. They were sucking the blood out of his body through long tubes.

Israeli added about Arab use of the blood libel: “Mustafa Tlas, who was Syrian Defense Minister from 1972 to 2004, lent credibility to the blood libel by writing his doctoral dissertation about it, as if it were a fact of history instead of an antisemitic fabrication.” Israeli provides many other examples of Arab use of the blood libel.

A postmodern version of the blood libel claims that Israel murders Palestinians in order to recycle their organs. On August 17, 2009, the culture section of the largest Swedish daily, the Social Democrat *Aftonbladet*, published an article by Donald Boström entitled “Våra söner plundras på sina organ” (“Our Sons Are Plundered of Their Organs”) in which the author claimed that the IDF was rumored to be killing Palestinians and harvesting their organs for transplant in collusion with the Israeli medical establishment.

Historian Richard Landes says that in our day,

We see a revival of conspiracy theories. Muslim societies are most prominent in the production, circulation and belief in them. The best-known conspiracy theory is probably that Americans themselves, or the Mossad, carried out the 9/11 terror attacks and not the jihadist Al-Qaeda perpetrators. This belief permeates elites throughout the Muslim world.

Landes went on to say: “Conspiracy theories coming out of the Muslim world are accompanied by another surprising phenomenon. In the past, conspiracists blamed a malevolent other—the Jews, the lepers, the witches, the communists. Now we find Western believers in conspiracy theories that target the West—for instance those of 9/11—in which some believers confirm the paranoid accusations of their enemies. The postmodern conspiracy theory’s siren song runs: “‘We’ are to blame, ‘our’ enemy is innocent.”

The coronavirus conspiracy theories show that the Jews are once again the first accused. The virus will eventually die out, but the antisemitic conspiracy theories will live on.

Political Implications

Government Accountability Is Being Tested in the Age of Coronavirus

by Dr. George N. Tzogopoulos

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Social distancing measures have had a great impact on the conduct of parliaments and politicians, who now give speeches to empty rooms and without challenge by journalists. The new social construct being formed between governments and populations in the coronavirus era is testing government accountability and transparency.

The closure of The Canadian Jewish News and last-minute rescue of The Jewish Chronicle, the world's oldest Jewish newspaper, show how abruptly and severely coronavirus is affecting the media. This problem is multidimensional, and its impact goes beyond economic considerations.

Serious journalism—already struggling for years to survive in the internet era—is facing a new hurdle. Government subsidies to save the press might provide it with temporary relief but will weaken its watchdog mission.

Fake news, by contrast, continues to gain ground. It is easy and cheap to spread stories online via social media. Now that people are spending so much more time at home, they are using their computers, tablets, and smartphones even more extensively than usual and are enthusiastically consuming and redistributing rumors and inventions. Uncertainty rules the day, and good journalists are left to walk the line between survival—both physical and economic—and a work routine that has been badly disrupted as they attempt to cover the pandemic.

A rise in discrimination and hatred has been clearly visible online over the past few weeks, with antisemitic messages spreading with the velocity of the virus. Hatred of Jews, as both individuals and as a collective entity, is being disseminated in the form of conspiracy theories about the origins of the crisis and the profits it is allegedly generating. Physical violence and online hate speech are occurring in tandem, a development that should alarm the international community.

How should this problem be addressed in the coronavirus era? A typical response under more normal circumstances would be collaboration among states, agencies, and Jewish communities and discussions in committees at relevant European Parliament working groups. But the new reliance on email and digital campaigns, as well as the replacement of face-to-face meetings with virtual ones, changes these dynamics.

Concern over how to handle the rapid rise in coronavirus-related antisemitic hate speech and violence resides within the wider debate on how democracies are coping with the pandemic. Coronavirus is dramatically influencing the modus operandi of Western countries and societies. In view of the necessity to practice social-distancing measures, parliamentary debates rarely take place and politicians give speeches to empty rooms free of journalists who might otherwise ask them hard questions.

Accountability and transparency are being tested. Procurement of goods and services for disease management can fall into corrupt practices, and the Council of Europe has published guidelines to prevent risks.

Parliaments are intensifying the push to employ virtual settings. Although this depends on the legal framework of each country and raises questions about efficiency, some countries, including Australia and the UK, are determined to proceed online. Cybersecurity is a critical concern, especially when representatives have to vote.

Consider, for example, the European Parliament, whose members receive electronic ballot forms at their official email addresses during remote sessions to be completed and returned with signatures. The opportunity for mayhem this structure implies will surely whet the appetite of hackers.

Additionally, citizens have fewer opportunities to protest. A recent demonstration in Tel Aviv, in which participants kept two meters apart, was a rare recent case. People are, of course, able to express their views openly on social media. However, the use of smartphones to trace patients and quarantined individuals during the crisis is causing unease about government use of personal data.

Nostalgia for the pre-coronavirus era leads nowhere. Democracies must respond to the unprecedented challenges by improving digital instruments to build public trust. As no vaccine has yet been found, delay will jeopardize liberal values.

Technological creativity and continuous learning can pave the way for active democratic participation, more inclusion, and crowdsourcing. Opportunities will sideline risks should policy and decision-makers invest time in an online participatory process, including question and answer sessions.

In the fight against antisemitism, a toxic element to democracy both on- and offline, smart education should be added to the arsenal.

This is a probationary period for Western countries, and the new social contract being constructed between governments and citizens will play out largely on the internet. The success of those governments' adjustment to this new reality could determine their fate.

This is an edited version of an [article](#) that appeared in the Jerusalem Post on May 21, 2020.

Coronavirus and the Modern State

by Maj. Gen. (res.) Gershon Hacohen

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The modern state is based primarily on the logic of routine, which is fundamentally different from the logic of emergency. Because the demand for assistance from state institutions is especially great in times of emergency, there is a need to reexamine the system of linkages that the state maintains in routine times and to create a balance between the logic of routine and the logic of emergency.

The coronavirus crisis, which has brought much of human interaction to an abrupt halt all over the world, offers an opportunity to reconsider the overt and covert aspects of the ways human life is managed—first and foremost the state’s roles and obligations toward its citizens.

The Enlightenment and the scientific revolution in Europe heralded the rise of modernity, which entailed a fundamental shift in thinking about human prosperity. Under the new political and scientific conditions, a hope arose that human life could flourish and be protected from disaster. Whereas for generations, people turned to God to make their hopes a reality, they increasingly came to demand a prosperous, safe life from the state.

The coronavirus has triggered a great upheaval, made all the more dramatic by the revelation of the modern state’s helplessness in the face of a wide-scale, calamitous event. We are being forced to see that there is an unbridgeable gap between the standards and conventions of proper state management during routine times and the logic of dealing with a state of emergency.

The challenge of adjusting to a state of emergency

Most of the “strategic management” experts in Israel have criticized what they view as the lack of an institutional-state organization for

managing the coronavirus crisis. They assume that all emergency situations resemble each other in their basic characteristics and hence should be managed by a designated organization and by experts trained in advance. They expect a ready-made operative approach and tools prepared beforehand, while totally rejecting any reliance on improvisation and “management on the fly.”

This line of thinking betrays a basic misunderstanding. The operation of modern systems in routine times does indeed require centralized, organized, and systematic management—but a multidimensional surprise disaster calls for rapid, holistic adjustment to an unprecedented situation. The impulse to fall back on a familiar, preexisting organizational format is not helpful; indeed, it is the main obstacle to proper adjustment to a brand new scenario.

The evacuation of the British army from Dunkirk at the end of May 1940 by thousands of civilian boats and civilian volunteers was entirely improvised. It was part of Winston Churchill’s creative adjustment to dire circumstances that none of his military commanders foresaw. Devotees of advance preparation would turn such an event into an organizational lesson in institutional preparedness for the next incident—so that if a need for a rapid mobilization of civilian boats ever occurred again, everything would be in place.

But it is impossible to anticipate the nature of the next emergency, which is likely to differ fundamentally from its predecessor. In times of emergency, a good leader is one who can improvise and adjust rapidly to completely unforeseeable events and make difficult decisions without a full picture.

The Talmudic sages, who thought deeply about human limitations in the face of the unpredictable and uncontrollable, worked out two patterns for the logic of leadership by distinguishing between “Messiah ben Joseph” and “Messiah ben David.” The former establishes a method, a law, and an organization (as when Joseph prepared the Egyptians for the seven lean years), while the latter breaches a fence and overturns arrangements and conventions. The former devises patterns of behavior for routine conditions while the latter adapts to the challenge of emergency by infringing the boundaries of routine.

There is a basic differentiation here between a leadership and managerial system that is appropriate to routine conditions and a leadership and managerial system that suits times of emergency. The question, then, is what system of linkages should exist between them, and which of the two should take precedence when building a conceptual infrastructure of state institutions.

Preparedness for an unprecedented event

Modern humanity expects that the state's management will be so stable during routine periods that emergencies will be handled without any disruption. Like an off-road vehicle with shock absorbers that prevent any jolting of the passenger compartment even under rough driving conditions, the state is expected to prepare "shock absorbers" for disastrous events in advance. But this expectation is fundamentally misconceived, because an emergency scenario is likely to be unprecedented. Even a vehicle with perfect shock absorbers can be swept away by a flood.

Dr. Efraim Laor, who has researched and been personally involved in dealing with great disasters of previous decades (Chernobyl, the tsunami in Thailand, and powerful earthquakes), asserts that a mass-casualty disaster is by nature an unprecedented event that upends established systems of knowledge with regard to facts and working assumptions. Therefore, expecting decision-makers to handle such an event in accordance with standards, procedures, and concepts prepared during routine times is a sure recipe for failure.

The modern managerial approach strives to link preparations under routine conditions to emergency situations. Reality, however, reveals a gap between the two situations that cannot be logically bridged. The inability to base the whole system on a single method and a uniform pattern of managerial excellence mandates an awareness of the essential difference between those who excel in management of routine and those who excel in times of emergency. A leader who fits the bill in routine times is not necessarily one who will be effective under emergency conditions.

And therein lies the problem of the modern state, which is based primarily on the logic of routine and denies the fundamental differentness of the logic

of emergency. The more the system excels in proper management under routine conditions, the less it is prepared to deal with an unprecedented emergency scenario.

Thus the coronavirus crisis calls for a fresh consideration of what can be expected from the modern state. Because the demand for assistance from state institutions is especially great in times of emergency, there is a need to reexamine the system of linkages that the state maintains in routine times and to create the necessary balance between the logic of routine and the logic of emergency.

The Long-Term Political Fallout of Coronavirus

by Dr. James M. Dorsey

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: As the coronavirus spreads, so does its likely political fallout. For authoritarians and autocrats, this is likely to be a mixed bag. Some will benefit from invasive tracing and monitoring of those affected by the virus, which is likely to boost the evolution toward a “Big Brother” surveillance state as well as nationalist economic policies propagated by populists and nationalists like Donald Trump. Others are seeing perceived government failures to effectively confront the virus undermine already shaky public trust, which can fuel demands for greater transparency, accountability, and freedom of expression.

The coronavirus pandemic, which is by definition egalitarian in the extreme and recognizes no physical or social borders, could cause complete breakdowns in already weak public health systems in conflict areas such as Syria, Yemen, and Libya.

The risks are magnified by the deliberate targeting during conflict of hospitals and other medical facilities and the mass dislocation of millions who are forced into bare-knuckle, unhygienic refugee camps with hardly any services and rampant malnutrition.

Protesters in countries like Iraq and Thailand, who demand an overhaul of the political system, and Hong Kong, where reform is the driver, have dashed government hopes that fear of contagion would take the wind out of the demonstrators’ sails.

Protesters in Iraq, which has so far [reported 124 cases and 10 deaths](#), have refused to abandon mass public gatherings, calling instead for the virus to take its toll on the country’s leadership.

“Listen to us Corona, come and visit the thieves who stole our wealth, [come and take revenge from those who stole our dreams](#), we only loved our homeland, but they killed us,” protesters chanted.

“The government uses coronavirus as an excuse to end the protests. They tried everything—snipers, live bullets, tear gas, abduction and so on and on—but they failed. They are now finding another way to stop us, but [they will fail again](#),” said Yasamin Mustafa, a teenage protester from Basra, referring to government warnings about the virus.

Similarly, students in Thailand have ignored [calls by military-backed PM Prayuth Chan-Ocha to end the protests](#) because of the virus risk. The students are demanding Prayuth’s resignation and political reforms after the Constitutional Court disbanded Future Forward, a popular pro-democracy party.

In Hong Kong, with Chief Executive Carrie Lam’s approval rating sinking to a record low of just 9.1% after her government faced criticism over its handling of the virus, protests have moved from the street to [online public gatherings in support of longstanding demands for reform](#).

At the same time, Lam’s backers in Beijing are confronting demands for greater freedom of speech at a moment when the government of President Xi Jinping has imposed absolute media conformity.

Xi’s critics claim that greater transparency and freedom could have [prevented the virus from turning China into the world’s most affected country](#) with economic consequences the severity of which has yet to be fully appreciated.

Writing in *The Wall Street Journal*, Bloomberg’s former China bureau chief Dexter Roberts warned that the long-term fallout of the virus could be fundamental, with hundreds of millions of domestic migrant workers “still facing unprecedented virus-related disruptions in their lives and work” as incomes have dried up, aggravated by enforced quarantines and “a skewed health care system (that) relegates (them) to understaffed and underfunded clinics.”

As occurred in the wake of the SARS crisis in 2003, the government will likely benefit in the short term from middle- and upper-class support for

increased political and social controls enabled by its rollout of a 21st century Orwellian surveillance state, Roberts argued.

“The coronavirus may eventually fade as a threat, but it has exposed the deep inequities that divide Chinese into two classes... That split remains the biggest obstacle to China’s development,” with disadvantaged migrant workers posing “[the biggest threat to its economic and political future](#),” Roberts said.

As for Iran, the virus crisis is not the last nail in the government’s coffin, but it has significantly widened an already yawning gap in public trust ripped open by widespread corruption, repressive policies, lack of transparency, and the government’s mishandling of the downing in January of a Ukrainian airliner.

"[The relationship between the government and the public is severely damaged](#). The government is suffering a massive loss of confidence. And this shows in critical situations like now. Due to this distrust, society ignores information given out by the government. In recent weeks, the government has too often had to correct its own statements," said sociologist Saeed Paivandi.

Paivandi was referring to faltering efforts by Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and the government to persuade Iranians to observe disruptive health precautions at a time when the country is struggling to cope with the devastating economic impact of harsh US sanctions that have complicated its access to medical products.

Initial government failure to confront the crisis head on by, for example, quarantining the holy city of Qom, the Iranian hub of the virus, has turned Iran into a source of the virus elsewhere in the Middle East and beyond. The extent of the health crisis at home combined with the impact of the US sanctions threatens to put the Islamic Republic in the same risk category as Syria, Yemen, and Libya.

The virus crisis is also grist for nationalist mills, prompting President Donald Trump to pressure US pharmaceutical companies that have moved overseas to shift their operations back to the US.

“The coronavirus shows the [importance of bringing manufacturing back to America](#) so that we are producing, at home, the medicines and equipment and everything else that we need to protect the public’s health,” Trump said.

If Trump sees a silver lining in the virus crisis, so do religious ultra-conservatives and critics of European measures to impose Western behavior on segments of Muslim minority communities.

With governments advising against customary physical greetings such as handshakes, kissing, and hugs, ultra-conservatives like Salafis, who refuse to shake women’s hands, observe privately that that their attitude is going mainstream at a time when their practices are under fire in Europe.

Dutch parliamentarians last month took Salafis to task for their refusal, arguing in a [parliamentary inquiry into “unwanted influencing by unfree countries”](#) that shaking a woman’s hand was part of Dutch culture and refusal to do so impeded integration. The coronavirus has, at least for now, undermined that argument.

Danish authorities have [suspended citizenship naturalization ceremonies](#) that require a handshake as part of the process in line with legislation adopted in 2018 to force the hand of ultra-conservatives that refuse to shake hands with the opposite sex.

Critics of the law said the suspension highlighted the absurdity of forcing people to have physical contact. “It’s absurd. The path to Danish citizenship should be about inclusion, not exclusion,” said Peder Hvelplund, a green lawmaker.

Political Leadership During the Coronavirus Crisis

by Dr. Manfred Gerstenfeld

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: During major crises, those in power have increased advantages over their opponents. A structural handicap of those leading the opposition is that the only tool they have at their disposal is their words. Furthermore, during a crisis the media mainly focus their attention on those who are in charge and the measures they are taking.

During major crises, those in power have an advantage over their opponents if they perform even halfway reasonably. To be more accurate, it is not that leaders objectively have to perform very well during a crisis to enhance their popularity. They only have to be perceived as doing so.

With the deadly coronavirus pandemic in full swing, an intermediary analysis of how leaders' performances are perceived may help us better understand future political developments in various countries. Parliamentary committees of inquiry on the handling of the crisis may play a role in how perceptions of leadership develop in some countries.

A structural handicap of those in opposition is that the only tool they have at their disposal is their words. They also have the problem that during a crisis, the media mainly focus their attention on those who are in charge and the measures they are taking.

It is helpful to look at one past case—the run-up to Germany's parliamentary elections in 2002. In early polls, German chancellor Gerhard Schröder, a socialist, trailed behind his Christian opponent, Edmund Stoiber, leader of the Bavarian CSU.

In the summer of 2002, huge rainfalls started in the Czech Republic and eastern Germany. The Elbe River overflowed and there was massive destruction. Schröder showed leadership in the crisis while Stoiber could only talk. Schröder had another crucial advantage: during the crisis: he virtually monopolized TV. This greatly enhanced the way he was perceived. Schröder won the election by a slim margin.

An assessment of the current situation in a number of countries shows that the coronavirus crisis has helped boost the popularity of several leaders, though not all. In the German 2017 parliamentary elections, the Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union (CDU/CSU) grouping, led by Chancellor Angela Merkel, remained the largest. They received 33% of the vote, a loss of 8%. The substantial fall in popular support was ascribed mainly to the irresponsible immigration policies of Merkel from 2015 onwards. Later polls showed a further decline in support for the CDU/CSU to around 25%.

Yet in the three latest polls taken in March 2020, this figure jumped to approximately 35%, even higher than what it was in the 2017 elections. In many of the pre-coronavirus polls, the Christian parties received only a few percentage points more than the Green party. It now has about twice as much support in the polls than the Greens.

Merkel has announced that she will not be a candidate for chancellor in the 2021 elections. In 2018, she gave up the chairpersonship of the CDU. Her successor, Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer, was not very successful and resigned her position in February of this year.

It is not only the top position that has a volatile effect on popularity polls. Before the outbreak of the pandemic, elections for a new CDU chairperson were planned. The leading candidate seemed to be economics expert Friedrich Merz, a German and European ex-parliamentarian. From 2000-02 he was chairman of the CDU/CSU parliamentary faction in the Bundestag. At present, however, he holds no political position and cannot particularly distinguish himself.

The second most favored candidate, Armin Laschet, is minister president of the largest federal state of Germany, North Rhine-Westphalia. He is thus in a somewhat better position than Merz. Initially it was thought that

Minister of Health Jens Spahn would also run for the chairpersonship, but Laschet has arranged with him that if he were to be elected, Spahn will become his deputy.

As minister of health, Spahn has had much opportunity to be in the limelight, and is now very positively perceived.

Often the chairperson of the CDU, the bigger of the two Christian parties, is the preferred Christian candidate for the chancellorship. The coronavirus crisis has changed this perception. Bavarian PM Markus Söder has been a key figure in this crisis in his home state. He appears very determined and is frequently on TV. In the past, Söder has said he sees his place in Bavaria and not as a candidate for the chancellorship in Berlin, but he has become the favorite for this position of many in the CDU. The question is whether he will give in to the pressure and run.

In France, the popularity of President Emmanuel Macron has greatly improved during the crisis, though different polls give somewhat different figures. According to the daily *Le Figaro*, at the end of March 2020, 43% of the French public were satisfied with his performance. This is the highest figure since April 2018. At the end of February, the figure was 32%. PM Edouard Philippe has also gained in popularity. Currently, 42% are satisfied with his performance as opposed to 36% one month earlier.

There are many precedents of the French population becoming more satisfied with their leaders at times of crisis. The popularity of President François Hollande, a socialist, rose after the attacks by Muslim terrorists in Paris in 2015. Similarly, the popularity of center-right President Jacques Chirac increased substantially after September 11, 2001.

In the US, the situation is less clear as far as the general election is concerned. Democratic challenger Joe Biden still leads polls with varying percentages over President Donald Trump. A Grinnell College poll on April 1 found that 49% of the public approves of Trump's handling of the coronavirus crisis and 47% disapprove. An Economist/Yougov poll on the same day found 50% approving and 46% disapproving. (Trump's approval rates are very volatile.)

In the UK, the conservative government of PM Boris Johnson, who is currently hospitalized with the virus, has high approval ratings overall: 73% as opposed to 24%. The same is true of its handling of the coronavirus outbreak: 72% versus 25%. Among cabinet members, Chancellor Rishi Sunak has the highest public approval at 77%. Fifty-four percent of the population are dissatisfied with the performance of Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn, who was replaced on April 4.

Even in Italy, which has been very heavily hit by the coronavirus pandemic, there is a huge increase in satisfaction among the public of PM Giuseppe Conte and his government: 71% in March 2020. In February satisfaction with Conte was at only 52%.

According to a poll carried out by the Israel Democracy Institute, 60% of the Israeli population is satisfied with PM Netanyahu's handling of the coronavirus crisis. Health Ministry DG Moshe Bar Simantov had an even higher satisfaction rate of 68%. Other public figures were seen far less positively by the public. Health Minister Yaakov Litzman's activities were considered positive by 40% of respondents. Blue and White leader Benny Gantz received 34% and former Knesset speaker Yuli Edelstein 31%. Incoming opposition leader Yair Lapid was viewed positively by only 18% of the population.

The Israeli poll also asked for opinions on institutions. Hospitals received a positive score of 83%, the media 58%, and the finance ministry 39%.

This is a period of high volatility of opinion. It is thus important to consider these figures as a snapshot of the moment. Current public perceptions offer a basis from which to analyze the way opinions evolve during and in particular after the end of the coronavirus crisis. At that time, these leaders will face a huge number of challenges in many areas.

Opinion Polling During the Coronavirus Crisis

by Prof. Yitzhak Katz

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Opinion polls from all over the world show that most of the public is satisfied with how its leaders have handled the medical aspects of the coronavirus crisis, including the use of location and tracking methods at the price of infringing on privacy. This contrasts to widespread dissatisfaction over the handling of the economic aspects of the crisis and greater concern over its economic than its health implications.

In recent months, numerous research institutes around the globe have surveyed aspects of the coronavirus crisis. The findings show similar perceptions all over the world on such issues as government actions in medical, physiological, and mental health matters; readiness for measures that interfere with individual rights; degree of personal concern for health; economic effects at the individual level; provision of reliable information; use of various means to prevent infection and treat the sick; assistance for the business sector; the speed and effectiveness of steps taken to exit the crisis; and so on.

Opinion polls examine subjective attitudes and perceptions. Other wide-ranging studies are also taking place that collect objective data. Those studies look at numbers of tests performed, numbers of patients in hospitals and on ventilation, mortality and recovery rates, rates of dismissal from work, numbers of workers on unpaid leave, grant and loan recipients, and more.

The Gallup International Association recently conducted two global opinion polls. The first, in March, surveyed about 25,000 people in 28 countries, and the second, in April, surveyed about 17,000 people in 17 countries. These polls found that most of the public support their leaders

and the ways they are handling the medical aspects of the crisis. The March survey found that an average of 62% support their governments while 38% do not. The April survey found a slightly higher average support level of 68% against 32%.

Particularly high rates of satisfaction were found in Austria, the Palestinian Authority, India, Holland, South Korea, Armenia, and the Philippines, while only two countries were found to have particularly low rates of satisfaction: Thailand and Japan.

Table 1: Support for the government’s handling of medical aspects of the coronavirus crisis (support + strongly support):

Country	March 2020	April 2020
India	83%	91%
Malaysia	77%	91%
Austria	88%	86%
Pakistan	60%	82%
Argentina	-	81%
Philippines	70%	80%
Bulgaria	60%	77%
Indonesia	72%	76%
Germany	47%	75%
South Korea	74%	75%
Kazakhstan	62%	74%
Switzerland	62%	72%
Italy	72%	64%
Russia	49%	51%
United States	42%	48%
Japan	23%	19%
Thailand	20%	19%
Bosnia-Herzegovina	62%	-

Country	March 2020	April 2020
Afghanistan	63%	-
Armenia	73%	-
Macedonia	65%	-
Turkey	69%	-
Britain	49%	-
Holland	79%	-
France	52%	-
Ecuador	44%	-
Palestinian Authority	80%	-
Azerbaijan	77%	-
Average	62%	68%

Source: Gallup International Association

Attitudes in the US

In the Gallup polls, the American public was split in its attitudes toward the coronavirus-related actions of its government and particularly those of President Trump. Support for the administration ranged from 42% to 48% in the two polls, which each covered a sample of about 1,000 respondents. However, a more comprehensive poll by Reconnect Research in April that questioned some 3,800 Americans about the overall performance of the federal government found 60% support compared to 40% opposition.

Attitudes in the US are closely linked to party affiliation. The most prominent subset of supporters of the federal government (71% of them) are Republicans aged 50 and over with an education level at high school or less. Support among Democrats is 48%.

A Pew survey conducted at the end of March found that a 45% minority support President Trump's actions while 55% oppose them. A poll by the same institute in April had a similar result. Fifty-four percent said they believe the president is not providing a satisfactory economic response compared to 46% who support it; 55% believe he is not providing a

satisfactory response to the needs of hospitals and their staff compared to 45% who believe he is; 57% think he is not providing the public with credible information while 43% think he is; 65% think he was too slow in his response to the crisis while 35% think he acted in time; and 66% think criticism of his performance in the crisis is justified while 34% believe it is not. Here too, party affiliation is a strong factor. Most Republicans (80%) support Trump’s approach to the crisis while only a minority of Democrats (20%) support the Republican president.

Table 2: Rates of support for President Trump’s handling of the crisis (April 2020)

Issue	Support the president	Do not support the president
General response to the coronavirus crisis	46%	54%
Response to hospitals and their staff	45%	55%
Providing the public with credible information	43%	57%
Speed of response to the crisis	35%	65%
Criticisms of the president’s performance are justified	34%	66%

Source: Pew Research Center

Other surveys conducted in various American states found even lower rates of support for Trump’s performance and actions in the crisis. For example, in New York State, 63% are opposed to the president and only 37% support him. In Massachusetts, opposition to the president’s actions (70%) is much higher than support (30%). In Florida, 46% support Trump’s actions and 54% are opposed.

In many cases, the American public makes a clear distinction between the president’s performance and that of other government figures, primarily state governors. Governor of New York Andrew Cuomo, for

example, has 76% support compared to 24% lack of support, despite the severity of the pandemic in that state. Surveys by the Monmouth Institute show that the average support for state governors in the US is 72%. Fifty-one percent are not satisfied with the president's performance, and 42% believe the advice he gives the public is harmful versus 33% who believe his advice is helpful. The rest (25%) think his advice neither harms nor helps.

Surveys in May have dealt with the issue of exiting the crisis. Most of the American public (68%) is worried that some states will be too hasty in easing restrictions, while 32% think the planned moves are too slow. Here too, there is a significant difference between Democrats, of whom a majority (87%) think the planned moves are too fast, and Republicans, of whom a majority (53%) think they are too slow (Pew survey, April 29-May 5).

Attitudes in Israel

Findings in Israel match the global trend of public support for the actions of governments. In a survey conducted by Maagar Mochot in March, 55% gave PM Benjamin Netanyahu's performance a good or very good grade, 23% gave him a moderate grade, and 23% gave him a poor or very poor grade. Thus, the majority (78%) rated Netanyahu's actions as intermediate or better. Similar ratings were given to the Ministry of Health. Fifty-three percent graded its performance as good or very good, 32% as moderate, and 15% as poor or very poor. Thus, the majority (85%) rated the ministry's actions as intermediate or better.

In the Israeli case as in the American, attitudes were influenced not only by objective or perceived performance but also by political affiliation. The religious public (members of the National Religious and Haredi parties) gave better grades to both the PM and the Ministry of Health, while the Arab public gave both very low grades.

In a Maagar Mochot poll in April, 60% gave the PM a grade of good in his performance during the health crisis, while 73% rated him intermediate or better. Sixty percent gave his performance in the economic crisis a poor grade.

In the course of dealing with the crisis, the Israeli government decided to allow the General Security Service to carry out cellular tracking of coronavirus sufferers and their contacts. This step won some support, but also garnered opposition over possible invasion of privacy as well as fear of data leaks or other misuse of the data. Similar measures have been taken in other countries, and in the comprehensive Gallup poll mentioned above, most of the public (75%) expressed a willingness to give up some of their individual rights if doing so would help stop the spread of the virus.

Conclusions

Surveys show broad global public support for the actions of governments in the coronavirus crisis. The explanation could be simple: Most people are indeed satisfied and that is what they report, assuming they have no reason to lie (as survey respondents sometimes do when asked about political preferences or uncomfortable personal matters). Moreover, even those who are dissatisfied with the handling of specific aspects of the crisis (such as the treatment of people in assisted living facilities or the extent of testing) may be satisfied with the overall handling by the person or people in charge (the PM, health ministries, and so on).

Satisfaction expressed in surveys is also bolstered by the recognition that the crisis is real and lives are at stake. Many people are concerned about the damage to health and the economy, and feel this is not the right time to engage in strong criticism. Many believe this is a “war” in which people must unite, take action, and support the leaders of the campaign. Criticism may grow louder as time passes, depending in part on how long the crisis lasts, the extent of the damage, and the narrative that dominates public awareness. Signs of a decline in satisfaction and support for governments are already visible in surveys conducted in May in various countries.

Critics and supporters alike may be motivated by both practical considerations and political preferences in their assessment of performance and success. Both are legitimate. The case of President Trump is a good illustration of the complexity of this problem. Opinion polls show considerable public criticism of his performance in the crisis, with the number of those who oppose his policy greater than the number of supporters—but the polls indicate that those levels of satisfaction are influenced not only by the objective situation but also by the respondents' personal politics.

Another element affecting public support could be respondents' religious status. For some, satisfaction with a leader or a government is affected by belief in the power of God to both punish populations and strengthen leaders and their flocks. An opinion poll taken in Jordan shows that 83% of the public believe coronavirus is a "punishment from God." Those people might find it easier than non-believers to accept the pandemic and the harm it causes.

The next research challenge will be an integrated analysis of the impact of objective and subjective data (independent variables) on factors such as the degree of trust in government and/or the chances of reelection of current leaders (dependent variables). Analyses of this kind conducted in Israel by Maagar Mochot regarding the performance of government ministries and/or heads of local authorities in crises such as the Gulf War (1991), the Second Lebanon War (2006), and the wave of forest fires in November 2006 show that subjective variables (perceived performance) have more influence than objective variables (actual performance), and that the "model" (one who is primarily concerned with his image) beats the "professional" (one who is primarily concerned with the correct solutions). The coronavirus crisis presents an interesting research challenge in this context.

How Coronavirus Emergency Measures Threaten Civil Rights

by Dr. Manfred Gerstenfeld

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Many governments have responded to the coronavirus pandemic by pushing aside civil rights. It is not yet clear whether this shift in national attitudes toward fundamental rights will continue over the long term or how that trend will manifest. During the crisis, governments approved the tracking of citizens as well as other tools that infringed their privacy. Once the need for emergency measures has passed, discussions—both civil and legal—will grow more intense over how much longer civil rights should remain compromised.

In response to the coronavirus pandemic, many governments approved the wholesale infringement of their citizens' civil rights. Large populations accepted the dramatic curtailment of their civil liberties for weeks and even months on end on the understanding that that curtailment was temporary. One wonders, now that the crisis is beginning to abate, whether their rights will be fully restored.

Many governments approved tracking measures and other privacy-breaching capabilities that can have long-term consequences. Albert Fox Cahn of the Surveillance Technology Oversight Project said, "We could so easily end up in a situation where we empower local, state, or federal governments to take measures in response to this pandemic that fundamentally change the scope of American civil rights."

Once most of the emergency measures have ended, discussion is likely to intensify about the extent to which civil rights were abolished at the height of the crisis. Robert Seegmüller, chairman of an organization of German constitutional judges, said that future courts will have to decide whether his country's constitution gives parliament the right to transfer

so much of its operational competence to the executive branch. He added that it has not yet been determined whether the closure of many institutions in the first weeks of the crisis was legally acceptable.

The first step in tackling these questions is to identify the fundamental rights that were limited or canceled entirely. The most important was the right to move freely in the streets of one's own city, a right that was summarily stripped from citizens during periods of lockdown. Lockdowns also infringed people's freedom to gather or to visit friends or family. (During the lockdown in the UK, Prof. Neil Ferguson, an epidemiologist and the top British government adviser on the virus issue, had to resign his position after it became known that in direct contravention of the social distancing limits he himself had convinced the government to impose on the general public, he had allowed his lover to visit him repeatedly at his home.)

The obligation to wear a face mask outside one's home is another major limitation of civil rights. This precaution not only infringes personal freedom but makes people difficult to recognize. In Western societies, recognition of faces is part of the culture. In some European countries the wearing of veils is forbidden. One cannot detach this issue from prior debates in these societies about expressions of Muslim fundamentalism. Similarly, social distancing rules have prohibited handshakes, which are a hallmark of Western culture and one to which religious Muslims have long objected (when they compel contact with women).

It is part of the culture of Western society to be able to socialize in physical proximity. The obligations of social distancing have had many consequences for this tradition. People in southern European countries kiss good friends on the cheek when they meet, a habit that has had to be abandoned. British pubs, where friends have gathered for generations, have been decimated by the crisis. Social distancing will go on in many places after the crisis is over, with British Chief Medical Officer Professor Chris Whitty forecasting that it will go on for another year.

The crisis has also had a sharp impact on the free movement of people across borders, which, though not exactly perceived as a civil right, was considered normal and a development in which many Europeans took

great pride. Several European countries closed their borders during the pandemic, and the EU closed its external borders to foreign nationals.

Lockdowns and social distancing have had a heavy impact on religious freedom. While individuals are permitted to pray at home, religious gatherings are still prohibited in many countries. This is irrespective of how important community meetings are for some religions. In the US, multiple lawsuits have been filed arguing that coronavirus-related restrictions violate the First Amendment's guarantee to freely exercise religion.

For the most part, the crisis has not limited freedom of speech, with the right to demonstrate often permitted during lockdown. The German Constitutional Court decided health concerns linked to the outbreak were not grounds for a general ban on demonstrations. Several anti-lockdown demonstrations were held in German cities toward the end of the emergency, some of which turned violent. There were also public protests against the lockdown in the US.

Privacy is a fundamental right, and data protection is a growing concern. Even before the coronavirus, it was generally known that companies like Google and Facebook have access to a wealth of data on huge numbers of individuals. Facebook had to pay a \$5 billion fine to the US government for deceiving users about its ability to keep personal information private. This occurred as a result of the [Cambridge Analytica data breach](#). The security, freedom, and privacy triangle will probably become a major area of debate.

The more populations distrust their governments, the more problematic tracking applications become. Governments claim the data acquired through such apps will be anonymized—but as the data is held at central databases, full anonymity is cast into doubt.

In some countries, there is serious fear of the abuse of power by governments and police overreach. Belgian Minister of Interior Affairs Pieter De Crem sent a letter in early April to mayors and chiefs of police calling on them to apply rigorous measures to people who went to stay in their second homes. Drones were employed to locate offenders near the coast, a measure that prompted liberal politicians to protest the use of the emergency conditions to set up the beginnings of a police state.

Another civil rights issue concerns equality. In places where there were more people in need of respirators than there were available, choices had to be made. Equality would mean that those who came first were given respirators, but in many places, priority was determined by the patient's state of health and age. Triage protocols for critical care provision during a pandemic are a policy choice that values the right to life of some over others.

Major economic intervention will be necessary to mitigate the effects of the economic recession that is likely to follow the pandemic in many countries. Government measures in pre-virus society often ran into both public protests and legal problems. Governments may well decide they cannot afford to delay measures to restart the economy. This can lead to emergency measures that can in turn limit civil rights. It would be very problematic if parliaments are not allowed proper verification procedures, provided they do not stall decision-making.

The Hungarian parliament has given up part of its rights, which has led to limitations on speech. PM Victor Orban can declare emergency measures by decree. If he wishes, he can prolong those measures without the approval of parliament. The measures allow jail sentences of up to five years for distribution of "fake news" about the pandemic or the government. The Hungarian government has accused some independent media of propagating "fake news."

Thirteen members of the EU have signed a declaration warning of the danger to fundamental rights posed by some responses to the coronavirus emergency. They express concern about risks to the state of law that can occur as a result of certain emergency measures. The declaration does not mention any specific country, but it is understood that it is addressed to the Hungarian Parliament. It is telling that about half the EU member states have not signed it.

A fundamental question has to be asked: Is it by chance that the great majority of the sick and the dead were in Western liberal democracies? Is there something inherent in the societal modus operandi that causes those governments to have more difficulty reacting to and controlling an emergency situation than non-democratic states?

The Coronavirus Crisis: Origins and the Way Forward

by Dr. Hanan Shai

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Amid the debate on the coronavirus crisis, there is broad agreement on three issues:

- **The nation-state has failed to check the spread of the virus, quickly and with few people being infected, by using its autonomous capabilities, which turned out to be meager.**
- **Trans-state bodies that derived their economic capabilities from the state have failed in their role of assisting it.**
- **The idea of globalism is fundamentally true, and the problems that have emerged in the crisis must be remedied by strengthening the states and, at the same time, as concluded by French President Emmanuel Macron, the trans-state bodies.**

This study contends that globalism in its current form has failed and collapsed, just as communism and other social frameworks failed and collapsed before it. The reason for their collapse was that all of them were based on delusory utopian ideas.

These utopian ideas are grounded in a dominant European liberal discipline whose founders abandoned the scientific revolution at the beginning of its path, abjured rational thought, and continued, like the church, to adhere to faith-based thought, feelings of the heart, and delusions of the imagination.

Another liberal discipline, less well-known, is the rational one. Committed to truth and to the absolute laws of nature, it was adopted by the Anglo-Saxon democracies, which, thanks to its values, experienced long periods of growth and prosperity. On three occasions this discipline could be mobilized to help rescue Europe from calamities that its utopian conceptions had caused.

A consideration of the globalism that has collapsed, in light of the

rational values of rational liberalism, leads to the conclusion that it must be eschewed immediately and replaced with an updated and realistic global conception based on the values of rational liberalism. Unfortunately, in recent decades faith-based liberalism has penetrated these democracies as well and turned humane centers, particularly in the United States, into standard-bearers of the destructive, faith-based “liberal” “enlightenment.”

The coronavirus crisis and its causes

The failure of the nation-states to prevent the coronavirus, quickly and by themselves, from becoming a lethal worldwide pandemic is first and foremost a resounding failure of globalism.

Globalism is a delusory utopian idea that is similar to the foundational social ideas that have preceded it since the days of the French Revolution: ruthless capitalism guided by the “unseen hand,” socialism that developed in response to the “state of nature” that the “unseen hand” brought about, and communism and Nazism that emerged as a mutation of socialism.

Like its predecessors, globalism aspired to improve humanity by changing it, in the spirit of “The old world we will destroy, the new world we will create,” into the “new man”: a wolf or a sheep that lives in a social “state of nature” created by the “unseen hand” under ruthless capitalism; a citizen who is subservient to the organizations that run his life under socialism; the German as a supreme creature without physical defects under Nazism; an individual without acquisitiveness and without private property that was taken from him under communism; and a globalist “citizen of the world,” freed of his nationality, of his “I,” and of other social limitations that were taken from him under globalism.

The usurpation of nationality, as part of a determined “crusade” to achieve a large-scale blurring of every existing social boundary—national, cultural, religious, gender-based, age-based, and so on—is aimed at diluting humanity and turning it into a “multicultural” pulp of people lacking any clear identity or signature. The insistence on preserving a heritage and national symbols, as well as education to perpetuate them, has become symbolic has become symbolic of dark, Nazi ultranationalism.

The insistence on protecting the “I” from the tyranny of the empowered “other” has become dark racism.

The turning of people into a uniform, global human conglomerate with no clear signature and identity had a goal: to enable deriving, from the creative human powers of all the people in the world, a high and unprecedented level of global economic growth.

The entry into the global market of 1.4 billion Chinese manufacturers and consumers, along with tens of millions of other citizens in Eastern Europe, gave globalism a very strong tailwind. The fact that many of the new entrants were educated, diligent people full of a fierce desire to equalize their standard of living with that of the West as rapidly as possible, and at the same time lacking any restraining democratic values, greatly accelerated the process. The huge demand for workers that emerged in the world, a great thirst for business transactions, for higher education, for travel, for consumption, and for leisure activities, along with a huge influx of refugees, brought about a constant migration of millions of people from their homeland to other countries, including many who migrated to China and, from it, to the world.

The growth and abundance that globalism wrought in the world in a very short time were without precedent. But there was a fly in the ointment: too many of the world’s citizens did not enjoy the fruits of the prosperity; the nation-state was weakened by the massive transfer of authority and powers that it had exercised on behalf of its citizens to global and regional organizations and corporations; individuals and states preferred to invest in projects yielding large and rapid profits so as to reinvest in further, similar projects. Investments in projects that do not yield an immediate profit, such as those in health, education, counteracting ageism, and infrastructure maintenance, were greatly reduced; the huge, unprecedented utilization of human creative power that emerged, highly intensively and aggressively, caused enormous destruction to nature that was likewise unprecedented.

The coronavirus, from the moment that its outbreak in China became known, was enough to impel millions of “new people”—“citizens of the world” supposedly freed from the shackles of their nationality—to flee in panic straight into the hands of the state of their own people.

A huge fleet of passenger planes—one of the classic symbols of globalism and the means by which four billion people (half the world’s population) travel about the world each month—was quickly mobilized to transport the masses fleeing back to their homes. However, disastrously, the passenger-laden planes were turned into “petri dishes” that increased the virus’s rate of reproduction and became a key factor not only in the rapid return of the “citizens of the world” to their far-flung countries of birth but also in the rapid global spread of the pandemic.

Upon returning to their various homelands, the “citizens of the world” discovered that the “Leviathan” that was supposed to protect the citizens of the state had turned into a midget. It indeed sparkled like a goldfish from the prosperity of many of its citizens, but it had been divested of its state authority and powers by human rights organizations, progressive liberal elements within the country itself, and global transstate organizations outside of it.

At the moment of truth, huge regional and global bodies that had derived their power from the nation-state had trouble responding to its requests for aid or even ignored them.

The anguished plea of the Italian prime minister to the citizens of Germany to help their Italian neighbors—given the fact that Germany, their state, and the European Union had turned their backs on Italy—was in fact the death knell of another delusory, childish, utopian idea. Like communism that preceded it, globalism, too, collapsed overnight amid the spread of vast destruction that cannot yet be estimated.

The claim by a German cabinet minister that the United States had stolen masks from a Thai manufacturer, masks that had been procured and prepared for Germany, is not only a sign of the precipitous collapse of the global social order. It is also an omen of the possible collapse of the intrastate social order.

Today there is a real danger that democracies, including old and stable ones, will be replaced by dictatorships in an orderly democratic process like the one that gave rise to Nazism—or, worse than that, through civil war.

It must be candidly acknowledged that cooperation between strong, sovereign nation-states, however close, honest, and fair, would not have sufficed to produce the sort of growth and abundance that globalism produced. At the same time, the flattening of the world in an attempt to turn people into “citizens of the world” and rob nature of its lifeblood may have played a central role in turning a viral outbreak, which could have remained a containable local one, into a global pandemic. The nation-state that should have been the first to contain it quickly within its unclear borders turned out to be a paper tiger with no ability to perform that task.

Here it is worth recalling that the Ebola virus, which was far more lethal than the coronavirus, was contained in 2014 in the location where it emerged (West Africa) without spreading to the continent or to the world. Its spread was prevented thanks to the openness that—unlike China—the states of Africa displayed, and no less than that, by the remoteness of the center of the outbreak from the foci of the global revelry.

The roots of the crisis

The roots of the consistent, resounding failure of modern society to promote people’s welfare and right to live in happiness can be found, perplexingly and unfortunately, precisely in the “scientific revolution.” That is, in a foundational revolution that was supposed to replace myths and stories originating in the Christian faith with rational, scientific thought.

In the natural sciences, humanity has, since the advent of the scientific revolution, used its reason to decipher the one truth at the basis of nature and its laws, thereby making progress in the scientific domains. In the field of humanism, however, humanity remains behind; the threat that reason posed to myths and beliefs caused the enlightened liberal elites in the humanistic fields to shy away from it.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the father of French and European philosophy, indeed rebelled against the Christian religion that believed in the son of God. In its stead, however, he founded a new faith-based religion that believed in man himself instead of the son of God, in the spirit of a Hellenistic belief that “Man is the measure of all things” (as asserted by Protagoras in the fifth century BCE).

Christianity believed that the reason for the suffering of humanity was its original sin. Rousseau, however, believed that humanity was good and perfect by nature, and the reason for its suffering was its subjugation to the tyranny of the church, the feudal aristocracy, and the monarchy in its time, and to the tyranny of the bourgeoisie and of nationalism in a later era.

Similar to Rousseau, Immanuel Kant, the father of German philosophy, claimed that rational knowledge must be set aside “to make room for faith.” Isaiah Berlin calls that decision one of the three most fateful turning points in Western culture.

The successors of these thinkers were more extreme than they were. For Hegel, truth is relative; for Heidegger, the ideologue of Nazism (who claimed after the Holocaust that Nazism had failed because Hitler was too humanistic), the truth has vanished completely because “all is nothing and nothing is all.” Sartre, for example, had no trouble believing in communism and admiring Stalin, even when his misdeeds were apparent to all. When he needed a higher dose of totalitarianism, he went on to believe in Maoism. In his old age he returned to the Christian faith and, like his ancestors, was buried as a Christian believer. In 1987, at the threshold of the present century, the Frenchman Baudrillard stated that truth is “what we need to get rid of as soon as possible.”

When truth, of which there can be only one (Freud), is made superfluous and replaced with myths and beliefs, morality—which is supposed, in Buber’s view, to protect humanity from the lie that does not exist in nature and is an invention of human beings—is also rendered superfluous.

In the absence of morality, man cannot use his mind to control emotion, instinct, and reflex in order to circumscribe them. In a world without truth, morality, and the restraint of the mind by the conscience, the need and the ability to distinguish between good and evil, and hence also the need to conduct conscientious soul-searching, to repent, to amend errors and injustices and avoid repeating them, become useless.

Nietzsche saw the atrophy of the human conscience as a gain. “Repentance and soul-searching,” he asserted, “oppress human nature,” and where there is no conscience, “real heroes do not regret and do not suffer.”

The human character, the “in the image of,” is not, Shalom Rosenberg maintains, innate and God-given but a goal toward which one must strive by internalizing the values of morality and, in their light, using one’s conscience as a guide, a judge, and an executioner. The eschewal of truth and morality, which made the conscience—the human character—extraneous, freed people from having to exert themselves to employ it and suffer its pangs.

The Nietzschean “new” *ubermensch* celebrated his liberation from enslavement to the “image” in Auschwitz. There he worked assiduously to destroy the people that had burdened humanity with the morality, repentance, and soul-searching that “oppress” human nature. His colleague, the enlightened, faith-based French liberal, was more modest and settled for hunting down the rebellious people and sending them via the French rail company to the “care” of the Nietzschean *ubermensch*.

When dark Christianity reached its nadir, its soul-searching mechanism was able to generate, despite its moral limitations, a “protest”—Protestantism—that salvaged the continent from the darkness of the Middle Ages and paved the way to enlightenment and the three fundamental revolutions—the scientific, the democratic, and the industrial.

When the liberal, faith-based, enlightened religion brought humanity to an even more terrible nadir because of its ambition to create a physically flawless *ubermensch*—and another man, an angel without urges for consumption and material gain—this religion had neither morality nor a conscience, and hence also no awareness or ability to engage in soul-searching.

Exempt from soul-searching and relieved of the hard work it entailed, the faith-based enlightenment’s Pavlovian response to its failure to create a communist man was to launch yet another imaginary social experiment: to create a globalist human uniformity.

The first to identify the great potential for profit in the new project, which requires the flattening of the world (as in the book *The World Is Flat* by Thomas Friedman—an ultra-Orthodox, enlightened/faith-based liberal), were capital and the markets. In their boundless desire to expand and grow, they supported the project’s advancement with—so it seems—boundless generosity.

It was clear that the alliance that emerged between boundless capital and markets and a crusading, liberal, enlightened/faith-based, mobilized commando force for erasing boundaries was volatile in nature and likely to end in a calamity.

Despite the great destruction that the democratic “crusade” to flatten the world wreaked as it passed like a storm through the Middle East (the “Arab Spring”), the faith-based liberal papacy that propelled the crusade, one might say with its own hands, did nothing to contain it.

Moreover, Barack Obama’s presidential reprimand to Hosni Mubarak—in which he told him to speedily resign so as to enable a “new order” that would grant Egypt stability and growth (despite the Egyptian president’s warnings of the disaster his forced retirement would cause to his country)—indicates the depth of the religious ecstasy that drove this hallucinatory and brutal liberal-democratic, faith-based crusade to flatten (and in hindsight, devastate) the world.

The crusade was checked by a local virus that the flattening of the world helped turn, in no time, into a global pandemic. This was despite the recent proclamation by a well-known, faith-based, liberal historian-futurist that humanity is no longer threatened by pandemics.

As of this moment, the dream of creating a global “new” man,” a “citizen of the world,” has ended in the return of the “faith-based liberal Cinderella” to a much earlier time: a man isolated from the company of other people, hidden within the narrow boundaries of his own home like the primeval man in his cave.

If Heidegger’s conclusion from the collapse of the Nazi experiment was, as mentioned, that it was caused by Hitler’s being too humane, the new and foreseeable conclusion from the collapse of globalism of French President Emmanuel Macron is that the European Union fell apart because its power was too limited. Hence, he claimed, it must be given not only additional economic power but additional military power as well (by whom and at whose expense?).

Rational liberalism: The escape hatch from the crisis

Besides the threat to health, humanity is threatened by a major social crisis resulting from an unprecedented economic crisis that has befallen it. Together with the loss of purchasing power, as in previous severe economic downturns, in the current crisis society has lost its power of production and is now subsisting from inventories. If these are not speedily renewed, the result could be a rapid social disintegration and a return to the Hobbesian “state of nature” of “war of all against all.” The rush to gun shops in the United States reinforces this assessment.

The chances of preventing the possible social catastrophe with a new social agenda that would be based on a rational liberal approach (which even Macron’s despair- and pity-evoking conclusion points to) are tiny. Even if a new catastrophe is warded off for now, past experience indicates that is highly likely to occur at a later stage. Now is the time to replace faith-based humanism—the humaneness of whose proponents is doubtful in light of the series of disasters it has inflicted on humanity—with a true, rational humanism that is founded on rational liberalism.

Unlike faith-based liberalism, rational liberalism did not dissociate itself from the scientific revolution but went along with it and settled modestly in the Anglo-Saxon democracies. Because of their consistent adherence to the values of rational liberalism (though not to all of them), these countries experienced long periods of prosperity and growth that enabled them to stand firm against attempts to spread the delusory European ideologies in them. On three occasions, their strength and fearless devotion to the values of rational liberalism led them to mobilize to salvage Europe from the calamities wreaked on it, and on the world, by the delusory ideas that grew in it, and even to sacrifice the lives of many of their young people to this end. Unfortunately, in recent decades faith-based liberalism has also penetrated these democracies and turned humane centers, particularly in the United States, into standard-bearers of faith-based, destructive “liberal enlightenment.”

There is not enough space here to fully set forth the doctrine and values of rational liberalism. To understand its essence and the chasm that yawns between the two liberal outlooks, it suffices to be familiar with the main aspects of its approach and with some of its constitutive values.

Similar to faith-based liberalism, rational liberalism seeks to redeem humanity from its subjugation to the tyranny of the strong and to prevent a social “state of nature.” It does not claim that man is good or evil, perfect or flawed, and so does not seek to change him into a meditator, an ascetic, a seraph, or an angel who is disconnected from his “I.” On the contrary, it accepts man as he is.

Rational liberalism attributes the emergence of the social “state of nature” to two facts that are intrinsic to human nature: the fact of the inborn inequality that nature creates between human beings, and the fact that, unlike animals (and even plants), man lacks a natural, inborn mechanism to limit his urges and gratifications, including the urge to lie (which, as noted, Buber refers to as a human invention that does not exist in nature).

Given the inequality, a weak and less talented person who has failed to produce his food will probably require, in order to survive, the surpluses of his fellow-man who is stronger and more talented than he is.

The lack of a limit to the drive for domination and the drive to accumulate and empower property will likely cause the strong person to exploit the weakness of his fellow-man whose life depends on him—and, in return for salvaging the latter with his surplus, to subjugate the weak person’s property to him and eventually also his body. Throughout history these two drives have caused the stratification of society into two classes: a minority of strong individuals who became the enslavers, and a majority of weak individuals who became the enslaved.

Christianity tried to avert this stratification by preaching the subdual of the human drives through abstention, and the meditative cultures devised behavioral rituals for disengagement from the body and its urges. Democracy focuses on containing the drives for domination, and the gratification gained by accumulating governmental power, through the democratic mechanism, which decentralizes governmental power downward and prevents its accretion at the top of the pyramid.

The values of rational liberalism and its mechanisms

Rational liberalism adds to the democratic mechanism, and to the values involved in implementing it, the inherent component that is missing—values of moral judgment when making democratic decisions.

Moral judgment can complement the mechanism for limiting drives and gratifications, which is inborn in animals and nonexistent in humans, through a man-made mechanism and thereby avert a social “state of nature.” To that end, rational liberalism makes use of the forethought that is unique to human beings so that they can subjugate their drives and gratifications to their consciousness, and likewise to the values of morality, which are like road signs directing the traffic.

Rational liberalism derives these guiding values from the laws of the universe and of nature, including human nature, laws that constitute an absolute and eternal truth. Hence, like the logic of the creation and the laws of nature from which they are derived, the values of this form of liberalism, too, are an absolute and eternal truth. Because the elements of nature and its laws are in harmony, social conduct in light of values that are derived from nature and its harmonious laws can produce a similar harmony (social justice) between human beings (notwithstanding their innate inequality) and, furthermore, between them and nature.

Rational liberalism equips society with three mechanisms that are meant to restrain it, without denying man the right to enjoy his innate drives: a moral mechanism whose values are derived, as noted, from the logic of the creation and its laws; an educational mechanism designed to teach and instill those values so as to accustom people to adhere to the truth, contain their drives, restrain their gratifications, and control anger, enabling them to live in peace with themselves and to compromise with the other; and the democratic mechanism, which—if the first two mechanisms are absent—can turn into a tool “for building a state for the sons of Satan,” as Kant warned.

The guiding values of rational liberalism that are important for a discussion of globalism are:

- **The value of truth:** In rational liberalism, the truth pertains to one world, as derived from the one, absolute, and eternal truth that exists in the laws of nature. As in science, in humanism an effort must be made to ground truth in proofs that are as strong as possible; and as in science, the consistent adherence to one truth, and to the ongoing effort to reveal that truth in interpersonal relations, is meant to reduce the element of gambling in human life, thereby enabling people to carry out their plans at a high level of certainty and to enjoy stability and security in their lives.

Liberal/faith-based “truth” is the inverse of rational truth: it is not absolute but multiple and relative because, like beauty, it is “in the eye of the beholder” and can also be based on narratives and “political correctness”—that is, legitimization for bypassing the truth so as not to compromise the dignity of the person (particularly “the other”) and his rights.

It comes as no surprise, then, that in response to accusations of concealing information about the coronavirus, China claims that—in line with the value of “political correctness”—it had to protect the dignity of the Chinese person and his right to privacy, particularly regarding his state of health. China can also claim that, after repudiating communism and its old liberal rabbi Marx and Engels, it learned from the new rabbi it made for itself—the faith-based, more progressive liberal, Baudrillard—that “the truth is what we need to get rid of as soon as possible.”

- **The sanctification of life:** In rational liberalism, this constitutes a guiding, foundational, and cardinal value that supersedes, except for special cases, every other value—exactly as, in humans and in animals, the existential instinct guides in them, reflexively, every other reaction so as to ensure their survival.

In contrast, faith-based liberalism put human dignity and rights before the sanctification of life, including, as noted, the right to privacy—which became the flagship of its humanism. Out of adherence to this value, for example, the U.S. administration refrained from security checks on domestic flights before the Twin Towers attack occurred. Such a check before the attack may, notwithstanding a certain infringement of privacy,

have saved the lives of thousands of people and enormous damage to property. Because of the violation of this value, buckets of cold water were thrown on the heads of police officers who, before the relevant emergency law was legislated, rushed to save the lives of worshippers from the coronavirus.

- **The value of freedom:** In rational liberalism, the liberation of man from tyranny begins with the removal of restraints. What turns that removal of restraints into freedom is the ability, which he did not have while he was subjugated, to make spontaneous decisions. In the absence of values, or when the values in whose light he spontaneously makes decisions contravene the logic of nature and its laws (like the “values” of faith-based liberalism), the person does not enjoy freedom but only the absence of restraints; given human nature, this absence of restraints will probably end quickly in his return to the “state of nature” from which he was freed.

The social order was designed since the French Revolution and especially since the collapse of communism in accordance with the values of faith-based liberalism, whose adoption was the main factor behind a series of collapses of this order in recent centuries. Thus democratic, and particularly European, man has not yet won real freedom but at most very brief furloughs; the last one ended with his relegation to solitary confinement in his home.

- In rational liberalism the **value of mutual responsibility** is derived from a similar symbiosis that exists in nature—in animal and plant life and indirectly also in the inanimate world: a utilitarian altruism that pays off for the recipient but also for the giver. The practical significance of this value, as Freud defined it, is the duty of each individual to carry responsibility and obligations toward his fellow-man. The boundary of mutual responsibility is the practical ability to fulfill that responsibility and those obligations.

Rational liberalism defines this boundary as the person’s duty to extend his innate obligation to his parents and his family, which comes easily to him, to his nation as well. The nation, within permanent, defensible borders—unlike the social frameworks preceding it in the social hierarchy (the

clan, the tribe, and the city-state)—is large enough to create collective, decisive power and thereby to prevent a routine of “living by the sword,” with the lack of stability and certainty that characterize life in the lower frameworks of the hierarchy.

Rational liberalism is also globalist: it produces global power through the obligation of each nation-state to accumulate sufficient power, not only to carry out its commitments toward its citizens but also to fulfill its responsibility and duty to cooperate in projects that advance humanity and thereby to guarantee, in time of need, the universal system.

In contrast, faith-based liberalism ignored the “limit of the extent of human control and oversight,” because of which humanity is layered and stratified in almost every social domain, including its organization into peoples, nations, and in the new era, into nation-states as well. Faith-based liberalism blurred the contours of the national layer so as to replace it with a global “Leviathan,” a body with unprecedented power but without organizational flexibility and physical closeness to threats—and thus also without an ability to respond to them rapidly, flexibly, and in the same spirit of mobilization, which in the nation-state is generated by such elements as language, ethnic cohesion, homogeneous tradition and culture, and common history going back hundreds and thousands of years.

The liberal/faith-based great notion of the dignity of “the other” and his empowerment vis-à-vis the “I” not only contravenes the instinctive drive to exist; it also turned the utilitarian, mutually beneficial altruism that underpins the value of “mutual responsibility” into a destructive, nonutilitarian altruism that directly clashes with the value of “sanctification of life.” Levinas characterized faith-based liberalism’s cult of the “other” as an autoimmune disease that has attacked society.

When the coronavirus crisis erupted and the nation-states, lacking their national powers and other capabilities, required the assistance of the “global Leviathan,” they discovered that the mentality that had taken hold among its official “citizens of the world” is the mentality of capital and the markets that had impelled the Leviathan’s creation—which means hastening to please the depositors but hiding in a bureaucratic maze when they want to withdraw their funds.

- **Faith:** Rational liberalism does not make faith superfluous, as perhaps emerges clearly from the scathing criticism of the conceptions and “values” of faith-based liberalism. On the contrary, for rational liberalism a sincere faith in the validity and veracity of its values is an important means of easing people’s rehabilitation from their subjection to the four addictive tyrannies (imagination and falsehood, domineeringness, the drives, and the gratifications), and even more so, of helping them maintain a routine of staying “clean” over time.

The crisis of democracy

The democratic revolution liberated humanity from the yoke of the aristocracy’s absolutism and turned all of its citizens into liberals. However, faith-based liberalism re-stratified society into two classes: a ruling class of the faith-based, “enlightened” liberal aristocracy took control of the societal heritage assets (law, media, military, art, and education) and turned them into latifundia aggressively ruling the “boorish” masses of subjugated people.

With the wisdom of the multitudes, with healthy natural instincts, and particularly with moral judgment in light of values of truth, the “boorish” masses realized that, like communism, the new king—globalism, a further creation of unrelenting faith-based liberalism—is naked. Intellectuals who should have constituted a moral shield for democracy abused their office and held their peace. Only in politics did some “rebels” stand up and say out loud, in an attempt to defend democracy and society, that the king is naked. However, a high acoustic wall that the aristocracy of faith-based liberal law, media, and art had built around itself kept those voices out.

What needs to be done

The virus that toppled the global order and is now sowing a calamity creates an opportunity to implement the lesson that Kant already warned of three centuries ago and that has not been adopted by democratic society since the first modern calamity—the bloodbath and destruction that the French Revolution and its aftermath wreaked in France and in Europe. This lesson, which is also the basic lesson of the collapse of globalism and its ramifications, underlines the fact that democracy without an orderly

morality of values of truth is dangerous, destructive, and corrupting no less than dictatorship, even if its leaders are “refined” liberals.

If ruthless and evil dictators were responsible for the calamities of Nazism and communism, democratic leaders (from the left and the right) are responsible for the calamity of faith-based globalism. And because even horrendous events like the Holocaust and other genocides in the twentieth century were not enough to inculcate this lesson in the democratic societies, the coronavirus calamity provides a further opportunity to achieve the great rectification that is needed.

It is proposed here that the platform for carrying out that rectification will be a second “Yalta Conference.” Like its predecessor, in which rational, practical decisions were made for defeating Nazism and delimiting communism, it will be devoted to making decisions on creating a rational, practical alternative to another utopian caprice that quick-witted faith-based humanism may come up with.

The convening of the liberal democracies for the conference should be initiated by the Anglo-Saxon democracies, whose leadership also initiated the convening of the first conference. Indeed, these countries, primarily the United States and Britain, have their hands full coping with the calamity that has befallen them and with domestic political crises whose contours overlap with those that distinguish between rational and faith-based liberalism. However, given the experience and the repute they have gained (thanks to their adherence to the values of rational liberalism) in rescuing Europe and the world from the three great calamities they have already undergone in the modern era—the French Revolution and Bonapartism, the ultranationalism of World War I, and Nazism and communism—none are better suited to this task than they are.

The Anglo-Saxon democratic leadership must immediately set up an “arrangements committee” to prepare for the conference and formulate a platform for discussion with five sections:

- A common rational-liberal, values-based code that the democracies must incorporate in their constitutions or their basic laws, thereby making the consideration of these values a requirement—in legislation, in politics, and in judgment.

- A plan to inculcate the values of rational liberalism at the same speed with which the tenets of faith-based liberalism were inculcated in society (truth that can also be a narrative, dignity that comes before life, freedom that is the removal of restraints, patriotism that is dark ultranationalism (and a will to live that is racism).
- A practical guide to creating capitalist socioeconomic justice that has never been written. Despite its shortcomings, capitalism, unlike socialism and communism, has not been tossed in the wastebasket because it accords with human nature. Hence it is essential to set boundaries for it so that its full potential can be realized while protecting society from its defects.
- A plan for the rapid elimination of the United Nations, which has become a global organization for the destruction of standards. The new, alternative United Nations should be designed in line with the vision of Woodrow Wilson—the U.S. president who planned the creation of the first United Nations—and its mission will be to serve as a tool to spread the values of rational liberalism in the world and thereby establish, in their light, a rational and moral global order. Actors who refuse or are unable to adopt the values of this new order and behave in accordance with them (if not in their home court, then at least in the global court) must be denied the right to influence its decisions.
- An international relations discipline for the era of recovery from the coronavirus crisis. In this sensitive period, it will be appropriate to base this discipline on a combination of two past disciplines: realism, as in the Cold War era, and liberalism, as in the Obama era, but instead of faith-based liberalism as during his tenure—rational, practical liberalism. While the updated discipline clearly will not enable off-the-charts growth, it will also prevent a sharp, disastrous plunge.

The liberal democracies have the opportunity to exploit the calamity that has befallen them like thunder on a clear day in order to change humanism, like science, into something rational and respectful of nature and its laws, including human nature. Only then, in light of the values of rational liberalism that they will adopt, will they be able to alter the routine of short “furloughs,” particularly in the European democracies, into a stable and ongoing freedom and to live in harmony not only socially but also with nature. Only then might nature, in return, desist from its fury and turn to human society with a shining face.

Economic Implications

The Effect of Coronavirus on the Global Economy

by Dr. Frank Musmar

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The 2020 outbreak of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) will go down in history for its massive impact on the global economy and on public health, both physical and psychological. At some point, life will get back to normal, but it will not be the same as it was before. People **have been panic buying** over the past two weeks as they wake up to how unprepared they are for a crisis. As a result, many are rethinking their spending habits and what necessities they should have on hand. Some of these temporary adaptations will become permanent as people discover that they prefer them to old ways of doing business.

China is being severely affected by the outbreak of the devastating coronavirus (COVID-19). The Chinese **manufacturing** and **services** sectors plunged to record lows in February, Chinese automobile sales sank a record **80%**, and Chinese exports fell **17.2%** in January and February. Official data confirm a widespread slowdown in China's economic activity, a trend that is also visible through informal barometers like **low pollution levels** and depressed shipping traffic. The country's economic recovery will be difficult as demand from other countries continues to drop while they attempt to cope with the spread of the virus within their own borders.

Among the other major global economies, the OECD forecasts the most significant downward growth revisions in countries deeply interconnected to China, especially South Korea, Australia, and Japan. **Europe** and **Japan**

are likely already in recession territory, given their weak fourth-quarter performance and high reliance on trade. While the US entered the crisis with a [tailwind](#), [some analysts](#) are forecasting a contraction in US GDP in the second quarter.

As the global supply chain slows down, the world is starting to pay closer attention to its reliance on China, and anyone conducting business with that country is feeling the pinch. As a result, a trend that will most likely follow the coronavirus outbreak will be a move away from reliance on China and toward greater self-sufficiency on both an industrial and a personal level. Industries that have been relying heavily on China, such as manufacturing, will likely reconsider their business ties and move parts of their operations elsewhere to diversify risk.

[A range of banks](#) and financial institutions have offered worst-case scenarios for 2020 as the spread of the virus affects the global economy and roils financial markets. [The extent of the damage](#) will depend on how quickly the virus is contained, the steps authorities take to contain it, and how much economic support governments are willing to provide to stem the epidemic's impact and immediate aftermath. [Bitcoin \(BTC\)](#) has moved largely in line with the stock market and slid back below the \$10,000 mark as coronavirus fears hit the global markets. Overall, however, bitcoin market sentiment remains positive in light of the upcoming block reward halving and the expected rally that has historically always followed halving.

Global markets are the first to react to a crisis. When it became clear that the coronavirus was not going away anytime soon, stock markets across the globe took a hit. After the CDC issued a public warning about the coronavirus, the S&P 500 Index had its worst week since the 2008 global financial crisis, dropping by over 11% in the last week of February. Conversely, the yield of the benchmark 10-Year US Treasury hit an all-time low as investors moved out of risky assets and into safe-haven assets. Gold also experienced a spike, adding to its strong rally since the start of the year. The price of oil has skidded 18% since the beginning of the outbreak. When the global supply chain expects a usage slowdown, oil is usually the first to drop in value as demand declines.

Tourism and travel-related industries will be among the hardest hit as authorities encourage “social distancing” and consumers stay indoors. The International Air Transport Association [warns](#) that coronavirus could cost global air carriers between \$63 billion and \$113 billion in revenue in 2020, and the [international film market](#) could lose over \$5 billion at the box office. Similarly, shares of major hotel companies have [plummeted](#) in the past few weeks, and entertainment giants [like Disney](#) expect a significant blow to revenues. Restaurants, [sporting events](#), and other services will also face significant disruption. Industries less reliant on high social interaction, such as agriculture, will be comparatively less vulnerable but will still face challenges as demand wavers.

The foremost [positive financial impact](#) of coronavirus will be seen in telecommuting and remote working, and we can expect to see a boom in freelancing, remote job, and remote software applications such as Zoom and Slack. Some corporations have started to offer staff work-from-home options to compete with remotely driven startups. This trend is poised to accelerate in the coming months as companies ask more and more employees to work from home. Teleconferencing is an obvious winner, perhaps too obvious to be capitalized on; [Zoom Video Communications](#) is already trading at 1,250 times earnings. A more affordable stock is Dell Technologies, which will benefit when employers upgrade the laptops used by remote workers. Telecommuting will permanently damage US demand for gasoline.

According to Datawrapper, the stock price year to date (%) winners due to coronavirus are Zoom Video Communications with a price/earnings ratio of 1,250, followed by Netflix (89), Amazon (83), Cerner (44), Thermo Fisher Scientific (34), K12 (26), and Quest Diagnostics (18).

The Coronavirus Crisis Shows Local Farming to Be an Existential Interest

by Maj. Gen. (res.) Gershon Hacohen

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The coronavirus crisis underscores agriculture's importance as a vital national asset. Public health depends not only on the quality of medical services but also on the availability and quality of food, which makes it vital for the state to maintain the highest possible level of agricultural self-sufficiency.

Until the advent of the coronavirus pandemic, the inhabitants of many of the world's big cities felt no sense of any dependence on their countries' local farmers. Every morning, trucks loaded with vegetables grown in Mexican greenhouses streamed into New York. Every evening, aircraft full of Turkish vegetables flew to Berlin to be sold in the markets in the morning.

The marketing of Israeli agricultural produce, like that of all other consumer products, has detached from domestic production. Even in midwinter, South African grapes are available on grocery shelves in Tel Aviv. In that metropolis, practically all interest in the fate of the country's farmers has ceased completely.

How did this happen? The Treasury and the Ministry of Agriculture were united in their belief that for economic reasons, the Israeli agriculture market should be opened up to global competition. When they allowed imported Chinese fish to flood the market before each holiday, they severely hit the Israeli fisheries industry, but explained that this was necessary to lower the cost of living. They maintained this argument despite the fate of the Israeli textile factories, which were badly affected by cheap Chinese imports.

In the face of these measures, Israeli agriculture has essentially come to a standstill. Farmers in the country are having difficulty surviving and farms are closing down.

With the advent of the coronavirus crisis, an opportunity has been created to redefine the basic assumptions of the state's attitude toward agriculture as a vital national asset. As the global market disruption forces each country to concentrate on satisfying its own needs, it is becoming increasingly clear that states must be independently capable of producing the necessary food—indeed, this is no less than an existential need.

Public health depends not only on the quality of medical services but on the availability and quality of food. Obviously, it is easier for the state to ensure distribution and monitor proper standards when the food production process is local.

Beyond that, we must remember that even in the digital age, the human soul needs open space, which since the dawn of human history has included not only undisturbed nature but also the agricultural landscape. The ecological balance between city and village defines the cultural uniqueness of the city and connects it to the countryside that sustains it.

As far as Israel is concerned, it is also worth recalling that while in exile, Jews focused on trade and white-collar pursuits, leaving agricultural labor to others. When they returned to their ancestral homeland, they restored their connection to agriculture. About a century ago, the prominent Labor movement thinker D. Gordon said: "If we do not work the land with our hands ... The land will not be ours and we will not be with the land. We will be foreigners here, just like in the Diaspora."

It's time to get back to basics. Local farming is an existential interest.

This is an edited version of an article published in Israel Today on April 5, 2020.

Economic Preparations for the Post-Coronavirus Era

by Dr. Manfred Gerstenfeld

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Once the critical danger to public health posed by the coronavirus has passed, there will be a multitude of issues to be urgently addressed, and the global economy will have to be a top priority. Planning should begin now, as enormous government interventions will be necessary. Where vast amounts of money are at stake, critical assessments have to be made ahead of time and throughout the process to avoid waste and abuse.

The coronavirus pandemic has led to huge societal problems all over the world. In such an unprecedented reality, it is important for governments to start planning as soon as possible for the period immediately after the worst danger to public health has passed. Such an agenda should be constructed ahead of time, even if it is full of holes. New plans can be added as developments arise.

Among the multitude of issues governments will face post-coronavirus, the hit to national economies will have to take priority. Lockdowns and other government decisions have destroyed significant portions of GDP for many countries for this year, and unemployment has increased dramatically.

Huge financial intervention by the states will be necessary to cope with these shocks, and several countries have already taken initial steps. The best means of intervening is far from clear, and different governments will take different approaches. As extremely large amounts of money are at stake, critical efficiency assessments will have to be undertaken on an ongoing basis. Vast wastage and abuse in such a fluid situation could make a catastrophic situation even worse.

The top priority has to be determining what kinds of interventions can help return a country to a normal, albeit different, economy.

Democracies ruled by politically centrist or center-right governments will want to return to a non-socialist type of reality as soon as possible. Mass injections of money into society will be required, but so will ongoing evaluations throughout. Countries that do not do this will risk falling into the trap of becoming de facto socialist.

There are other risks as well. In view of the massive interventions that will be required and the need for results as fast as possible, there will be a temptation in some quarters toward authoritarianism. This contains two dangers. One is that those in power may want to circumvent civic opposition, which can be expensive and can delay decision-making, by employing emergency measures that they then refuse to roll back. The other is a possible trend in which some citizens view others' civil rights as obstacles to their own economic advancement. That could lead them to vote for more populist and authoritarian parties. The latter development could also result from the dashing of expectations among parts of the population about the extent of the help they will be receiving from the government.

Checks and balances will have an important role to play in government policies, and not only as far as economics are concerned. It remains to be seen how the interventions will affect pre-coronavirus commitments to act against human-caused climate change, for example.

There will be a temptation to nationalize essential industries and financial institutions that have sunk into deep trouble as a result of the crisis. Doing so only makes long-term sense with respect to privatizations of state-owned industries where re-nationalization would have been inevitable anyway. The failed British railway privatization and break-up come to mind.

For other corporations that are so much in need of state help that governments have to acquire their shares, nationalization should be only temporary. Israelis may remember that their government became a shareholder of some of its large banking institutions when the banking sector collapsed in 1983. When the banks became healthy again and the markets permitted it, the government sold off its shares.

In the meantime, another issue is coming to the fore. How does one trade off the huge economic cost in terms of lost GDP and greatly increased national unemployment against the need to take extreme measures to fight the health impact of the virus? That discussion will grow much louder in the coming weeks as pressure rises for a return to “normal,” come what may.

The value of a human life is not a new subject in economics, though it is often kept out of the public eye. There are many risk evaluations in which a specific figure is assigned to the saving of a human life. Health care funds, to give one example, must determine the cost of expensive medication to be reimbursed against the number of lives it can save.

The sudden huge increase in unemployment levels needs to be addressed through major government measures. The temptation will be great to make state payouts to all citizens or to large groups of them. This can only be done on a large scale for a short time. The exceptions are countries with small populations and significant income from oil or other natural resources.

For this to work, a government service will have to be set up to assist those who fall outside the safety net. Some businesses will have no choice but to close down or enter bankruptcy, and their employees will become jobless. Many self-employed will be unable to restart their jobs. Countries that had grown accustomed to low unemployment levels will have to find ways to help the suddenly much greater numbers of jobless citizens.

This necessitates immediate planning for extensive retraining programs. Governments should assess vacancies and determine what jobs can be filled by the newly unemployed. This is even more relevant in European countries where the birth rate is below, sometimes far below, replacement level.

The debate on the need to reduce the impact of globalization has already started. Governments will have to rethink which products imported at a low cost from abroad should be made in their own countries instead. India, for example, struggled to provide the drugs it needed at the height of the crisis because the raw materials could not be delivered from locked-down China.

The pandemic has had a huge impact on the EU—so huge that it prompts the question of just how far European solidarity goes. National governments have made decisions in the face of the crisis that served their own interests at the expense of that solidarity. Germany, for instance, kept some medical equipment for itself and did not export it to other European countries. It also closed its borders to citizens from several neighboring EU countries.

The 1985 Schengen Agreement was a great step forward in terms of easing travel within the EU. A European could move from one participating country to another without having to go through passport control, which created a sense of unity and meaning on the continent. The recent closure of borders by some EU countries has had the opposite effect: it created a greater awareness among citizens that they live in different countries.

All this pales against the enormous financial problem created by coronavirus. Initially, attention was focused on Italy, which was hit harder than any other European country by the pandemic. Its suffering will likely continue even after the peak of the health threat, as the virus could have an even greater impact on Italy's economy than on that of other EU members.

In the years before the 1999 introduction of the euro, it would have been helpful to devalue the Italian currency. This is no longer possible. The coronavirus crisis shows once again what a huge mistake it was to introduce a joint currency while individual member countries continued to employ divergent fiscal and economic policies. (As an aside, Brexit looks far more sensible nowadays. The British government can make plans for the UK's economic recovery without having to navigate through Brussels.)

Ianis Varoufakis was Greek finance minister during part of that country's economic crisis. He recently published an article in which he relates the economic dictat that was imposed on Greece by the EU. He explains that in practice, the economic restrictions were dictated by Germany. None of the proposals he made on behalf of his country were even considered. Varoufakis warns that such a policy cannot be repeated toward Italy, which is far bigger and more powerful.

Even before the coronavirus crisis, it would have been extremely difficult for many European governments to pass legislation through their national parliaments granting loans to Italy like those made to Greece. This is not only because of the larger sums required. Euroscepticism has greatly increased in recent years in several EU countries, as has the number of parliamentarians who hold such views. They would have strongly opposed massive financial assistance to Italy.

Only a few weeks ago, it was believed that even if funding for Italy were forthcoming, the harsh conditions demanded by the EU would probably lead to the collapse of the Italian government. A new Eurosceptic government headed by Matteo Salvini, leader of the Northern League, might introduce an alternative currency to be used in Italy in addition to the euro. This could be a way of gradually taking Italy out of the joint currency.

Yet another problem for the EU is that Italy has been an important annual net contributor to the EU. That may now end.

In the meantime, the EU has been overtaken by a far bigger problem. Ten EU members, including Italy, Spain, France, and Belgium, want the EU to issue Eurobonds amounting to hundreds of billions of euro to assist them with their financial problems. These bonds can only be sold if there are proportional national guarantees. Germany, the Netherlands, and Austria have announced their total opposition to this. This may turn into the largest conflict about mutual solidarity the EU has ever faced. Tensions on this issue are rising fast.

These are only a few of the many issues affecting the economic sector that will have to be addressed quickly as the world emerges from the coronavirus pandemic.

Technological and Scientific Implications

Coronavirus: A Sputnik Moment for Science Education

by Alex Joffe

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The coronavirus pandemic has tragically revealed the shortcomings of many institutions, but it has also exposed how poorly science and technology education have shaped the understanding of both policymakers and the public. Like the Sputnik satellite launch in 1957, the coronavirus pandemic is an opportunity to transform science and technology education—but powerful institutional and cultural forces are working against such a goal.

On October 4, 1957 a 58cm-diameter sphere became the first object launched into space. The Soviet Union's Sputnik 1 satellite transmitted signals to earth for three weeks before its batteries died. Less than one year later, in September 1958, Congress passed the National Defense Education Act. The legislation transformed the American educational system by providing funds for a slew of initiatives designed to increase American scientific capabilities.

As the coronavirus pandemic encircles the globe, societies everywhere are experiencing the same shock. We are all realizing that our scientific and technological capabilities, while in some cases prodigious, are insufficient to do more than stem the growing loss of life. A vaccine remains months away if not farther, and the treatments that are

available, though numerous, are controversial. More fundamentally, the pandemic has revealed how inadequate scientific and technological education is among the public and among the world's leaders, few of whom have even the most basic conception of what a virus is.

The inability to present, evaluate, and compare statistics on infection rates and deaths, including such simplistic qualifications as raw numbers versus per capita averages, has been woefully displayed. Even models used by epidemiologists to estimate possible numbers of deaths—the models on which political leaders have made wrenching decisions to shut down vast swaths of the world economy—have been shown to be flawed. The way those models work, be they flawed or otherwise, is obscure to everyone but specialists.

So too with the cost-benefit analyses being used to evaluate when economies can reopen. Reconciling the approaches of physicians and economists requires understanding their contrasting premises and applying a moral calculus that accepts some level of risk. Even such prosaic questions as understanding toilet paper shortages means addressing complex technologies; namely, supply chains, which must then be multiplied countless times from every product from antibiotics to milk.

The shock that accompanied Sputnik's launch was felt throughout American society, shaking it out of the self-satisfaction and complacency that had developed at home during the peace and prosperity of the 1950s even under the growing threat of nuclear war. The "missile gap" that loomed large during the 1960 presidential campaign turned out to be illusory, but the space race that developed between the US and the Soviet Union was a tangible means of generating national pride and, more fundamentally, developing science and technology. This hardware-oriented goal was accompanied by similarly transformational concepts throughout the 1960s and 1970s aimed at eradicating poverty and disease and improving the environment.

Today's coronavirus shock is rightfully focused on Chinese mendacity regarding the pandemic's origins and spread, and growing horror at Chinese domination of key global industries.

But the deeper shock should be the realization of how poorly we understand the science and technologies that underpin the 21st century, even as we rely on them wholly. That knowledge, from a basic understanding of how viruses work to where food comes from, can only be transmitted by an educational system that has gradually moved away from its basic responsibilities.

Making the most of this Sputnik moment means overcoming the shock and attempting to remedy gross shortcomings in educational systems. The futurist cachet and patriotism that were associated with the space race and the Cold War saw students stream into the burgeoning fields of aerospace engineering and computer science. But today's American students routinely test lower than others in mathematics and are far more likely to pursue an education in business than in science or engineering.

Could today's students, scarred by the pandemic, be drawn toward biomedical fields and other vital disciplines? Will the life and death debates over infection reproduction rates (R_0) spur greater interest in biostatistics, epidemiology, virology, mitigation technologies such as antimicrobial coatings, and the techniques and ethics of mass testing and mass surveillance? Will shortages in consumer commodities and critical medical supplies drive students to study manufacturing techniques and supply chain management, from rapid prototyping of hospital ventilators to transportation and logistics? Indeed, fields from nanoscale drug delivery to robotic agriculture are critical to 21st century security, not simply economic competitiveness.

But enhancing US science and technology is far more complicated today than it was 60 years ago. The military-industrial complex that President Dwight Eisenhower warned against in his farewell address now has serious rivals. The higher education industrial complex alone accounts for over \$600 billion of the US economy. Elementary and secondary education in the US cost another \$700 billion. These industries, which are distributed throughout every state and community, are—if nothing else—experts at explaining why they deserve yet more money.

The sums already spent on medical research are vast: the National Institutes of Health has a budget of \$41.7 billion, while the pharmaceutical industry spends over \$70 billion annually on research and development. US healthcare costs are over \$3 trillion annually, with an additional \$550 billion spent on research and development. Over 70% of that R&D expenditure comes from the private sector.

So how much funding for science and technology is enough? How are existing funds allocated, and how much is siphoned off for other purposes? In elementary and secondary education, American communities spend vastly more per student than almost all their global counterparts—but the students receive worse outcomes, even as administrative, pension, and health care costs continue to escalate.

One of the most tangible effects of vast federal funding to higher education over the past decades has been an even faster rise in tuition, around 8% per year, far exceeding the rate of inflation, as institutions extract dollars directly from students and their families and through government-backed loans. Outstanding loans to students total some \$1.6 trillion. Among the costs of these massive debts are dramatic drops in the formation of families and purchases of homes by at least one generation of citizens.

Another more recent dysfunctional higher education phenomenon is the rapid growth of a vast managerial stratum devoted to “diversity” and “inclusion” that already extracts tens if not hundreds of millions of dollars from college and university budgets. It is vital to keep any additional money out of the hands of this grievance industry.

In short, there is little reason to think already well-funded institutions that should be directly responsible for improving science and technology education—some of which are teetering on collapse as a result of pandemic-related interruptions to their cash flow—would do so effectively.

Perhaps the root of the problem is a culture that takes science and technology for granted, where inculcating self-regard is more important than understanding how the world works, where displays of moralistic posturing are rated higher than examples of intellectual

rigor, and where it is the norm to rely on streams of non-Americans, from graduate students to farm workers, to undertake the basic work on which society is founded. Among other things, this culture of risk aversion and intellectual laxity is the product of many decades of foundering leadership that equated throwing money at problems as success.

Like so many tragedies, the coronavirus pandemic offers clarity regarding the failings of institutions and leadership—from the WHO, which has been revealed to be a dishonest Chinese franchise, to local police and governors in free countries acting out dictatorial fantasies in the name of protection. Educational institutions should be examined with similar ruthlessness. But like so much needed change, the call must come from below.

The problems of complacency, greed, and pettiness are fundamentally human questions of character and courage. Rather than place further blind faith in “experts” and institutions, we should be looking carefully at who is providing real leadership and new ideas, as well as cultivating true character and courage within ourselves.

The Internet in the Coronavirus Era

by Dr. George N. Tzogopoulos

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic is causing an online revolution—one that provides opportunities but also creates risks. Surveillance of infected and quarantined individuals through mobile applications is helping to slow the spread of the contagion, but contains an implicit threat to privacy. Cybersecurity is being tested as hackers look for ways to use the unprecedented situation to strike governments, companies and individuals.

The identification and isolation of individuals infected and quarantined with coronavirus (COVID-19), as well as people with whom they have been in contact, is considered a priority in the international fight against the pandemic. Government policies differ on methods of monitoring these citizens and the legal terms under which their data can be held and shared.

A New York Times article discusses online surveillance practices currently being applied in Australia, China, Italy, Mexico, Singapore, South Korea, and the US to trace the movements of coronavirus patients or send warning messages. In Israel, PM Benjamin Netanyahu announced that all means—both technological and digital—will be used to fight the spread of the virus.

Under normal circumstances, the use of online surveillance tools would spark an immediate and intense debate about privacy implications. The mission of the UN Global Pulse initiative is to ensure that big data, artificial intelligence, and emerging technologies are harnessed safely and responsibly for the public good.

But at the present moment, saving lives is deemed a more urgent concern. *A March 2020 study* conducted at the University of Oxford

shows that several methods of direct online contact, including first-degree instantaneous contact tracing and the practice of informing users when they can move about safely or when they should seek medical help and avoid vulnerable individuals, have the potential to stop the spread of the epidemic if used correctly by enough people.

A team of medical research and bioethics experts from the same institution [is supporting several European governments](#) in their effort to devise a coronavirus mobile app for instant contact tracing. In Israel, the Health Ministry has already launched a [phone app](#) to help prevent the spread of the virus.

Internet usage in the coronavirus era creates both opportunities and risks, and those risks extend beyond the potential for unaccountable and irresponsible use of data by governments or companies. According to Reuters, [hackers attempted to break into the World Health Organization](#) at the beginning of March. The US Department of Health and Human Services [was also attacked](#), and the Canadian Centre for Cyber Security [issued an alert](#) on risks to national health organizations that are involved in the response to coronavirus.

Cyber and biological weapons can be combined with malicious intent with potentially disastrous results. In a reflection of this concern, cybersecurity is mentioned in the [American National Biodefense Strategy](#). Erel Margalit, founder and chairman of Jerusalem Venture Partners, goes so far as to argue that [though there is no proof that the current virus is the result of a cyberattack, it could be](#).

While the origins of coronavirus are still being debated and researched, [a new study in *Nature* calls the scenario of a laboratory-based creation “improbable.”](#) But even if the virus is not a biological weapon, the matter of cybersecurity surrounding its outbreak is far from trivial. Cybercriminals seek ways to capitalize on crises, including pandemic scenarios like coronavirus. National security could be jeopardized as politicians, diplomats, and military officials are forced to substitute teleworking and virtual summits for face-to-face meetings. Well-equipped offices are going unused as users resort to remote access and connectivity via computers and smartphones. Measures have been taken

in most countries to guarantee the safety of online communications, but efforts to intercept talks will certainly multiply. Carelessness and weaknesses in communication links are gifts for hackers.

Employees in both the public and private sectors will need to work from home for a long period. Unless their agencies, organizations, or companies have provided them with secure tools and applications, their data will be easy to steal. Israel's expertise at preventing this can be beneficial for other countries.

Dangers can be financial, such as credit card leaks and breaching of private bank accounts. Interpol [has warned about financial fraud](#) via phishing scams and fake calls about supposed medical cures, international donations, state aid, or tax breaks. And there is another danger: hackers can access private genetic information, either to blackmail companies or individuals to obtain money in exchange for non-publication of sensitive data or to sell the information to interested parties.

Coronavirus is not only affecting public health and the economy. It is also bringing other challenges to the forefront, such as how to handle the sudden "virtual" revolution. When the pandemic is over, world leaders will need to work together to improve digital literacy and international cyber governance. The question is whether the internet will be turned into a new frontier for cooperation or a competitive battleground.

Coronavirus, Security, and the Cyber-Order

by Dr. George N. Tzogopoulos

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The coronavirus crisis represents an opportunity to analyze the concept of security beyond military might. The pandemic, which resembles a form of biological warfare, is being accompanied by incessant cyberattacks, and most countries are showing themselves unable to tackle asymmetric threats effectively. International cooperation on internet governance will not be easy. In December 2019, the UN General Assembly adopted a Russian-backed resolution on fighting cybercrime. The debate on cyber governance will highlight differences between Western and non-Western countries and complicate the post-coronavirus order.

The coronavirus is injecting uncertainty into almost every dimension of life, and there is much international debate about the potential consequences of the pandemic on world affairs. In a [Wall Street Journal commentary](#), Henry Kissinger asserts that “the world will never be the same after the coronavirus.” NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg considers a primary objective of the Alliance “to ensure that the health crisis does not become a security crisis.” Media are reporting a rapid increase in incidence of the disease aboard military vessels, with the case of aircraft carrier USS Theodore Roosevelt getting particular attention. Military exercises, for example between Israel and the US, are being canceled, which is causing disruption.

The operational readiness of armed forces could be tested in the short and medium term. The IDF is faced with keeping its soldiers and personnel healthy, contributing to the medical needs of the state, and accomplishing its national security mission. The pandemic’s impact on Israeli security could be a double-edged sword. On the one hand, there is a rise in opportunities for closer collaboration between Israel and

the Palestinians. [The UN has praised the coordination](#) between them in reacting to coronavirus. But on the other hand, Israel's enemies will certainly seek to exploit the instability and strike.

This threat does not only apply to Israel. Terrorists might be inspired to launch biological attacks, and the civil wars in Syria and Libya could see new rounds of violence and areas of fragility.

While the sources of threat remain generally the same, the means of action are multiplying. IDF Chief of Staff Lt. Gen. Aviv Kochavi [has warned](#) that an attack, another round of violent confrontation, and even a large-scale operation can occur during this period.

While military might is the *sine qua non* for the notion of security, the coronavirus pandemic exposes the difficulty both Western and non-Western governments have in preventing and responding to asymmetric threats. President of France Emmanuel Macron [is calling for a global ceasefire](#)—but for the international community to chart a safe route, difficult compromises and a holistic approach are required.

A critical element is cybersecurity, which is a basic element of international security in the modern era and relevant to both biological warfare and the so-called genetic revolution. Cybersecurity continues to be a constant problem as the pandemic proceeds. According to Microsoft, every country in the world [has seen at least one coronavirus-themed attack](#). Interpol has detected an increase of cyberattacks against hospitals. Israel National Cyber Directorate Chief Yigal Unna [said recently](#) that important aspects of the country's efforts to develop a vaccine for the coronavirus have been networked and could be vulnerable to cyberattack.

In 2017 Microsoft president Brad Smith [talked about the need](#) for a “Digital Geneva Convention,” and the possibility of a cyberwarfare convention is being debated by scholars. To no one's surprise, international tensions on how to deal with cybersecurity have been high for years, and they reflect differences between Western and non-Western countries as well as between developed and emerging economies.

In December 2019, days before the outbreak of the coronavirus, the UN General Assembly [adopted a Russian-sponsored resolution](#) on fighting cybercrime. The document calls for establishing a committee of world experts to draft an international convention to fight the criminal use of information and communications technologies. The US [remains skeptical](#) due to the lack of consensus on drafting a new treaty and anticipates less openness and freedom in internet governance. It is concerned about the resolution [because it sees](#) that both Russia and China have successfully exploited international rules and norms to promote their own objectives.

The possible replacement of the [Budapest Convention](#), set up in 2004 by the Council of Europe, is a distant but possible scenario. The first meeting of this intergovernmental committee of experts [will take place this August](#).

With most people stuck at home during the pandemic, internet usage is up around the globe. As the post-coronavirus order will be significantly shaped in cyberspace, geopolitical antagonisms are expected to rise. The US will certainly continue to push its partners away from Huawei and possibly catch up with 5G technology. But with its ever-growing market of more than [850 million internet users](#) (the biggest in the world), China will rely on multilateralism and occasionally on partnerships with Russia. Washington needs to either alter the balance of the UN General Assembly or build ad hoc alliances beyond the Russian framework adopted last December. A new digital fragmentation will only add to existing security challenges.

Global Competition

The Battle of the Coronavirus Narratives

by Emil Avdaliani

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: China and the US have different views on how the coronavirus originated, how it spread, and how it should be fought. These opposing narratives arise out of a context of ideological divide that will only be deepened by the crisis. Smaller states will have to decide which narrative they are going to accept, a trend that could widen existing gaps between the great powers and their allies.

The coronavirus pandemic is becoming a battle of narratives. Ultimately, the question of whether the virus's spread was a product of human action or an accident might not matter very much. Whatever its origin, the pandemic has highlighted wide ideological differences between the democratic West and non-democratic China. On a broader level, the democratic West now stands more starkly in opposition to non-democratic Asia.

Opposing ideological visions are a hallmark of great power competition. The ancient Greeks, the Romans, the Arabs from the seventh century, the Byzantines, and, later, the great European colonial powers often cast their foreign policy in ideological terms. The US has a long history of viewing conflicts with opposing powers through an ideological lens. By establishing that a position occupies the moral high ground—by being on “the right side of history”—a government can mobilize industries, focus the attention of political elites, and gather allies to support the cause. America's powerful military and robust economy were of course critical to defeating the Soviets in the Cold War, but it was ideology that energized the US to push on toward its decisive victory.

Ideology is an inseparable part of any great power competition, and the US-China rivalry is no exception.

There are several components to the growing US-China rivalry. There is a military dimension: expansive Chinese military capabilities, both on land and at sea, are undermining the concept on which US power has depended since WWII. In parallel, China is taking on the US on the technological front, which has long been a pillar of US superiority. China's recent successes in telecom and computing question the premise of American technological infallibility. The economic side is even more revealing, as China already outstrips the US in many areas and is set to outdo it in the remaining sectors in the coming decade or so.

The last element—a clear ideological separation—was lacking, but is now quickly evolving as a result of coronavirus. US-China competition is now laid bare in all four crucial dimensions: military, technological, economic, and ideological.

The ideological component, which is where the battle of narratives lies, would eventually have taken shape even without the pandemic. Signs of this trend were present before it erupted, with the US taking every opportunity to criticize China on human rights issues, treatment of minorities, and debt-incurring policies toward its Asian neighbors. The problem of China's treatment of its Uighur minority is a good example of Washington attaching ideological momentum to its growing disagreements with Beijing.

The ideological divide will grow ever more pronounced, especially with the exacerbating factor of coronavirus in the picture. Ultimately, we should expect the ideological competition and mutual mistrust between the two powers to increase to Cold War levels.

Both Beijing and Washington will scramble to lock in support from their allies. The ideological dimension of the conflict will force many states to choose a coronavirus narrative, which will mean choosing a side. This will lead to a further division of Eurasia into blocs headed by Beijing, Washington, or weaker states—like Russia—that will themselves be in league with one of the two powers.

The ideological dimension will also mean the prospects for ironing out existing geopolitical differences will be extremely dim. Any improvement will require either Washington or Beijing to give up geopolitical assets—a highly unlikely scenario.

Much will depend on which side will be able to amass more allies. In this regard the US possesses, and will continue to possess, an overwhelming advantage. The world's largest democracies, which are also the world's most prosperous states, are militarily, economically, and, most essentially, ideologically connected to the US. China will struggle to balance the US's array of allies, and will likely turn to Russia to play a greater role. Moreover, territorial disagreements with many of China's immediate neighbors will continue to limit its ability to project a new ideological model.

Beijing might find it has to clarify the thinking behind its flagship “Belt and Road Initiative” (BRI). China promotes it as a new vision of state-to-state relations, but it is also intended to be a mechanism for changing state systems.

So far, despite China's intense efforts to control the coronavirus narrative, the ideological component favors the US. Though many are quick to point to recent transatlantic ruptures, it should be remembered that the divisions between the EU states and China are far greater. This was evident even before the outbreak of the pandemic. Differences with the US notwithstanding, Germany and France are not going to follow China's lead, no matter how powerful its economy.

Coronavirus Could Revolutionize America's China Policy

by Emil Avdaliani

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Many argue that the coronavirus pandemic will ultimately benefit China more than the rest of the world, especially the US. After all, America is now the worst-hit country on earth in terms of human casualties. But the crisis could in fact help the US reorganize its geopolitical thinking toward the People's Republic, resulting in a radical break in which Washington's political and economic elites are newly unified against a rising Beijing.

Analyses abound on which state or region will benefit the most from the coronavirus crisis. Many believe it will be China, which has (or says it has) sustained many fewer human and economic losses than the US and western European countries. The US and Europe, meanwhile, are experiencing their deepest crises since WWII.

A battle of narratives has arisen on who is to blame for what has happened to the global and national economies. These narratives warrant their own analysis. Suffice it to say here, however, that the pandemic will accentuate the divide between the West (especially the US) and China.

Though Beijing might well succeed at portraying itself as highly efficient in combating the virus, it could suffer an unexpected consequence: a unifying of the American political and business elites against it.

This process was already in place well before the pandemic struck. Indeed, it can be argued that it predated the rise of Donald Trump. US leaders have been gradually shifting American geopolitical attention away from the Middle East and toward China and Southeast Asia for years. Both the Obama and the Trump administrations made significant moves toward this end.

Still, there has not been a conclusive accord within the American political elite on what kind of threat China poses to US geopolitical interests. The US's deep economic interconnectedness with China has complicated reaching a policy consensus on this question.

Another no less significant factor in the seeming US indecisiveness toward China is the very nature of the US government. It is a huge bureaucratic apparatus with numerous agencies, each with its own vision, and those visions often clash. Contrary to autocratic states where divisions are not seen and decisions are taken without consulting the wider public and often without economic considerations, the democratic US traditionally needs much longer to adjust to new geopolitical realities. This can take years.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when the US entered the world stage as a major geopolitical player, the country faced two major rivals: Japan before WWII and the Soviet Union, a rivalry that persisted from 1945-46 through the late 1980s. Analysis of US foreign policy during those periods shows how slowly and at times clumsily Washington came to realize the fundamental nature of the threat Tokyo and Moscow posed to American interests.

These cases show an interesting pattern in US foreign policy. To form a definitive foreign policy stance—that is, to cast a foreign state as an unequivocal geopolitical enemy—the US usually had to experience a deep geopolitical shock that would consolidate its vision of the rival. Take Japan. It took the attack on Pearl Harbor in late 1941 to shake the US political elite out of the last vestiges of isolationism and indecisiveness to view Tokyo as a direct geopolitical threat. The US needed a decade, from 1931 when the Japanese attacked China to the Pearl Harbor strike of 1941, to grasp the extent to which Tokyo's ambitions were fundamentally opposed to American ambitions.

Something similar occurred with the Soviet Union. It took Washington many years to fully comprehend the extent of Soviet opposition to the US. America's peculiar indecisiveness in the later stages of WWII and in its immediate aftermath made it lose precious time that would otherwise have enabled the western world to be better prepared to

counter Soviet geopolitical ambitions across Eurasia. The US foreign policy readjustment lasted until the war in Korea, which showed American resolve in thwarting communist ambitions.

The coronavirus, which has hit the US more severely than any other country in the world, could well serve as a defining moment for American foreign policy for the rest of this decade and into the 2030s. The US political elite will likely become more focused on China and competition with Beijing will become more pronounced. The economic and human losses in the US are of a magnitude that American policymakers will need to explain them to the broader public. Those in the top leadership who were ambivalent, as well as America's allies around the world, will be more inclined to cast China as a competitor and even an enemy.

It is likely that major attempts from the American side will be made to produce a China strategy. This will involve reinvigorating the US military presence among its allies across the Indo-Pacific. India, Japan, and South Korea will play a larger role in Washington's calculus.

There is simply no alternative to this policy as China's military and economic power will not only not dissipate but will increase in the coming decade. And this is not only about American military posturing. Major steps will have to be taken inside the US to bolster innovation, grow the economy, and coordinate among various structures of power.

There will be problems. As the shock of the Pearl Harbor attack and the astoundingly gruesome policies of Stalin in post-1945 eastern Europe helped the US reorganize its economic and military thinking to counter Japan and the Soviet Union, respectively, a reorganization of the entire US state machine to counter China might take time, from months to a few years. Moreover, with Japan and the Soviets, it was easier for the Americans to make a policy shift as those countries were interconnected economically. With the Chinese it is a different story. China and the US engage in trade on a massive scale. Though readjustment of the entire US state apparatus will likely accelerate to produce a viable "China strategy," it will take time to convince the American business community to withdraw from China.

The pandemic will likely sharpen anti-China rhetoric in the US. More than that, US losses should help Washington streamline its China policy. Success is not guaranteed. Imperial Japan and the Soviets had crucial deficiencies the US was able to exploit, and the US will have to identify China's weaknesses. It has not done this very successfully up to this point, but the coronavirus should serve as the kind of crisis that prompts a redefinition of the country's foreign policy by causing political and business elites to reach a common vision about how to combat a geopolitical rival. The pandemic thus has the potential to revolutionize Washington's China policy.

Pandemic Sets the Stage for a Western-Asian Ideological Contest

by Emil Avdaliani

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: As the shock from the coronavirus pandemic decreases over the coming months, both China and the West are likely to record successes in the economic and political realms. The crisis has set the stage for an ideological struggle between the West and China that will play a crucial role in determining the destiny of Eurasia throughout this decade and the next.

As the scale of the coronavirus pandemic grew more and more apparent, apocalyptic scenarios quickly multiplied. Many expected the world to undergo structural changes primarily affecting the global economy. Others believed the entire fabric of the geopolitical world order would be reshaped.

Many of these forecasts are exaggerated. The world will probably continue to operate in more or less the same way it did before the pandemic. However, some trends that had already started to evolve before the virus may accelerate: interest in changes to supply chains; pursuit of effective mechanisms in the supranational organizations to battle future pandemics; growth in the belief in the primacy of state sovereignty and its interests over those of union entities (for example, the EU and the Eurasian Economic Union [EEU]); and a further strengthening of the authoritarian style of leadership across the Eurasian states.

We should expect the pandemic to drive a wedge between the West and China. There are calls among the US elites to decouple the American economy from its entanglement with Chinese trade. These calls were already present before the pandemic, and they will be amplified both during the crisis and in its aftermath.

Calls for a disentanglement from China will likely grow louder in Europe, too, where the stance on Beijing has hardened considerably over the past couple of months. As in the US, this follows a trajectory that was already visible before the pandemic. In 2019, the EU institutions characterized China as a “systemic rival.”

Thus the pandemic will further increase calls for a tougher approach to China and its economic model for relations with the Eurasian states, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Whereas China has been a divisive issue for US and EU politicians that has damaged trans-Atlantic ties over the past several years, the coronavirus will likely unite the West in promoting common policies targeting Beijing’s influence across Eurasia.

But there is a larger picture: the extent to which China has been bolstered by the economies of East Asia. It is fashionable to talk about how the pandemic might benefit a rising China, but in reality it is not only China that has risen in recent decades. In a collective Asian rise, dozens of states neighboring China have also experienced exponential economic growth. When the 2008 financial crisis struck, the southeast Asian states served as a cushion for China while western economies reeled.

The coronavirus will likely have a similar effect. The West should experience more protracted difficulties than China and its surrounding states in terms of healthcare, the economy, and the ideological realm. It is not just China that has emerged with greater power but the entire Asian continent. Europe and the US, meanwhile, continue to struggle to find economic and political cures to their problems.

In modern scholarship on geopolitics and international relations, the topic of China’s rise is arguably the most debated. Much remains unanswered, but it can certainly be said that the pandemic and the ensuing troubles have set the scene for wider competition between the West and a China propped up by the economies of east and southeast Asia.

Definitive arguments cannot be made for whether Beijing or the West will achieve world domination or preserve its current position. It is possible, however, to lay out possible trends for the 2020s-early 2030s.

One scenario could be that a propped up China gains influence in Eurasia by providing major amounts of medical aid to hard-hit states (for example, Iran, Iraq, Tajikistan, etc.). Large economic packages in the form of investments through the BRI could follow, which would increase Beijing's position in the eyes of central Asia, Iran, and the rest of the Middle East. The conditions for such a scenario are ripe, as the West is distracted by internal political divisions and economic troubles.

A second scenario could be that the West regains confidence through sharp measures undertaken to prop up its currencies and provides support to a number of Eurasian states. A further aligning of visions on China could take place in Washington and major European capitals, which could enable the US to score a geopolitical win by pushing China's 5G out of the European continent and limiting the BRI's chances for expansion among the EU nations.

Both these scenarios are radical in a way. It is possible that what will transpire will be more balanced, with China and the West each having only partial success. Indeed, even if China increases its influence in Tajikistan or Pakistan, it will not significantly increase Beijing's global posture. What China needs for its geopolitical clout to grow is divisions among EU member states and, ideally, a wider rift in trans-Atlantic ties.

At the same time, the West will not be able to properly challenge Beijing's BRI. On the map of Eurasia, there is a large vacuum of economic power between China's western province of Xinjiang and the EU, where, barring moves by Russia's not very successful EEU, Beijing's BRI could make significant inroads.

Over the coming months, the West is likely to address the need for a consensus on an economic remedy for the EU and possibly a compromise on thorny issues that besiege trans-Atlantic relations.

We are entering an age of heightened competition between the West and a China cushioned by the enhanced might of other east Asian states. Both will have success in the economic and ideological spheres, but tensions are likely to rise. Coronavirus sets the stage for

an ideological struggle that up to now has rarely emerged as a topic for open discussion among western political elites. China's economic power is unlikely to decrease, and a battle for the hearts and minds of Eurasian nations is likely to unfold as the West attempts to limit Beijing's geopolitical strength.

Putin's Coronavirus Crisis Is Not “Under Control”

by Dr. Jiri Valenta and Leni Friedman Valenta

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The coronavirus has caused a three-dimensional crisis in Russia: a health crisis, an economic crisis, and a personal crisis for Putin. The false low figures Moscow has released about domestic virus cases and deaths are an attempt to disguise a devastating situation.

The health crisis

Though Russia contains 146 million people, it has been largely ignored by the global media in its coverage of the coronavirus crisis. What little information is available on the state of the virus inside the country appears highly suspect.

Moscow initially claimed that out of more than 116,000 tests for coronavirus in Russia, there were only 147 confirmed cases and zero deaths—fewer casualties than Luxembourg, which has a population of fewer than 628,000 people.

Russia credits its own foresight for this anomaly. Its representative to the WHO, Melita Vunovic, told CNN that Russia started testing “literally at the end of January” (whereas US testing only got underway in March), and that tracing contacts, quarantining, and social distancing all started “relatively early.”

It is true that at the end of January, Russia closed its 2,600 mile land border with China, whose Wuhan district introduced the virus to the world—but most of Russia's many borders with other neighbors remained open far longer.

On March 17, daily life in Russia still seemed largely normal. President Vladimir Putin told a government meeting, “We were able to contain the mass penetration and spread” of the pandemic. “The situation is generally under control despite high risk levels,” he said.

Things were not “under control.” Two days later, Russia reacted to furious necessity, closing its borders, schools, and businesses, and providing economic packages and essential social distancing directives that were already in place in other countries. Meanwhile, the Russian people, skeptical of the low reported figures on cases and deaths, had already begun emptying grocery shelves of buckwheat, a major staple.

A new countrywide alliance of doctors stated that the real figures for illnesses and deaths were in the thousands. They videotaped calls from physicians who had been told to prepare for a huge rise in “pneumonia cases.” In addition to the prospect of an onslaught of sufferers, they also had the problem of insufficient quantities of protective equipment.

At the forefront of this group is Russian doctor Anastasia Vasilyeva, head of a medical workers union, who quickly realized what these “pneumonia” cases actually were. Government statistics were being manipulated to conceal the spread of the coronavirus by attributing hospitalizations and deaths not to the pandemic but to pneumonia and other ailments.

Vasilyeva called on Russian doctors to counter the false information and go public with their knowledge. “While the whole world is facing an outbreak of a new coronavirus, Russia is facing an outbreak of a community-acquired pneumonia,” she said. “And as usual we are facing the lie of the authorities.”

Vasilyeva was arrested when she attempted to deliver desperately needed protective medical gear to hospitals in Novogorod. Most of her companions were released, but she was reportedly dragged to a police station where she was “choked and hit in the abdomen and passed out as a result.” Denied access to a lawyer for hours, she spent the night in police detention.

“It is staggering,” wrote Amnesty International’s Russia director, Natalia Zviagina, “that the Russian authorities appear to fear criticism more than the deadly COVID-19 pandemic.”

In late March, the Russian parliament approved new legislation including fines and jail sentences for spreading “fake news” about the virus.

In Russia, free speech is expensive. Russia has been hit hard in recent weeks and seems largely unprepared for what is to come. As in China, hiding the truth has cost precious time.

Worse yet, according to Foreign Policy, there is evidence that the lab in the Siberian city of Novosibirsk that is processing all the country’s coronavirus tests has been overwhelmed by the growing backlog. Moreover, Russia’s test, which is reportedly locally developed, produces many false negatives. It can only detect the coronavirus virus when its density in a sample is more than 100,000 viruses per milliliter. In the US the virus can be detected if it has a density of only 6,250 per milliliter.

The Russian health ministry reported that by March 21, the country had performed 133,101 tests and recorded only 253 confirmed cases of the virus even as other countries were reporting thousands of cases. At the same time, Russia’s official statistics agency recorded a “37% rise in community-acquired pneumonia.” There was wide reporting of a need for more hospital beds and equipment to deal with this surge of “pneumonia.”

Since then, social quarantines and lockdowns in Russia have been extremely strict. On March 31, the Russian parliament approved legislation imposing fines of up to the equivalent of \$640 and up to seven years in prison for anyone who defies the quarantine.

On April 18, CNN reported that the Johns Hopkins University Center for Systems Science and Engineering had put the Russian figures at 36,793 cases and 313 deaths. On the same date, the US reported 711,197 cases and 37,309 deaths. (Reporting times vary, and US statistics are updated every 15 minutes.)

The expectation is that the numbers of cases and fatalities for Russia will continue to rise, as they have in Europe and America, and Russia is not prepared.

The economic crisis

Lockdowns and quarantines have naturally driven down demand for oil in industrial countries. Oil prices have therefore plummeted, devastating oil producers like Russia. In Moscow, apparently the epicenter of the virus in the country, Mayor Sergei Sobyenin has been told that a lack of aid to small and medium-sized businesses may lead to mass starvation.

The Russian economy, insufficiently diversified, is hugely dependent on hydrocarbons. As OPEC and Russia argued over what level of oil output to maintain, an initial deal with the Saudis to cut production in order to raise the price of oil fell through. Then came a price war as the Saudis, eager to gain market share, cut the price of energy transferred to Europe.

On April 10, at a meeting of leading oil producers including America that was apparently mediated by President Trump, an agreement was finalized to cut production to 10 million barrels of oil a day. The agreement was blocked by Mexico, however, and a new deal by which Riyadh and Moscow would take on a larger share of the necessary cuts until things improve also seems to have fallen through. In some areas, as demand has continued to drop, oil has even gone into negative territory.

There have been huge gyrations in the Russian stock market as the oil giants battle one another. Catastrophe awaits thousands of Russian industrial workers. At this writing, the ruble is worth \$0.013.

Putin's political crisis

The third aspect to the coronavirus crisis is its effect on Putin's efforts to remain in power long after his term expires in 2024. Having ruled Russia for almost two decades through his "round robin" deal with Dmitri Medvedev, periodically trading the positions of president and prime minister, Putin is now after bigger game.

After promising to put more power in the hands of parliament, he gained its approval, and that of Russia's Constitutional Court, for a vote on legislation that would effectively reset his presidential term tally to zero, allowing him to serve two more back-to-back six-year terms. His present term ends in 2024. If he succeeds in these machinations, Putin will be 84 when the second of his new terms ends in 2036.

Putin is attempting a coup d'état: a grab for perpetual dictatorship.

The national vote to approve these changes was originally set for April 22 but has been postponed following calls to delay it during the pandemic. An accurate vote is difficult in Russia under any circumstances but the coronavirus has upended any prospects for a vote, at least for the present.

Ironically, there could be a temporary upside to Putin's continued holding of the reins during the crisis. He has the capacity to cut through political knots on behalf of those stricken by the disease—if he so wishes. But can one trust that Putin will ever surrender any of his powers to parliament?

Initially, a deluge of bad news had Putin going into retreat, leaving it to his subordinates to take the fall for the deadly missteps. But as the number of cases ballooned, he reemerged and took command. According to Putin, the vote was postponed because “the absolute priority for us is the health, life, and safety of the people.”

Conclusion

It is always difficult to extract reliable information from a closed society, and in the present instance, Russia may not even have the ability to make an accurate assessment of the impact of the coronavirus across its vast territory. In addition, the treatment of those willing to speak the truth about the pandemic shows there is nothing new in Russia. The authoritarian leadership still favors secrecy and selectively determines what and how much should be revealed.

President Trump's first words, when he learned of the virus in late January, were similar to Putin's. He reportedly told the WHO on January 22 that he wasn't worried about the coronavirus because "we have it totally under control."

Still, Trump's travel restrictions plan was conceived on Jan. 31, 2020—just one day after the first confirmed case of person-to-person transmission in the US. Those restrictions, which went into effect on February 2, 2020, initially restricted flights from China and then from Europe. The US responded more quickly to the crisis because the truth about the pandemic was being made manifest and no one was punished for telling it.

It is imperative that Russia overcome what Andrey Kortunov, director of the Russian International Affairs Council, calls "a political and psychological immunodeficiency ... an absence of the instinct that is inherent in any biological species to protect one's own population." We join him in the wish that "mankind...focus on finding a solution to a truly universal problem."

Asia

China and Viruses: The Case of Dr. Xiangguo Qiu

by Lt. Col. (res.) Dr. Dany Shoham

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: In July 2019, a rare event occurred in Canada. Suspected of espionage for China, a group of Chinese virologists was forcibly evicted from the Canadian National Microbiology Laboratory (NML) in Winnipeg, where they had been running parts of the Special Pathogen Program of Canada’s public health agency. One of the procedures conducted by the team was the infection of monkeys with the most lethal viruses found on Earth. Four months prior to the Chinese team’s eviction, a shipment containing two exceptionally virulent viruses—Ebola and Nipah—was sent from the NML to China. When the shipment was traced, it was held to be improper and a “possible policy breach.”

The scope of the 2019 incident involving the discovery of a possibly serious security breach at Canada’s National Microbiology Laboratory (NML) in Winnipeg is much broader than the group of Chinese virologists who were summarily evicted from the lab. The main culprit behind the breach seems to have been Dr. Xiangguo Qiu, an outstanding Chinese scientist born in Tianjin.

Until recently the head of the Vaccine Development and Antiviral Therapies section of the Special Pathogens Program, Qiu received her MD degree from Hebei Medical University in China in 1985 and came to Canada for graduate studies in 1996. She was later affiliated with the Institute of Cell Biology and the Department of Pediatrics and Child Health at the University of Manitoba, Winnipeg. She was not engaged in the study of pathogens while at that institute.

But a shift took place in Qiu's research work. Ever since 2006, she has been studying powerful viruses—Ebola most of all—at the NML. Both of the viruses that were surreptitiously shipped from the NML to China were studied by Qiu in 2014 (as well as other viruses, including Machupo, Junin, Rift Valley Fever, Crimean-Congo Hemorrhagic Fever, and Hendra). But she paid greatest attention to Ebola for the entirely legitimate aim of developing effective prophylaxis and treatment for the infected.

Inevitably, Qiu's work included a variety of Ebola wild strains—among them the most virulent, which has an 80% lethality rate—and relied heavily on experimental infection of monkeys, including via the airways. She made remarkable strides, and was granted the Governor General's Innovation Award in 2018.

So far so good—or so it seems.

Qiu is married to Chinese scientist Keding Cheng, a bacteriologist who shifted to virology and who is also affiliated with the NML. Qiu maintains a close bond with China and visits frequently, and many Chinese students from a notable range of Chinese scientific facilities have joined her at the NML over the past decade.

Of those facilities, four are believed to be involved in Chinese biological weapons development. They are:

- Institute of Military Veterinary, Academy of Military Medical Sciences, Changchun
- Center for Disease Control and Prevention, Chengdu Military Region
- Wuhan Institute of Virology, Chinese Academy of Sciences, Hubei
- Institute of Microbiology, Chinese Academy of Sciences, Beijing

All four facilities collaborated with Qiu on her Ebola research. The Institute of Military Veterinary also joined a study on the Rift Valley fever virus, while the Institute of Microbiology joined a study on the Marburg virus. Notably, the drug used in the latter study—Favipiravir—has been successfully tested by the Chinese Academy of Military Medical Sciences against Ebola and other viruses. (The drug has the designation JK-05; it is originally a Japanese patent registered in China in 2006.)

The Chinese interest in Ebola, Nipah, Marburg, and Rift Valley fever might possibly be beyond scientific and medical needs. Significantly, only the Nipah virus is naturally found in China or neighboring countries. That being the case, the interface between Qiu and China is *a priori* highly suspicious.

The shipment of the two viruses from NML to China is alarming unto itself, but it also raises the question of what other shipments of viruses or other items might have been made to China between 2006 and 2018.

Qiu made at least five trips over the academic year 2017-18 alone to the above-mentioned Wuhan National Biosafety Laboratory of the Chinese Academy of Sciences, which was certified for BSL4 in January 2017. In August 2017, the National Health Commission of China approved research activities involving the Ebola, Nipah, and Crimean-Congo hemorrhagic fever viruses at the Wuhan facility, and in March 2019, the Chinese published their tour de force.

When the shipment from Canada was uncovered, security access was revoked for Qiu, her husband, and the Chinese students. IT specialists entered Qiu's office after hours to gain access to her computer, and her regular trips to China were halted.

Jens Stoltenberg, the secretary-general of NATO, said at a news conference that he can't comment on the case, but appeared to suggest the possibility of espionage. "What I can say in general is that we have seen increased efforts by the nations to spy on NATO allies in different ways," he said.

Qiu's research has not only been conducted on behalf of Canada and China. In 2018, she collaborated with three scientists from the US Army Medical Research Institute of Infectious Diseases, Maryland, studying post-exposure immunotherapy for two Ebola viruses and Marburg virus in monkeys. Those activities were part of a study supported by the US Defense Threat Reduction Agency.

The multiplicity of Chinese grants, all on the national level, supporting the work done under Qiu's lead at the NML is impressive:

- National Key Program for Infectious Disease of China
- National Key Research and Development Program of China
- National Natural Science Foundation of China International Cooperation and Exchange Program
- Special Foundation of President for Ebola virus research from the Chinese Academy of Sciences
- President's International Fellowship Initiative from the Chinese Academy of Sciences
- China National Key Subject of Drug Innovation
- Youth Innovation Promotion Association of the Chinese Academy of Sciences
- National Natural Science Foundation Award, Ministry of Science and Technology
- National Science and Technology Major Projects
- Beijing Advanced Innovation Center for Structure Biology
- Major Program of the National Natural Science Foundation of China

It is still possible that Qiu and her husband will return to work at the NML, but a good deal of intelligence analysis and assessment will be required. The Canadian Security Intelligence Service has a serious challenge on its hands.

This is an edited version of an [article](#) published in the July-December 2019 issue of the IDSA periodical CBW Magazine.

What Coronavirus Could Mean for China

by Emil Avdaliani

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: States all over the world stand to lose a great deal economically from the coronavirus pandemic. But in the case of China, there is an additional significant dimension to the crisis: the West will grow increasingly distrustful of Beijing, which will further widen an already gaping geopolitical divide. Calls in the West for an economic decoupling from China as well as increasing demands that Beijing comply with Western economic, health, and political standards could complicate China's global aspirations.

Economic troubles

The coronavirus pandemic will undoubtedly have an impact on China's economy. Consider, for example, the US-China trade deal, the first phase of which took effect in February. That phase stipulates that Beijing will have to buy an additional \$200 billion in US goods over the next two years. Though the Chinese government has said the country will comply with this requirement, it remains to be seen whether Beijing will be able to follow through on this and other commitments contained in the deal.

There is also concern in the US that the second phase of trade negotiations with China will be delayed. This would have a negative effect on Washington-Beijing relations, which could in turn have global repercussions.

The pandemic is also creating major disruption of China's near-trillion-dollar Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Significant delays have been reported in BRI projects in South Asia, specifically in Cambodia, Indonesia, Sri Lanka, and other states. One problem is travel restrictions, which are limiting Chinese workers' ability to participate in BRI projects abroad. There is also a fear that a partial shutdown of Chinese factories could have a major ripple effect on the BRI, as large infrastructure projects need a constant supply of key resources that are lacking in host states.

The Chinese government will undoubtedly work very hard to salvage the BRI. This flagship project, which is widely considered to be Xi Jinping's personal initiative, is now infused into Chinese statecraft and foreign policy—and even more importantly into the country's perception of its own rising global standing. Disruption of the BRI would seriously damage Beijing's geopolitical aspirations.

To assist the Chinese economy as it copes with the effects of the coronavirus crisis, Beijing is likely to intervene significantly via interest rate cuts, increased lending, and fiscal stimulus measures. It is going to have to deal with damage caused to the economy by the diminishing of world supply chains resulting from a decrease in global demand for Chinese products.

There could be an even bigger dimension to China's coronavirus crisis. There is a growing trend among Western states to limit their exposure to Chinese economic power through a partial decoupling of existing deep economic contacts. Many world corporations with global supply chains are stationed in China, and some might react to the coronavirus crisis by choosing to diversify their locations. Indeed, such calls were rising well before the pandemic because Western and Chinese standards of doing business are fundamentally different on many levels.

Ideological troubles

The world was rattled by the lack of information emanating from China at the beginning of the pandemic and by subsequent alleged efforts by Beijing to limit the free dissemination of information about the epidemic. This will likely cause serious damage to China's attempts to position itself as an aspiring global power with ambitions to remake both state-to-state relations and the Eurasian economic order.

Though Beijing has put great effort into using this crisis as an opportunity to enhance its soft power through the provision of medical help to states around the globe, an opposite trend is emerging: a deepening of distrust of China and a worsening of its ability to position itself as a model power.

There are calls around the world demanding explanations from Beijing about the crisis, as well as threats of lawsuits over the alleged cover-up

of information by the Chinese at the beginning of the pandemic. Many investigations will be made into the outbreak of the virus, but it is clear that the crisis has widened an already significant ideological divide between China and the Western world.

Poised as they are to compete geopolitically in the coming decades, the two poles have tried so far to refrain from addressing the unfolding struggle in ideological terms—but the coronavirus crisis will eventually expose an ideological clash that will complicate West-China relations.

The pandemic might serve as a breaking point whereby EU institutions begin to vocally question information coming from China and openly criticize the country. This would be consistent with the development of EU policy toward Beijing over the past year. In 2019, EU institutions recognized China as Europe's systemic rival. Europeans are starting to reconsider their dependency on a single external supplier for crucial medical equipment.

China's relations with the US will be damaged as Washington strives to consolidate its stance among its allies and partners around the globe. The extent of the damage will ultimately depend on how far the US is willing to go to use the pandemic as a weapon against China.

China's diminished position will limit its flexibility even along BRI corridors. Pre-pandemic concerns about China's political and economic moves in Central Asia and the Middle East will increasingly ossify into geopolitical limits for Beijing in the wake of the crisis.

While some analysts are making radical forecasts, the likeliest damage scenario for China's global standing after the coronavirus pandemic is at a medium level of severity. The BRI will likely proceed along the planned corridors. The results of the pandemic will be seen primarily in the ideological realm, which is so deeply interwoven into the geopolitical. The Eurasia of 2050 may well show lines of influence divided between Chinese economic and ideological spheres and the Western world. The coronavirus might turn out to have been the primary cause of the decoupling of the West and China.

South Korea's Approach to Coronavirus

by Dr. Alon Levkowitz

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The South Korean government was forced by coronavirus (COVID-19), which began in China, to take immediate action to avoid losing control over what was rapidly becoming a pandemic. Seoul had to make critical decisions fast: did it want to contain the virus according to the Chinese model by strictly enforcing closure on a danger area, limiting public freedom, and endangering the economy? Did it want to adopt the British model of essentially sacrificing the older generation on behalf of the younger (a policy Britain later changed)? Or did it want to adopt the Israeli model of closing the borders to anyone coming from a state where the virus had appeared? Seoul chose a uniquely Korean model: mapping the illness, maintaining transparency, convincing citizens to adhere to a set of rules and a policy of surveillance, and—perhaps most significantly—quickly testing as many people as it possibly could.

The population of South Korea in 2020 is about 51 million. As of March 31, 2020, according to the South Korean Ministry of Health, 162 Koreans have died of coronavirus, 9,786 are confirmed cases, and 5,408 have recovered. But the most important figure to consider is this one: as of March 31, 2020, the number of tests conducted by South Korea was 395,194. This number is critical to understanding how South Korea has fought the pandemic.

The first coronavirus cases appeared in South Korea at the beginning of February 2020 among members of the Shincheonji Church in Daegu. The church has almost 10,000 members. The unique rituals of this church made it a coronavirus time bomb. Very swiftly, the government stepped in and tested more than 90% of the members of the Shincheonji Church. They also mapped everyone with whom those people had crossed paths and tested them as well.

The South Korean government understood that time and data were going to be crucial weapons in the war against the virus, so it decided to dramatically expand testing. To put this huge project into action, 40 labs were prepared almost instantly to check thousands of tests per day. The testing kit South Korea used was developed and produced domestically, which meant the country was not dependent on imported test kits the way Israel and other countries are.

In order to contain the virus, the government needed as many tests as it could lay hands on as fast as possible in order to identify sources and lock down the spread. At the beginning of the crisis, South Korea conducted about 3,000 tests per day, but quickly increased this pace to almost 20,000 per day. The enormous number of tests allowed the government to map the way coronavirus was moving through the Korean population.

To maintain the efficiency of this process, Seoul streamlined testing by creating a McDonald's-style drive-through testing process. People drive up to a booth and are tested without leaving their cars. In less than 10 minutes they can arrive, get tested, and leave the site. Israel has adopted this mechanism in five locations around the country.

Seoul understood that in order to gain the vital trust and cooperation of the public to combat the virus, it was going to have to be transparent. It is accordingly updating the public on every move it makes regarding testing and surveillance. But the public, too, understands for the most part that they have a responsibility to do as they are told. Those who ignore the rules—for example, people who disobey quarantine instructions—are fined \$30,000.

The government uses mobile phone tracking, CCTV, and a payment system to track and map the movements of citizens who test positive. This kind of surveillance might smack of Big Brother, but it serves the essential immediate purpose of identifying whoever might have been in contact with a virus sufferer and instructing them to self-quarantine and get tested immediately. Anyone who enters South Korea is requested to upload an app onto their phone and update it daily. In some cases, visitors are instructed to self-quarantine for 14 days.

The last layer of the war on coronavirus is the South Korean health system, which is on a very advanced, first-world level. The government has decided to pay all coronavirus-related medical expenses, but if the number of infected cases rises significantly, it will have to increase restrictions on the public throughout the country.

Asian Soft Power Grows in the Coronavirus Era

by Shay Attias

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has ushered in a new age of global diplomacy. Asian countries are trying, with some success, to turn the global health crisis into an opportunity to enhance their soft power and fill the diplomatic vacuum left by President Trump. South Korea has launched a national campaign to brand itself as the “cutting edge” state in the fight against the virus, and its president is leading an aggressive diplomatic effort focused on the G-20 and Japan. The nations that emerge successfully from the global health crisis will gain influence, strengthen their diplomatic positions, and attract foreign investment—the essential components of soft power.

The global health crisis precipitated by the coronavirus (COVID-19) requires a swift and dramatic increase in global transparency, collaboration, diplomacy, and communication. The pandemic is forcing a reconstruction of global priorities, agendas, and even the known order.

Within that context, South Korean president Moon Jae-in is pushing a public diplomacy [campaign](#) to elevate his nation’s brand by leveraging the information the country has accumulated since January 2020 on how best to respond to the crisis. South Korean data has proven essential to the crisis management programs many other states are now scrambling to assemble.

Coronavirus is not the first viral outbreak to severely affect Asian countries. The 2003 SARS epidemic, which hit China, [Hong Kong](#), and [Singapore](#), pushed those economies to prepare for the next crisis. Because of that preparation, Asia may well ride out the coronavirus crisis better than the West.

During a pandemic, diplomacy and international cooperation are critical tools. To find solutions fast, countries must learn from one another's experiences, and cooperation is essential to ensure crucial supplies of protective equipment. States' success or failure at managing the crisis is measured by other countries, foreign investors, and global citizens.

Asia's response to the coronavirus outbreak—contain, then stimulate—has now been implemented by most of the western world. Western healthcare centers are turning to Asian governments as examples of forceful measures of containment.

A prominent example is South Korea. It is the fourth-largest economy in Asia and the 11th-largest in the world. Over the past decade, South Korea has built powerful industries in high tech, mobile, automotive, and technology.

The coronavirus outbreak has led to an improvement in South Korea's global image. The country, which reduced its number of confirmed coronavirus cases in early February 2020 just as case figures were dramatically escalating around the world, is perceived as a model of how to cope with the crisis. Impressively, the country has [tested](#) more than a quarter-million people at 600 testing sites nationwide—a capacity of 20,000 people a day. Not only are the tests much more numerous in South Korea than elsewhere, but results are sent to citizens by text within six hours. One month after South Korea's first case was reported, it had [more recoveries than new infections](#).

Korean citizens played an essential role in the rise of their national brand by being the first to model “voluntary passive social isolation,” an element that was vital to the success of the government's measures. The immediate and widespread cooperation of the public contributed to South Korea's ability to avoid a total lockdown. Even before the government coordinated its message on social distancing, the people of South Korea [embraced](#) the need to close businesses even if that measure would incur personal financial hardship. Korean churches [suspended](#) services and moved online. [According](#) to one resident, “It's less about protecting ourselves and more [that] we don't want to spread this throughout the community.” This attitude is the opposite of what

was seen in Miami, for example, where crowds of people flocked to the beach in [total disregard](#) of the danger of either being infected by coronavirus or passing it on to others.

The Asian private sector also stepped up, creating net cash positions that the western economies are having severe difficulty emulating. Asian central banks prepared financial “ammunition” to support their economies and position them to weather disasters. South Korea’s aggressive, efficient, and fast testing has impressed countries around the world, around 117 of which are now [importing](#) Korean testing kits and medical equipment as their numbers of confirmed cases grow. Health ministries around the world are applying the Korean strategy to their own fights against coronavirus.

Europe and the US are scrambling to fight the pandemic, with entire cities and states locked down. The worst-hit countries in Europe, such as Italy and Spain, have seen cases surge to the tens of thousands, while infections in the US spiked tenfold in a week to cross 70,000.

The West would likely be looking eastward for solutions to this crisis regardless, as the virus originated in Asia. As the brunt of the pandemic makes its way west, the Asian nations are beginning to emerge from the worst and can offer examples of effective responses. The West is also still China’s biggest customer, with the US and Europe serving as major markets for online shopping malls like Alibaba and AliExpress. The Asian countries, led by China, have a significant financial interest in restoring those markets.

The countries that were able to respond quickly and whose citizens obeyed national health guidelines will have an advantage in the post-coronavirus era. The economic impact of the pandemic is hitting almost every business in Europe and the US. The proven strength of Asian companies, people, and governments bolsters their global reputation and will probably translate into more foreign investment. South Korea had a low score on the 2019 [Soft Power Index](#) (19th), but it will likely rise much higher after the coronavirus crisis passes.

China and the Coronavirus Pandemic

by Roie Yellinek

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The coronavirus pandemic is providing insights into the conduct and thinking of the Chinese leadership, which has far-reaching implications both internally and externally.

The coronavirus is not the first pandemic to be exported from China to the rest of the world. In this instance, the outbreak was initially believed to have been triggered by cross-species transmission originating in a market in the city of Wuhan selling exotic wildlife for domestic consumption, though it was subsequently argued that the cross-species transmission originated at the [Wuhan Institute of Virology](#).

China's leadership, which is known for the tight control it exercises over its citizens, has enabled and even encouraged the wildlife markets in Wuhan and other cities from which coronavirus and other diseases are believed to have originated. After the SARS epidemic of 2002-04, the Chinese government shut down those markets, but reopened them within a few months in response to demand from upper class consumers who wanted the exotic and very expensive meat only available at such markets. In acceding to this wish, the government favored the privileged minority at the expense of the broader population, and not for the first time.

The spread of the coronavirus pandemic was sharply exacerbated by the regime's lack of transparency and strict constraint on free communication and discourse. The outbreak could possibly have been contained if the local party leadership in Wuhan had been alerted to alarms coming from the area, but all such voices were quickly silenced. The regime's tyrannical control over the population, the media, and all public discourse did, however, allow it to deal with the crisis efficiently and quickly once the virus began to gather momentum inside the country. As is generally the case in China, governmental instructions were fully enforced and did not meet significant resistance.

In mid-March, about three months after the outbreak began, a senior party official announced the imminent removal of traffic restrictions in low-risk areas to allow residents to return to their workplaces. The Chinese economy is trying to return to normal by assessing the degree of risk in the various provinces and allowing entry into low-risk areas.

A comparison to the SARS epidemic less than two decades ago illustrates a striking change in China's global position. SARS caused the infection of about 8,000 people worldwide and killed about a tenth of those people. The coronavirus pandemic, by contrast, has resulted in the deaths of some 290,000 people out of over 4 million confirmed cases so far. (It is difficult to ascertain an accurate number of cases and deaths as methods of measuring differ from country to country and some states are actively concealing their figures.) The dramatic extent to which the coronavirus has spread around the world is a direct result of China's closer ties with many countries. It is no wonder that another major outbreak was in Iran, which is one of China's strategic allies.

The reach of China's global soft power is also reflected in the way it uses its powerful propaganda machine, which it has established in many countries via Chinese media outlets, hundreds of Confucius Institutes around the world, and penetration of local media. Beijing's strenuous public relations efforts have influenced public debate about the virus all over the world. China's object is to entrench a narrative in which it is not responsible for the plague, which, Beijing claims, could have erupted anywhere.

It is premature to assess the impact of the epidemic on China's international status and future relations with the West and other regions of the world, but the reach of Beijing's message about its efforts to send equipment and medical aid to poor countries—and the World Health Organization's touting of these benevolent Chinese acts, dismissal of Chinese responsibility for the global crisis, and highlighting of the purported failure by the US to assist the world in a similar fashion—suggests that Beijing has come a long way in its ability to project soft power.

Europe

Coronavirus Is Hitting Russia on More than the Economy

by Emil Avdaliani

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The coronavirus pandemic is causing Russia fundamental problems and putting its entire political system under intense scrutiny. As the death rate rises across its far-flung territories, troubles between Moscow and the regions are increasing. The crisis is prompting questions about the recent set of proposed constitutional changes, and the economy is likely to experience deep shocks—particularly when the effects of the pandemic are combined with those of the recent oil price war with Saudi Arabia.

The coronavirus pandemic began to affect Russia later than the western European states and the US, but has the potential to completely unravel the country's already precarious economic stability. It is not yet possible to reliably estimate the Russian economy's expected losses, but forecasts range from near zero annual GDP growth to a best-case scenario of 0.5%. Some Russian economists fear that the economy could shrink by up to 9% overall by the end of 2020.

In 2020, Russia's economic stability in the wake of the crisis is its top priority. That statement can of course be applied to every state affected by the coronavirus, but the worry is particularly acute in the case of Russia, as it has been hit in recent years by decreasing incomes and rising inflation. If the pandemic results in a major blow to the economy, the shock could precipitate an irreversible undermining of the stability of the ruling elites.

The Russian political elite's mandate for continuous rule does not derive from the people. In contrast to the western norm, power in Russia comes from institutions ranging from the military to the security agencies. The popularity of Russian politicians is less important than many analysts in the West often believe. What counts is a stable internal economic situation.

This was the recipe for stability and continuity throughout 2000-20 and is even more true today. Putin and his allied elite political groups intend to stay in power beyond 2024. Their success in achieving that goal depends on the social pact they made with the people to provide and maintain a relatively stable economic situation. The havoc the coronavirus could wreak on the Russian economy has the potential to destroy that compact, and with it Putin's chances of extending his power beyond 2024.

The impact of the coronavirus crisis on Russia is not only economic. The outbreak and the government's response to it could have been an opportunity to display Russia's preparedness and the effectiveness of its political system. Instead, it revealed that the top leadership was unprepared for a challenge of this type or magnitude.

The pandemic in Russia, in striking contrast with China and even Western states where death rates are still high but contained, is no longer under control. Though it had been argued that the vast spaces separating Russia's population centers would limit the spread of the virus, geography does not appear to have stemmed its progress. It has been confirmed that Russia's hinterland—i.e., distant regions with small concentrations of people per square kilometer—has been hit by the pandemic along with all the major population centers. What should have served as a geographic benefit is in fact working against the central government, as the country's inadequate transportation links and lack of sufficient medical resources make it very difficult for Moscow to control the pandemic in far-flung regions.

The epidemic also revealed another problem that is receiving little attention: regions and republics within Russia are implementing responses to the coronavirus without any coordination with Moscow. This pattern exposes the perennial problem of precarious relations between

the center and the federal regions. During the crisis, some regions—the restive North Caucasus, for example—have taken disproportionate measures and even explicitly disregarded orders from Moscow.

This trend highlights a largely forgotten problem with federalization: in times of crisis, it is extremely difficult to control distant territories. This is not only because of the huge geographic distances involved, but also because of the desire of local leaders to serve their own interests, which do not necessarily comport with those of Moscow. This is especially true if the regions in question are populated primarily by non-Russians.

The coronavirus pandemic could thus shake the entire premise upon which the Russian ruling elites' power has rested thus far. What makes 2020 even more troublesome for the Russian leadership are other major developments that were initiated by Moscow itself.

Only a few months ago, Russia's political system seemed fairly stable. This perception was altered when the top leadership proposed several waves of constitutional changes that would ultimately end in Putin's being allowed to continue as president in 2024, if he decides to participate in the elections. Even the trusted elite, which one might expect to be content with Putin's extension of his power, is showing signs of concern about the possible long-term results of this radical development.

Moreover, there is an increasing belief among the broader Russian population that though the changes fit into overall constitutional trends in Russia and in many Eurasian states, they nevertheless undermine the Russian people's belief in the primacy of the state constitution. Many now believe the proposed constitutional changes are a long-planned show designed to extend the incumbent president's rule well into 2036. In essence, the top Russian leadership has undermined the foundation of its own power: the stability and preeminence of the state constitution.

Russia's economy and influence have been affected not only by the ongoing coronavirus crisis but also by the oil price war with Saudi Arabia that immediately preceded it. Putin made Russia into a dominant player in global energy politics with the partial object of driving a wedge between Washington and its crucial ally in Riyadh. Just prior

to the coronavirus outbreak, Moscow refused to meet Saudi demands to double output cuts, prompting a price war with the kingdom that involved exponentially increasing oil output and driving global demand down. The Russian leadership ultimately agreed to cuts at four times the level suggested in early March, and at a higher level than what Riyadh agreed to cut from its output.

Three interlocking long-term developments will thus trouble Russia throughout 2020 and beyond: the coronavirus pandemic is testing the country's social contract to its very foundation; Russia's internal political stability is being called into question by Putin's proposed constitutional changes; and the oil price agreement with the Saudis is largely disadvantageous.

Coronavirus and the Western Media

by Dr. George N. Tzogopoulos

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: While the Western media initially perceived the coronavirus pandemic as exclusively belonging to China, they are now faced with the challenge of covering the crisis as it spreads across the Western world. An analysis of Italian front pages shows that fear is a recurrent feature in news coverage and reveals a delay in journalists' understanding of the need to adopt difficult measures. Despite the weaknesses of their coverage, their example can perhaps help other Western media not only avoid politicization in a challenging time but also fight the constant stream of fake news spread via social media.

The role of the media in public health crises has long been an area of interest in the field of communication studies, with media coverage of SARS, influenza, and Ebola epidemics providing grist for research. Studies have examined the effect on media of proximity to the virus epicenter, national contexts, and local cultures, as well as the specific features of the media organizations selected for analysis.

Generally speaking, fear always receives major coverage. While journalists do report on precautionary measures, dramatization of the crisis, almost always fueled by messages sent by the political elites, tends to be a regular feature in media discourse.

As the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic is ongoing, it is premature to draw hard and fast conclusions about how it is being covered by the Western media, but some preliminary insights can be offered.

Their response is best assessed in two phases: the outbreak of coronavirus in China and its rapid and broad spread across the West. During the first phase, most Western media defined the problem as Chinese and situated their news stories in the context of Sino-Western tensions. Coronavirus

was seen as an opportunity to criticize the Chinese government, condemn its practices, and advocate for media freedom rather than focus on potential repercussions for global public health. Western journalists attributed measures taken in China to contain the virus, such as the lockdown of the Wuhan region, to its different political system. When fear was expressed, it had to do with potential consequences to the world economy. The assessment by US commerce secretary Wilbur Ross that the coronavirus outbreak in China could accelerate the return of jobs to North America did not generate much optimism in the media discourse.

To no one's surprise, the coronavirus sparked disagreements between Washington and Beijing. In early February, *The Wall Street Journal* published an article by the American academic Walter Russel Mead, "[China is the Real Sick Man of Asia](#)," that angered Beijing so much that it demanded an apology. (Mead responded that he was responsible for the content of his op-ed, not the title, which had been selected by the editors.)

In mid-February, the US put more pressure on China by announcing that it would treat five major Chinese state-run news agencies with operations in the country as foreign missions. As a result, these agencies would need to register their employees and properties with the State Department. At about the same time, the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs announced that it would revoke the press credentials of three *Wall Street Journal* reporters working in Beijing. Whether or not the two announcements were directly linked, they reflect a ratcheting up of mutual suspicion.

If the first phase of the coronavirus pandemic was relatively easy and safe for most Western media to report on, the second was, and continues to be, more complicated and emotional. Italy has been suffering since mid-February and a chain reaction has occurred in several other European countries. At this stage, it is easy to see the traditional trend of the media to amplify risk. Media scholar Karin Wahl-Jorgensen [notes the usage of frightening language in British media](#), including the phrase "killer virus." In response to this media tendency, the World Health Organization published a [guide](#) to prevent social stigma. The guide encourages the spreading of facts and narration of sympathetic stories while challenging myths and stereotypes.

An analysis of the front pages of three Italian newspapers, *Il Corriere della Sera*, *La Repubblica*, and *La Stampa*, over the three weeks from February 20 through March 10 reveals interesting trends in coverage. In the first days, the papers almost completely ignored the coronavirus, focusing instead on other stories like the Hanau attacks in Germany. As they gradually realized the severity of the situation, they began to publish images from hospitals and reported on urgent government measures to block off the northern part of Italy and later the whole country. Only after the number of victims dramatically rose did the three papers put an emphasis on advising readers how to protect themselves and stressed the importance of staying home and abiding by the rules.

Subsequently, most stories have addressed the health dimension of the problem and its economic ramifications, hospital capacity, the heroism of doctors, the difficulty citizens are having supplying their basic needs, and some social consequences, such as limited revolts in prisons. The Italian government was criticized to an extent for not having put travelers returning to Italy from China into quarantine. The coverage was not politicized, however, with the exception of some pieces that appeared following calls in late February by Matteo Salvini for PM Giuseppe Conte to resign. The Italian papers' coverage reflected a sentiment of national unity, especially in March.

The Italian media provide an example for other Western media of how to prevent high politicization during the pandemic. The mainstream American media might not be able to absorb this lesson, however, as the passionately anti-Trump agenda of much of the media cannot easily be reined in. With that said, politicization is not the greatest media risk during the crisis. Much more serious are misinformation and disinformation.

Unlike previous public health crises, the coronavirus pandemic is evolving amid an almost completely uncontrolled flow of fake news. Social media facilitate its spread. Whereas the debate about fake news up to now has revolved principally around its alleged impact on the political process, the current discussion is different. Inaccurate information cultivates illusions about nonexistent cures and can deceive desperate citizens into sharing personal details with malicious websites.

The traditional online media will have a greater and greater responsibility in the coming weeks to expose these activities and disseminate factual information provided by health authorities. This is also true of technology companies such as Facebook and Twitter, which both need to improve their fact-checking policies.

The EU and the Coronavirus Pandemic

by Dr. Tsilla Hershco

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The coronavirus pandemic has exposed many of the EU's inherent weaknesses, from its total unpreparedness for the crisis, to the open borders that expedited the spread of the disease, to the lack of solidarity reflected in member states' refusal to help Italy in the initial critical phase of the pandemic. The union cooperates well in non-crisis situations, but its complacency, lumbering bureaucracy, and sluggish decision-making processes hamper its ability to respond to urgent developments.

The coronavirus epidemic has exposed the EU's gravest flaws. It failed to make plans for state cooperation to combat an epidemic, should one arise. The Union's open border policy in accordance with the Schengen Agreement, which it considers its cardinal achievement, has turned out to be a major hindrance to the effort to contain the virus. The Union refused to suspend the Schengen Agreement even as the virus rapidly picked up momentum and minimized the dangers of the pandemic to the general public, missteps with grave human costs.

Europeans, often rightly critical of China's human rights abuses and fearful of Beijing's burgeoning economic strength, strongly criticized the fierce and undemocratic steps the People's Republic took in the fight against coronavirus. But they failed to internalize the lessons learned from the human toll of the virus among Chinese citizens and its rapid spread to other Asian countries. Instead the EU pointed to China as an example that would not be followed by enlightened and progressive Europe.

When the virus spread to Italy, several EU countries responded by criticizing Italy for having become a viral hub while refusing to close their own borders with that country, a step that could have curbed the spread of the epidemic across Europe. It was the Chinese and the Russians, not the EU, who supplied desperately needed equipment to fight the plague in Italy. The Chinese also delivered equipment to Spain and France, which soon followed Italy into the heart of the crisis.

It is interesting to note that, in contrast to its non-response to Italy, the Union provided around 20 tons of aid to China as it struggled with coronavirus. It is not yet clear whether this marks a tightening of diplomatic relations between Europe and China to compensate for Europe's worsening relationship with the US.

Europe's complacency about the deteriorating situation in Italy was evident in the conduct of many Union countries. In France, for example, mass events took place at the annual agricultural fair in Port de Versailles, which opened on February 22 and continued even after the virus had appeared across the continent. President Macron attended the opening of the fair, where he was surrounded by crowds and talked to people with no apparent concern about either receiving or transmitting the virus. On March 6, Macron and an entourage visited a nursing home to announce a ban on visiting nursing homes—the irony compounded by neither the president nor his entourage taking even elementary precautions while at the site.

On the same day, the governor of the Haute-Rhine district in eastern France held a press conference attended by experts, senior province officials, and health authorities announcing new limitations on public gatherings, closures of educational institutions, and banning of visits to nursing homes. During the meeting, the speakers handed the microphone back and forth in violation of the very precautions they were discussing. Local government elections in France were held as scheduled on March 5, although the second round, which was scheduled for March 22, was canceled due to the rapid spread of the epidemic.

The EU gradually began to internalize the danger of coronavirus as it surged across the continent. On March 6, a special conference on coronavirus was held at the Union Health Ministers' Forum, where it was decided that the states would cooperate and exchange information on the crisis. On March 17, European Commission president Ursula von der Leyen acknowledged that the EU had underestimated the danger and declared the Union closed to citizens of non-European countries. Some EU member states, such as Spain, Denmark, and the Czech Republic, announced a total closure of their borders.

The EU has achieved considerable gains, mainly on economic issues, during non-crisis periods, but it has failed more than once to deal with crisis situations. Over the years, the Union has grown to include 28 member states and has gradually increased areas of integration across many spheres, including foreign policy and security. As a result, the EU has become a cumbersome bureaucratic body with a slow decision-making system that does not match the dynamic pace of events in the global arena or, for that matter, the domestic arenas of the member states. Unanimous decisions are required on key issues, including emergency situations, which makes action slow and difficult.

The EU's handling of the massive refugee problem, for example, highlighted differences of opinion among its members that would ultimately have implications for the coronavirus pandemic. Eastern European countries such as Hungary and Poland initially balked at receiving refugees. In 2016, the Union reached an agreement with Turkey according to which Ankara would stem the influx of refugees in exchange for financial aid and the Union consented to receive refugees under certain conditions. The EU complied with this agreement, sending Turkey about €6 billion, but Ankara recently allowed refugees to reach the Greek border on the pretext that the Union had breached the agreement.

The Union has essentially put itself in the position of being extorted by Turkey. Greece has had to deal with this latest flood of refugees alone, a surge that was intensified by the recent military offensive in Idlib. This situation, which would be difficult even under relatively normal circumstances, could be dramatically more damaging for the Greek islands as it could lead to a broader local outbreak of coronavirus. Lesbos, for example, is crowded with refugees.

In recent years, the EU has faced harsh internal criticism from Euroskeptic parties in addition to challenging developments such as Brexit and a weakening of German-French cooperation, which has for years been the main engine for deepening and expanding European integration. The coronavirus pandemic should clarify for Europe that it has dangerous flaws that must be corrected so it can cope with global crises.

Coronavirus and Macron's Vision for Europe

by Dr. George N. Tzogopoulos

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: After years of falling in line with German priorities at the EU by focusing on economic matters, French president Emmanuel Macron is now an advocate for change. He believes geopolitics should be interwoven into the future of Europe and proposes an ambitious new strategic doctrine—one that challenges the conventional wisdom on NATO, Russia, and China; emphasizes the EU's role in world affairs; and boosts the French presence in the Eastern Mediterranean. But the ongoing coronavirus crisis has put his plans on hold. As the pandemic continues to wreak havoc on the Continent, Macron is calling for greater solidarity and supports the issuance of joint European debt to finance the fight against the virus—an idea Germany is resisting.

The European debt crisis highlighted Germany's political dominance within the EU. Berlin took the lead in making critical decisions about austerity policies, the inclusion of the IMF in bailouts, and the involvement of the private sector in debt restructuring. As the game was being played on the German terrain of economics, France's role in the EU was overshadowed at the time. Paris still had its voice heard on occasion—for example, when it insisted in 2015 that Greece remain in the Eurozone—but it generally acceded to the German-dominated political order.

This began to change after the 2017 French presidential election. President Emmanuel Macron seems determined to revive his country's faded glory.

While German Chancellor Angela Merkel considers the fiscal compact and the obeying of rules *sine qua non* for the future of the Eurozone, Macron appears to be more flexible. He envisages a Europe

that features more investment and sustainable growth. Although he has not managed to persuade Merkel to accept his core reforms, he is an ambitious politician with a vision for Europe and a desire to make it a reality.

This has become particularly evident during the coronavirus pandemic. Analogizing the situation to a war, Macron has called for EU solidarity to fight the virus. Significantly, he backs the idea of coronabonds, a debt instrument with which to provide support for European countries in need such as Italy. Together with the leaders of Italy, Spain, Portugal, Slovenia, Greece, Ireland, Belgium, and Luxembourg, Macron signed a letter advocating coronabonds. Germany remains resistant to this idea.

Macron is leading a push for the EU to acquire not only more economic powers but also more security powers. The momentum prior to the onset of the pandemic favored his cause. New European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen pledged to lead a “geopolitical” team. Geopolitics is not an area where Berlin can take the lead, because Europe still retains vivid memories of the two world wars. In Macron’s view, this represents an opportunity for France.

In a remarkable interview with the *Economist* after the withdrawal of US troops from Syria, Macron called NATO “brain-dead.” As shocking as this was to the international community, he was telling the truth about an alliance that is struggling to respond to new challenges with old remedies in the post-Cold War era.

In the interview, Macron addressed the ambivalent messages sent by the Trump administration toward Europe and said he believes Europe should gradually move toward building its own defense. The French-led European Intervention Initiative that he announced in 2017 and launched a year later could contribute a good deal to this goal. The Initiative, which is not only limited to EU member states (the UK has already joined), aims at cultivating a common strategic culture and contributing to NATO and other European projects such as the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO).

Only a few days after Brexit was concluded, Macron unveiled his country’s nuclear doctrine. France, now the only nuclear power in the

EU, sees the ongoing nuclear arms race as a global threat and strongly emphasizes deterrence. Presenting his country as a paradigm, Macron encourages his European partners to join a strategic dialogue on how conventional security and defense policy can be combined with nuclear deterrence. He favors engagement with Russia and China and believes Russia should be a constructive player in European security. He wants to see the EU navigate smoothly between the US and China in the new technological Cold War.

France has been militarily involved in the fight against terror in Africa and the Middle East for years, and was recently present in the Persian Gulf and the Eastern Mediterranean. The French frigate Courbet was the first European vessel to take part in the European Maritime Security Initiative in the Strait of Hormuz. The French helicopter carrier Dixmude conducted exercises with Greece, the US, Turkey, Tunisia, and other countries. Significantly, the French aircraft carrier Charles de Gaulle docked in Limassol and participated in drills with Greece and Cyprus. On the occasion of the Charles de Gaulle's presence in the Eastern Mediterranean, the *Times of Israel* reports, Israeli pilots in F-16s and French pilots in Dassault Rafale aircraft simulated three-on-three combat in mixed teams.

In an effort to bolster its presence in the Eastern Mediterranean, Paris has applied to join the East Med Gas Forum. The French company Total participates in natural gas drilling in the Exclusive Economic Zone of Cyprus and Lebanon. Greece and France are expanding their defense collaboration. Athens has decided to upgrade its Mirage 2000 fleet and is considering upgrading its NH-90 helicopters as well as the purchase of two Belharra frigates. Cyprus will reportedly also buy military equipment from France.

At the end of January, Macron agreed with Israeli PM Benjamin Netanyahu to launch a strategic dialogue. France is also reenergizing its ties with Egypt, with Minister of Defense Florence Parly meeting with Egyptian president Abdel Fattah Sisi in Cairo at the beginning of March. Paris has been critical of Turkish policies in the Eastern Mediterranean, particularly Ankara's actions in Libya and its memorandum of understanding on the demarcation of maritime zones.

Emmanuel Macron is a strategic thinker and a leader, but it cannot be foreseen whether or not his ambitions will influence Europe. Germany acknowledges the urgency of the effect of the coronavirus pandemic on the European economy but is resisting ideas like coronabonds that deepen integration.

The public health crisis is causing unprecedented uncertainty in many realms. Sailors on the Charles de Gaulle have come down with coronavirus, and the Iniochos-2020 military exercise, which was to have taken place in the Mediterranean in May with French participation, has been canceled. The capacity of countries like Greece and Cyprus to buy French military equipment will have to be reexamined in light of the crisis, and the impact of the disease on energy developments in the Eastern Mediterranean has yet to be assessed.

Coronavirus Reveals the Lack of Unity at the EU and the UN

by Dr. Edy Cohen and Dr. Frank Musmar

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The coronavirus crisis is **rattling 19 highly indebted European nations** and exposing a **potentially fatal lack of communitarian spirit** within the EU. European countries have applied a **me-first response**, imposed export bans on vital medical equipment, and put up border controls that have left European citizens stranded. In a particularly **shameful abdication of responsibility**, EU members failed to give desperately needed medical assistance and supplies to Italy during the outbreak. The UN, meanwhile, has performed no genuinely helpful service whatsoever during the global crisis.

Maurizio Massari, Italy's ambassador to the EU, has complained that the **response** of EU member states to his nation's cries of distress during the ongoing coronavirus pandemic was limited to consultations. When Italy called for extra supplies of medical equipment, including masks, Germany and France, alongside other EU members, imposed limits on the export of protective medical equipment. In contrast, China offered to sell Italy 1,000 ventilators, 2 million masks, 20,000 protective suits, and 50,000 coronavirus testing swabs (albeit at exorbitant prices). Frustrated and enraged Italian citizens **burned the EU flag** in a sign that at least some Italians are ready to leave the union over its failure during this crisis.

While some countries in Europe have announced their own budgetary stimulus programs, the EU failed to deliver a massive fiscal stimulus package for the benefit of the whole Union. Italy pledged a 25 billion euro (\$27.26 billion) rescue plan, and France has said it will **deploy 45 billion euros** to mitigate the impact of coronavirus on businesses, among other measures.

Some European leaders are reluctant to issue euro bonds to provide financial help to individual member states during the coronavirus crisis because the bonds would [group debt](#) from highly indebted nations with that of more fiscally sound countries. “This crisis has reduced trust between member states and within the whole system, and this is a real problem,” said Heather Grabbe, a former adviser to the EU enlargement commissioner.

The war of masks

The pandemic unleashed a scramble for medical equipment, with governments accused of [confiscating](#) shipments of personal protective equipment (PPE) and ventilators destined for other countries. As stockpiles dwindle and countries embark on what one French official called a “[global treasure hunt](#),” governments are reluctant to allow protective and other equipment to leave their shores. Many governments say the prices being demanded for PPE are extortionate.

Turkish authorities announced the release of a shipment of crucial medical equipment to Spain after coming under fire from Madrid officials who [accused them of hoarding supplies](#). Last month, the French government said it was [seizing all masks](#) being made in the country. One French company, Valmy SAS, was obliged by customs officials on the French coast to divert an order for PPE from the UK’s National Health Service, a regular customer. Authorities claim that the Czech Republic [seized](#) more than 100,000 face masks that China had sent to Italy to help tackle the coronavirus outbreak. Around 680,000 protective masks were confiscated, as well as thousands of respirators, from speculators, according to an [article](#) shared by the Czech [health minister](#).

At the global level, allies are far from united and are accusing one another of theft. According to Berlin, about 200,000 N95 masks made by a Chinese producer for the US company 3M and intended for the German police were [diverted](#) to the US while they were being transferred between planes in Thailand, an act Berlin calls “modern piracy.” 3M said the US administration asked it to increase shipments to the US from its factories overseas and to stop exporting masks from US production sites to Canada and Latin America. Canadian PM Justin

Trudeau said the US move was a “mistake” and pointed out that the US also imports medical supplies from Canada.

In France, regional leaders say they are **struggling** to secure medical supplies as American buyers are outbidding them. The health minister of Barbados, Jeffrey Bostic, said the US **seized** a consignment of ventilators destined for his country, prompting further accusations of “modern piracy.”

Global orders tend to change very gradually at first and then accelerate dramatically. In 1956, the British intervention in Suez laid bare the decay that had set into British power and marked the end of the UK’s role as a global power. Today’s American policymakers should recognize that if the US does not rise to meet the hour, the coronavirus pandemic could mark a “Suez moment” for American power.

The virus has exposed **vulnerabilities**, frailties, and disunity in Europe and at the UN. Nations have failed to join together to combat the pandemic. Researchers and large biotechnology companies in many countries are working in secret and on their own without any intention of cooperating for the greater good. The coronavirus pandemic has revealed that supranational organizations like the EU and the UN might have good intentions, but they are nothing more than clubs for self-defined elites. If that really is all they have to offer at a time of crisis, it is time to dissolve both bodies.

The Middle East

Coronavirus and the Middle East

by Col. (res.) Dr. Dan Gottlieb
and Lt. Col. (res.) Dr. Mordechai Kedar

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. Erdoğan’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.

Coronavirus in the Middle East: Unlearned Lessons and Missed Opportunities

by Dr. James M. Dorsey

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.

Responses to Coronavirus Expose Governments' Fault Lines

by Dr. James M. Dorsey

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The failures of the Pakistani and Egyptian responses to the coronavirus crisis demonstrated that neither ultra-conservative science-rejecting worldviews nor self-serving autocratic policies aimed at regime enhancement produced initial prevention and mitigation strategies that could have blunted the impact of the disease.

Pakistan and Egypt, though very different in terms of their responses to coronavirus, are by no means the only countries in the world to botch their handling of the onset of the crisis. Overwhelmingly, governments across the globe—with the exceptions of Singapore, Taiwan, and South Korea—failed to take the early warning signs seriously.

Unlike western democracies, which themselves have little to boast about in their handling of the crisis, countries like Pakistan and Egypt lack checks and balances, robust civil societies, and independent media, and they have both gone out of their way to keep it that way.

Egypt, apparently taking a leaf out of China's playbook, reprimanded foreign correspondents from The Guardian and The New York Times in Cairo for reporting that the number of cases in the country was exponentially higher than the 495 confirmed by authorities as of March 29.

The coverage was based on conclusions by infectious disease specialists at the University of Toronto who had analyzed flight and traveler data as well as infection rates.

The [scientists](#) estimated that “Egypt likely has a large burden of Covid-2019 [coronavirus] cases that are unreported.” They put the number of Egyptian cases as high as 19,130 as of March 15.

In response, authorities withdrew the press permit of The Guardian's Ruth Michaelson and expelled her from the country while The New York Times's Declan Walsh was forced to delete a tweet. Several Egyptians have also been detained on charges of spreading false rumors.

Egypt did impose strict measures, including the closure of all educational institutions and the suspension of flights, on March 15, the day the scientists published their findings. The government also announced a \$6.38 billion fund to fight the virus.

A World Health Organization (WHO) official in Cairo [said](#) the group could not verify the scientists' methodology but added that "it is possible that there are many other cases with mild symptoms which did not result in hospital visits, and therefore are not detected or reported."

Independent reporting is a crucial node in an effective early warning system. It creates pressure for a timely response. The effort to suppress it was in line with Egyptian general-turned-president Abdel Fattah Sisi's initial reaction to the virus.

Rather than focusing on early preventive measures at home, Sisi sought to benefit from China's predicament.

With only one officially confirmed case of a Chinese national arriving in February at Cairo Airport, an individual who was hospitalized and who recovered, Sisi sent his health minister, Hala Zayed, to China to praise it for preventing a far worse global outbreak by taking very strong precautionary measures. This was done despite Beijing's costly failure to confront the disease firmly from the outset.

Pakistan's approach in recent months was no less negligent than that of Egypt.

Like Egypt, a country in which the power of the military is thinly camouflaged by hollowed-out institutions, Pakistan waffled until last week in its response to the pandemic.

In a bid to earn brownie points in Beijing, the Pakistani government refused early on to evacuate some 800 students from Wuhan. It also failed to manage the return of potentially infected pilgrims from Iran. And finally, it catered to ultra-conservative groups.

As a result, Pakistan, a deeply religious country that borders on both China and Iran, allowed Tablighi Jamaat, a proselytizing group with a huge global following in some 80 countries that is banned in Saudi Arabia, to continue organizing mass events.

The group organized a 16,000-person mass gathering in early March in Malaysia where scores were infected with the coronavirus.

Hundreds of Tablighi gathered from March 21 to 23 in the Mardan District of Pakistan's Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province to pray, listen to speeches, and eat and sleep in congested quarters.

One participant, professing his belief that God would protect the Tablighi, described spending almost six weeks together with thousands of others at Tablighi headquarters near Lahore, a city of 11 million, just before traveling to Mardan.

Pakistan Religious Affairs Minister Noor-ul-Haq Qadri caved in to demands by the clergy to keep mosques open but capped the maximum number of people at prayers at five.

The minister's concession reinforced a popular perception that the Pakistani government viewed the virus crisis as less grave than what was being projected by health authorities across the globe.

"If the pandemic was serious, the government would've shut down all the mosques," said Sadiq Bhutt, speaking through an interpreter, as he entered a mosque in Islamabad for Friday prayers.

Ultimately, the Pakistan military overrode government policy and intervened to impose a lockdown like that which is being conducted by much of the rest of the world.

But as in Egypt it may be too late for Pakistan, which is both the world's most populous Muslim nation (207 million) and ill-equipped for a pandemic.

Ultimately, the lesson of Egypt's, Pakistan's, and China's initial handling of coronavirus is that neither self-serving autocrats nor authoritarians have the wherewithal to confront a crisis like a pandemic

in a timely fashion. Their much-delayed responses failed to take the public's interests to heart, focusing instead on the interests of elites that prioritize geopolitical or political advantage.

Western democracies have not performed much better, with President Donald Trump seemingly more concerned about economic impact in an election year than about public health and people's lives.

The difference is that western democracies have the ability to hold leaders to account and implement lessons learned from the costly mismanagement of the coronavirus pandemic.

It's hard to hold out a similar hope for Arab autocracies or countries like Pakistan whose democratic façade is at best skin deep.

Coronavirus, China, and the Middle East

by Dr. Mordechai Chaziza

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:The Middle East was already plagued by war, famine, and wholesale death in the form of multiple civil wars when the outbreak of Covid-19, a novel coronavirus, added pestilence to the mix. The pandemic offers a unique prism through which to assess the way China interacts with Middle Eastern states in time of crisis. While many countries in the Middle East suspended bilateral air travel, repatriated their citizens from China, and prevented Chinese workers from returning to the region, the same governments also sought to maintain close relations, expressed support for Beijing, and delivered aid to China. The findings show that at least for now, the relationship between China and the Middle Eastern states remains close. However, it may take months to see the full ramifications of the pandemic in the Middle East, so it is too soon to tell how China's interactions with the countries of the region will develop.

Introduction

In December 2019, a mysterious outbreak of infectious disease occurred in the central Chinese city of Wuhan (Hubei Province). Cases soon began to surface in other Chinese cities as well. As this novel coronavirus (officially designated as COVID-19) moved beyond China's borders, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared it a pandemic (a disease that spreads in multiple countries around the world simultaneously). COVID-19, which is spread through social contact, is now present in 213 other countries and territories around the world.¹

The outbreak has become a major international health crisis, with official figures indicating over 6,156,438 worldwide cases of infection and over 370,000 deaths by the end of May 2020.² However, the actual infection and mortality figures may be far higher due to under-reporting.

In the first months of the outbreak, the Middle East rapidly became the second-most hard-hit region after China. Every Middle Eastern country has had confirmed cases. According to the International Monetary Fund (IMF), vulnerable populations, particularly the poor, are likely to suffer disproportionately as they may have less access to health care and lower savings with which to protect themselves from financial catastrophe.³ Many countries in the region appear to be unprepared to handle a health crisis like COVID-19, and the outbreak could potentially prove catastrophic to millions of people affected by war and refugee crises in places such as Syria, Yemen, and Iraq.⁴ According to UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) data, around 7.4 million refugees and 9.3 million IDPs (internally displaced persons) are scattered across Turkey, Syria, Jordan, Iran, Iraq, Israel, and Lebanon.⁵

The vast majority of countries in the region, including Iraq, Bahrain, Iran, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Turkey and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), have closed schools and universities, suspended football leagues, canceled cultural events of world importance (for example, the Qatar Grand Prix and the Ultra festival in the UAE), and suspended all commercial flights until further notice. Some have imposed bans on citizens traveling to specific countries to stop the spread of coronavirus. Bars and cafes have been shuttered, prayers and traditional religious events have been canceled, and religious sites have been closed (e.g., the al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem, the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, and the Shiite Muslim shrine in Karbala, Iraq). There is concern that coronavirus has infiltrated a main pilgrimage route in the Middle East, which could lead the deadly pathogen to infect vulnerable refugee populations. If this occurs, it could cause unprecedented public health crises across the region.⁶

The capacity to contain the virus depends on the strength and effectiveness of the governments and public health systems of the Middle East countries (see Table 1).

Table 1: Government effectiveness scores and credit ratings for key Middle East countries

Country	Government effectiveness	Credit rating
Iran	38	+B
Turkey	54	-BB
Israel	86	A+
Saudi Arabia	65	A
Qatar	75	-AA
UAE	90	AA
Egypt	31	+B
Iraq	9	-B
Lebanon	26	(RD (default
Bahrain	60	-BB
Kuwait	50	AA
Jordan	75	-BB
Oman	60	BB
Palestinian Authority	21	Not rated
Syria	3	Not rated
Yemen	0.5	Not rated

Sources: World Bank, Worldwide governance indicators (2018); Fitch ratings. (1) = percentile rank (0-100). (2) = AA+ to AA- = high grade; A+ to A- = upper medium grade; BB+ to BB- = non-investment grade speculative; B+ to B- = highly speculative.

According to WHO, most Middle East states rank relatively high among the world's 191 health systems, with a few exceptions, such as Syria, ranked 108th, and Yemen, ranked 120th (see Table 2).

**Table 2: Overall health system efficiency
in Middle East WHO member states**

Country	Rank	Index
Oman	8	0.691
Saudi Arabia	26	0.894
UAE	27	0.886
Israel	28	0.884
Bahrain	42	0.824
Qatar	44	0.812
Kuwait	45	0.810
Egypt	63	0.752
Turkey	70	0.734
Jordan	83	0.698
Lebanon	91	0.664
Iran	93	0.659
Iraq	103	0.637
Syria	108	0.628
Yemen	120	0.587

Sources: Ajay Tandon, Christopher J. L. Murray, Jeremy A. Lauer, and David B. Evan. “Measuring Overall Health System Performance for 191 Countries,” in GPE Discussion Paper Series: No. 30, ELP/GPC/EQC, The World Health Report 2000, June 21, 2000.

Some Middle Eastern countries might face particular difficulty in fighting the spread of coronavirus.⁷ Civil wars in Syria and Yemen will almost certainly impede the proper functioning of their health systems. The unilateral US sanctions on Iran may hurt its ability to buy the technology required to produce essential equipment and medicine to contain the spread of the disease.⁸ Its exponential spread could stress 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 and Yemen where hospitals have been the targets of devastating airstrikes.⁹

At this writing, coronavirus continues to spread across the Middle East. Official figures indicate over 581,000 cases of infection, 191,741 active cases, and 14,802 reported deaths by the end of May (see Table 3).

Table 3:
Coronavirus in the Middle East Government effectiveness scores

Country	Cases	Recovered	Deaths	Active
Turkey	163,103	126,984	4,515	31,604
Iran	148,950	116,827	7,734	24,389
Saudi Arabia	83,384	58,883	480	24,021
Qatar	55,262	25,839	36	29,387
UAE	33,896	17,546	262	16,088
Kuwait	26,192	10,156	205	15,831
Egypt	23,449	5,693	913	16,843
Israel	17,012	14,811	284	1,917
Bahrain	10,793	5,826	17	4,950
Oman	10,423	2,396	42	7,985
Iraq	6,179	3,110	195	2,874
Lebanon	1,191	708	26	457
Jordan	734	507	9	218
Palestinian Territories	447	368	3	76
Yemen	310	13	77	220
Syria	122	43	4	75
TOTAL	581,447	389,706	14,802	191,741

Source: Worldometers, May 31, 2020.

Compared to America, Europe, or Africa, the numbers of cases of infection and reported deaths in the Middle East are significantly lower, though the real figures are likely to be higher as there is no reliable reporting from most of its countries because of conflict, official denial, or both. During Ramadan (April 23-May 23), many countries relaxed their measures, which

further strained capacities. This resulted in a dramatic increase in vectors of contagion, particularly in Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and the UAE.¹⁰

The UAE was the first Middle Eastern country to report a coronavirus-positive case, but the most significant numbers of infections and fatalities have been in Turkey, followed by Iran and Saudi Arabia.¹¹ Turkey has the tenth-highest number of reported COVID-19 cases in the world after the US, Spain, Russia, Britain, Italy, Brazil, France, Germany, and India, and the highest number in the Middle East (163,103 cases of infection, 31,604 active cases, and 4,515 deaths as of May 31). Turkey, which is located on the transit point between Asia and Europe, recorded its first official case on March 11, 2020, after which the virus spread rapidly.¹²

In twelfth place is Iran. The Islamic Republic was a significant source of imported cases in other countries in the area, such as Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan, among others (148,950 cases of infection, 24,389 active cases, and 7,734 deaths). There is serious concern that the true number of infections in Iran is much higher than the number of confirmed cases reported by the government, which is struggling to contain and manage the pandemic. The seriousness of the coronavirus situation in Iran raised fears across the region—in Lebanon, Turkey, Iraq, Kuwait, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and other countries—that the virus could be brought to their countries by Shiite pilgrims traveling to or from Iran.¹³

This study will examine the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the Middle East and assess whether it will affect China's relationships with the region. Is the ongoing outbreak functioning as a stress fracture in those relationships? What should China do to maintain close relations with countries in the region? The COVID-19 pandemic offers a unique prism through which to assess the ways in which China interacts with Middle Eastern countries in time of crisis.

The pandemic's impact on the Middle East

Owing to its geographical location and centrality to Eurasian trade networks, the Middle East has historically been a conduit for the spread of disease. The COVID-19 pandemic is the second coronavirus outbreak to affect the Middle East region. (Coronaviruses are a large family of viruses that include the common cold, Severe Acute Respiratory

Syndrome [SARS], and Middle East Respiratory Syndrome [MERS-CoV]). The MERS virus was first reported in Saudi Arabia in 2012 (more than 2,000 cases) and has since spread to several other countries in the Arabian Peninsula. It has also appeared in the US. More than 800 people have died from the MERS virus.¹⁴

One reason why the Middle East is uniquely at risk of an outbreak of a pandemic is the constant, routine mass migration of people from one country to another, whether for religious, economic, or safety reasons. Every year, Muslims travel by the millions to the holy cities of Mecca and Medina for the *hajj* and *umra* pilgrimages, while Shiite Muslims in particular make pilgrimages to holy shrines in Iraq and Iran. Qom, a major pilgrim destination, is one of the epicenters of the outbreak in Iran. Thousands of pilgrims from other countries with Shiite Muslim populations may have been exposed to the virus in that city before the outbreak was detected and made public.¹⁵

Moreover, the region is also home to millions of expatriate workers who frequently travel to and from their home countries. These extensive economic links create additional opportunities for a pandemic to spread. Given that Dubai and Abu Dhabi are both global financial centers and major hubs for international travel, it is no surprise that the coronavirus pandemic arrived early in the UAE (a family of four Chinese tourists in the Emirates were the first cases in the Mideast)¹⁶. In 2019, the number of foreign visitors to Dubai increased 5.1% to 16.7 million, helped by a 15.5% rise in the number of Chinese tourists (989,000).¹⁷

According to the WHO-World Bank joint report, the estimated total cost of a global influenza pandemic is 2.2-4.8% of global GDP (\$3 trillion).¹⁸ The novel coronavirus has had a significant impact on Middle East economies that are already struggling with severe economic strain, political instability, and conflict. Cascading crises are feeding into one another, creating an interconnected web of catastrophe. These countries are not facing one crisis; they are facing two or three simultaneously.¹⁹

Governments around the Middle East are trying to contain COVID-19 with measures aimed at limiting human contact as much as possible. The main fear is the explosion of critical cases to a level that could overwhelm local healthcare systems. While measures seem to be

working to varying degrees in each country, the damage they are causing to the countries' economies has yet to be measured. Middle Eastern governments have to tread a fine line between fighting the pandemic effectively while at the same time making sure their economies do not collapse. The outbreak is having a major impact on the oil and gas industries, the civil war and refugee crises, the travel and tourism industry, the BRI, and the capital markets.

Oil and gas industries

The coronavirus pandemic is dramatically affecting one of the Middle East's most critical industries: oil. Many nations in the region rely heavily on oil and gas revenues, so a decline in the prices of petroleum-related products is expected to be the most significant economic channel through which the effects of the pandemic are felt. In recent years, the depletion of foreign currency reserves and uncertainty about future oil prices forced Gulf oil producers to adopt restraint in their economic policy, which has entailed streamlining and cost-cutting measures. Various government agencies were instructed to cut spending on new projects and return unused budget allocations to the Ministry of Finance. The Gulf States are increasingly seeking to escape their profound dependence on oil revenues through streamlining, diversification of revenue sources, and adoption of the principles of a modern economy.

The main difficulty in converting and diversifying the oil-based Gulf economies is that the political and social stability of those countries is directly related to the high standard of living of their citizens, which is supported by oil money.²⁰ Economic or social instability in the Gulf States could influence or even threaten regional stability.

Oil is a leading export product of the Gulf producers, and oil prices have declined sharply since COVID-19 appeared in China. The price of Brent oil plummeted from \$68.9 a barrel on January 1 to \$22.7 a barrel on 31 March. Crude oil futures for May 2020 tumbled to \$20.4 a barrel in anticipation of the negative impact of the pandemic on oil demand.²¹ Other factors might have contributed to this drop, including the oil price war launched by Saudi Arabia with Russia that has cratered prices, threatening economies across the region.²² However, coronavirus was probably the most important factor, mainly because of the significant

drop in demand from China as authorities shuttered production facilities as part of their efforts to contain the spread of the virus. The recovery of oil prices will depend on how successfully China and other countries control the spread of the virus, the effects of which are now global.

The pandemic-related curbing of China's voracious hunger for oil has left Middle East producers with too much produced crude. According to Bloomberg, Chinese oil demand has dropped by about 3 million barrels per day (20% of total consumption) as coronavirus squeezes the local economy.²³ The Chinese energy market's response to the health crisis is highly reactionary, given that it is not yet clear how deadly the disease will be or what the long-term impacts will be on the Chinese economy and commodities. Currently, almost half of China's oil imports are sourced from the Middle East, principally from the Persian Gulf. In 2019, roughly half (44.8%) of Chinese imported crude oil originated from nine Middle Eastern countries, ranging from \$386 million from Egypt up to \$40 billion for Saudi Arabia.²⁴

Energy, centering on the crude oil and petrochemical industries, is at the heart of the growing links between China and the Persian Gulf. The strength of the relationship between the People's Republic and the region depends on energy (though it extends to other commodities). China is highly dependent upon oil and gas imports, principally from the Persian Gulf and Africa, which are carried mainly by tanker over sea lanes of communication (SLOCs) and run through maritime chokepoints. Beijing's dependence on crude oil imports from the Persian Gulf has been increasing gradually since 1993, when it became a net importer of oil.²⁵

China buys up around one-fifth of its energy demand, making it a major customer for Gulf oil producers. Saudi Arabia is a particularly large supplier (16.8% of China's total imported crude oil), with imports from the Gulf oil producers reaching 44.2% in 2019.²⁶ According to Reuters, China bought approximately 1.67 million barrels per day (83.32 million tons of crude oil) from Saudi Arabia in 2019.²⁷ In November 2019, Saudi Aramco signed crude oil sales agreements for 2020 with five Chinese customers, increasing total volume by 151,000 barrels per day compared to its 2019 supply contracts.²⁸

According to the IMF 2020 report, Gulf economies that fail to diversify could see approximately \$2.5 trillion in accumulated wealth crumble away within 15 years as global oil demand drops.²⁹ For this reason, all the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries have embarked upon development programs to promote sustainable economic diversification. They are looking to diversify or entirely rebuild their economies, increase trade, attract more foreign direct investment, and increase their global market presence for alternative sources of revenue in the wake of low oil prices.

However, the success of their vision will depend to a great extent on revenue from energy exports to build their post-energy sectors, and lower oil prices in recent years strain those efforts.³⁰ The Gulf states are primarily reliant on energy revenue to drive their economies, with 85-90% of federal budget revenues coming from energy exports. According to the US Energy Information Administration (EIA), most Gulf energy crude oil exports are sold to East Asia.³¹

According to the International Energy Agency's (IEA) latest oil market forecast, global oil demand is expected to decline in 2020 as the impact of COVID-19 spreads around the world, constricting travel and broader economic activity. The IEA expects global demand for oil to fall by 435,000 barrels per day year-on-year in the first quarter of 2020—the first quarterly contraction in more than a decade. Global demand for all of 2020 is expected to fall by 365,000 barrels per day, which would be the worst performance since 2011.³² Moreover, the outbreak of a novel coronavirus prompted OPEC in March 2020 to consider an additional cut in oil production of 1.5 million barrels per day until the end of the year as an emergency measure on top of the 1.7 million barrels per day already pledged.³³ On April 12, OPEC, Russia, and other oil-producing states agreed to cut production by nearly 10 million barrels per day, a record. The group agreed to gradually decrease the curbs in production through April 2022.

Obviously, China plays an important and growing role in the global economy, so any setbacks in its economic activity and growth are likely to cause significant negative spillover into the global economy. Fear and uncertainty about the spread of the virus are likely to hurt investment

decisions in China and in other countries, which will lower oil prices further. According to the Oil Market Report for February 2020 (IEA), global oil demand has been hard hit by the novel coronavirus and the widespread shutdown of China's economy. Beijing's oil demand in 2019 accounts for 13.7 million barrels per day (14% of global demand) compared to 5.7 million barrels per day in 2003. Its growth in oil demand currently accounts for more than 75% of the global growth in demand.³⁴

The COVID-19 outbreak is also affecting liquefied natural gas (LNG) demand. The Middle East is a key source of China's LNG, and Qatar—the world's largest supplier of LNG—is one of China's biggest suppliers.³⁵ According to Independent Commodity Intelligence Service (ICIS) estimates, there has been a 2.9 million ton drop in China's LNG demand so far in 2020. ICIS forecasts that total China LNG demand for 2020 will be 65.5 million tons, with 2021 imports expected to rise to 71.8 million tons. ICIS notes that the spread of the virus will have a significant negative impact on the industrial, power generation, transport, and commercial sectors in China.³⁶

Civil wars and refugee crises

While many countries in the Middle East are unprepared to handle health crises to varying degrees, the COVID-19 pandemic has the potential to be truly catastrophic to the millions of people in the region affected by war and refugee crises in places such as Syria (122 cases of infection, 75 active cases, and four reported deaths); Yemen (310 cases of infection, 220 active cases, and 77 reported deaths); and Iraq (6,179 cases of infection, 2,874 active cases, and 195 reported deaths). Among the many challenges faced by countries in the region, the protection of refugees is particularly difficult. This is because they are likely to suffer from two contagions: coronavirus and misinformation about coronavirus.

Several factors make refugees vulnerable to the outbreak. First, they tend to live in areas with high population density, including refugee camps and ethnic enclaves in large cities. Not only do they reside in these high-density areas, but they are often in economically precarious situations that prevent them from staying home. As a result, for both demographic and economic reasons, refugees typically cannot engage in social distancing

measures. In addition, refugee camps often suffer severe shortages of water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) infrastructure, so actions like frequent hand-washing are difficult if not impossible to perform.³⁷

The failed states that contain dense refugee enclaves also have a high risk of massive coronavirus outbreaks. As noted, the virus can spread rapidly in the confines of displaced person camps, and refugees on the move are difficult to keep track of. This makes the spread of the virus impossible to contain or monitor. At this writing, there are over 6.2 million internally displaced people in Syria (including 2.5 million children)³⁸ and 4 million in Yemen (the worst humanitarian crisis worldwide). Millions more refugees from these war zones are scattered in other countries throughout the region.³⁹

The governments of these countries are particularly ill-equipped to handle health crises or epidemics as the conflicts they are experiencing have severely weakened their health systems. Even as they face complex emergencies, they are burdened with weak health systems, weak infrastructures, and weak capacity to respond in comparison to the wealthy Arab Gulf countries. International health and refugee organizations are aware of the dangers and are trying to prevent disaster, but their efforts may not be enough.⁴⁰

In northwestern Syria, the recently intensified fighting in Syria's Idlib and Aleppo provinces has forced as many as 948,000 people, mostly women and children, from their homes since early December 2019.⁴¹ Many of these internally displaced people are living in acutely precarious circumstances with inadequate shelter (if any), limited supplies of food and medicine, and increasingly inadequate health facilities. Although Syria had only 122 reported COVID-19 infections by the end of May 2020 (a highly dubious figure according to health experts), the already poor health of this population and their lack of access to health care puts them at higher risk of becoming seriously ill or dying from the virus.⁴²

The travel and tourism industry

According to the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC), the coronavirus pandemic could cut 50 million jobs worldwide in the travel and tourism industry. The Asian continent is expected to be the worst affected (around 30 million of these job losses would be in Asia, seven million in Europe, five million in the Americas, and the rest in other continents). Once the outbreak is over, it could take up to 10 months for the tourism industry to recover to its normal levels (airlines and cruise ships are currently more affected than hotels). The travel and tourism industry currently accounts for 10% of global GDP.⁴³

The sharp decline in travel and tourism caused by the COVID-19 pandemic threatens Middle Eastern countries in several ways. It exposes the weakness of their reliance on fees as a source of government revenue, and as the Gulf region is a major transit hub for passengers connecting from Europe to Asia, canceled or limited flights have a severe local impact. Dubai, for example, which is home to the world's busiest airport for international travel, relies heavily on tourism and aviation. In 2019, Dubai attracted 16.7 million tourists and set a target of 20 million tourists for 2020.⁴⁴ The coronavirus outbreak and subsequent travel restrictions are dampening those figures at just the time when the country is striving to reduce oil dependency. Dubai had also hoped to attract 11 million foreign visitors to attend Expo 2020 (the total expenditure for which approaches around \$9 billion), but that event has been canceled as a preventive measure.⁴⁵

Saudi Arabia is the second-biggest tourist destination in the Middle East. Over 17.7 million people visited in 2018, a figure forecast to increase to 23.3 million in 2023. The travel and tourism sector is expected to contribute \$70.9 billion in total to the country's GDP.⁴⁶ Although there has been growth in the leisure tourism sector, most tourism in Saudi Arabia continues to involve religious pilgrimages.⁴⁷ The religious tourism sector has flourished in line with increasing demand to join the *hajj*, the most important religious event of the year in the Muslim world. This should help Saudi Arabia offset its recent losses in oil revenue.

However, since the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic, the kingdom has taken the unprecedented step of suspending visas for visits to Islam's holiest sites (e.g., the Prophet's mosque in Medina) for the *umra* pilgrimage. This raises questions about the *hajj*. Saudi Arabia has also suspended visas for tourists from countries affected by the virus as fears of the pandemic deepen. Further, according to the SPA news agency, the kingdom has imposed a temporary ban not only on visitors but also on locals and residents performing the *umra* over virus fears.⁴⁸ In Bahrain, in the wake of the coronavirus outbreak, a decision was made to cancel the Formula One Bahrain Grand Prix, a blow to the Gulf State's vital tourism sector.⁴⁹

The ongoing spread of COVID-19 has forced Turkey to close its borders and ground all outgoing and incoming flights, which has affected the country's vital tourism industry. In 2019, the number of tourists visiting Turkey increased by 13.7% to reach a record 51.8 million people. The country had set the goal of hosting 75 million visitors by 2023. According to the Turkish Statistical Institute (TUIK), the country was likely to earn \$34.5 billion from tourism alone, marking a historic milestone. Before the pandemic, Turkish cities were teeming with both locals and tourists. Now, most squares and historical and natural tourist sites are almost completely deserted.⁵⁰

Turkey was hit by the coronavirus pandemic at a time when its economy was already suffering from a weak currency, a high budget deficit, high inflation, a fragile financial system, and a dwindling central bank reserve. Given the major share the tourism sector contributes to the Turkish economy (in 2019, Turkey was the sixth-most visited country in the world), Ankara's pandemic-created economic woes are only set to increase as summer comes unless the crisis is soon contained.⁵¹

In recent years, Egypt's tourism industry—a key to the country's economy—had shown signs of recovery after the 2011 revolution, the 2013 coup, and the 2015 downing of a Russian airliner by the Islamic State group, all of which took their toll on visitor arrivals. Though still far off the 14.7 million recorded in 2010, Egypt welcomed 11.3 million arrivals in 2018 compared with just 5.3 million in 2016.⁵² Tourism revenues in Egypt jumped by more than 28% to reach about \$12.2 billion

in fiscal year 2018-19 compared to \$9.8 billion in fiscal year 2017-18.⁵³ According to the Central Bank of Egypt (CBE), the tourism industry was the country's third source of national income after remittances from Egyptians abroad, which ranked first (\$26.4 billion), followed by non-oil exports (\$17.1 billion).⁵⁴

The Egyptian government's preventive safety measures, set up in response to the coronavirus outbreak, have led to a sharp decline in the tourism industry. Egypt is now losing an estimated \$1 billion per month in lost tourist revenue.⁵⁵

According to the UN World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), 1.5 billion tourists visited foreign countries in 2019. This represents a 4% increase over the previous year—the same figure forecast for 2020, confirming tourism as a leading and resilient economic sector, especially given current uncertainties. The Middle East emerged as the fastest-growing region for international tourism arrivals in 2019, growing at almost double the global average (more than 8%). While growth in the Asia-Pacific region slowed down, it still showed above-average growth, with international arrivals up 5%.⁵⁶

China has been the world's leading source of international tourists since 2012. According to the National Bureau of Statistics, 2019 saw around 169.2 million outbound trips from China (a rise of 4.5% from 2018).⁵⁷ Chinese tourists, the world's largest spenders, accounted for \$277 billion of international tourism spending, or 16% of the world's total \$1.7 trillion. In the 2020s, this number is expected to double as passport ownership in China increases from the current 10% of the population to a projected 20%.⁵⁸ The China Outbound Tourism Research Institute is projecting a +7% year-on-year increase in outbound trips from mainland China in 2020 (a total of 181 million trips).

The majority of international, especially intercontinental, travel by Chinese is done for non-leisure (i.e., business) purposes. It is expected that after the coronavirus crisis has passed, most of these postponed international trips will be taken.⁵⁹

The ban on group trips and package bookings caused by the pandemic outbreak has had, and will continue to have, a dramatic impact on dozens

of destinations around the world. Two likely effects will specifically affect Chinese travelers to the Middle East. First, many Middle Eastern countries are now imposing travel restrictions on Chinese travelers and have suspended their China flights.⁶⁰ As noted, Saudi Arabia has suspended the entry of pilgrims to its holy sites, further reducing tourism to the region.⁶¹ According to Census and Economic Information Center data, across the Middle East, 2.4 million Chinese visitors traveled to the region last year, comprising 2.7% of the region's total of 91 million tourists. In the UAE, which has the highest volume of Chinese tourists anywhere in the Middle East, one in every 16 visitors to the country is from China, or 6% of its total tourism.⁶²

Second, the economic slowdown in China implies fewer tourists traveling anywhere abroad, including the Middle East. The Tourism Economics company downgraded its 2020 forecast for Chinese departures because of coronavirus. According to their estimates, if the outbreak lasts longer and is more severe than the 2003 SARS crisis, it could lead to 25 million fewer outbound trips by Chinese travelers this year (wiping out \$73 billion in spending).

The global airline industry is also facing substantial financial losses and its first traffic decline in more than a decade because of the pandemic. The International Air Transport Authority warned that COVID-19 could reduce global traffic by 4.7% and cost airlines more than \$29 billion. Tourism Economics forecasts that China's outbound and domestic travel markets will not fully recover until about 2023.⁶³

The absence of Chinese travelers will be felt most dramatically across East Asia and the Asia-Pacific, which depend heavily on Chinese tourism, while parts of Europe and the Americas will also feel the pressure. The effect of China's economic slowdown on tourist arrivals to the Middle East is expected to be more limited. Only 2.4 million Chinese visitors traveled to the region out of 150 million Chinese tourists. However, the loss of a significant income source like the Chinese tourism market, even if only temporary, can cause pain to Middle Eastern economies.

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)

China's most significant 21st century diplomatic and economic activity is the launching of the new Silk Road project, dubbed the Belt and Road

Initiative (BRI). The BRI, a sprawling framework of trade and commercial ties between China and various world regions, is the flagship foreign policy of the Xi administration. The BRI seeks to open up new markets and secure global supply chains to help generate sustained Chinese economic growth and thereby contribute to social stability at home.⁶⁴

The BRI, the most ambitious geo-economic vision in recent history, has both a maritime and a land-based component. The maritime element is the Maritime Silk Road Initiative (MSRI), and the land-based equivalent is the Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB). The different sub-branches of the SREB (a series of land-based infrastructure projects including roads, railways, and pipelines) and the MSRI (made up of ports and coastal development) would create a multinational network connecting China to Europe and Africa via the Middle East. This is intended to facilitate trade, improve access to foreign energy resources, and give China access to new markets. The two schemes are inseparable, and Beijing wants to implement them in parallel.⁶⁵

The scope of the BRI is broad, covering more than 72 countries along six economic corridors. The BRI's six main economic corridors include the New Eurasian Land Bridge; the China-Central Asia-West Asia Economic Corridor; the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor; the Bangladesh-China-Myanmar Economic Corridor; the China-Mongolia-Russia Economic Corridor, and the China-Indochina Peninsula Economic Corridor. The BRI covers two-thirds of the world's population, 40% of global GNP, and an estimated 75% of known energy reserves.⁶⁶ The total cost of the initiative is not clear, but according to some estimates, \$8 trillion will be invested.⁶⁷

In the last decade, Beijing has become increasingly involved in the Middle East, especially the Persian Gulf. Almost all states in the region are looking to China as a promising market and a provider of investment and finance without the political conditions regarding democracy and human rights that Western countries and institutions tend to insist on. China has, of course, been economically active in the Middle East, especially the Persian Gulf, for more than three decades, but its engagement has increased substantially along with its economic growth and its more assertive position in the global economy.

The economic relationships between China and the Middle Eastern nations have strengthened, including finance and investment, to complement the increasingly robust trade component. Not surprisingly, interests have consequently become more complex. Chinese leaders increasingly see the Middle East as strategically important, and Middle Eastern politicians look eastward more and more as they contemplate their long-term interests. The BRI is creating more opportunities for cooperation, and the China-Middle East nexus is becoming an essential geopolitical axis in understanding Eurasian international affairs.

The Middle East region brings together the land and maritime Silk Road in a unique geographical location with diverse and complex humanitarian, religious, and ethnic factors. As an energy-rich zone, it plays a decisive role in the building of the BRI. The region also plays a prominent role in security coordination, economic cooperation, and cultural exchanges under the BRI framework. The Chinese government is therefore paying attention to the role of the Middle East in the construction of its BRI vision.⁶⁸

The Middle East is situated at the heart of the BRI: not only do the three continents of Asia, Africa, and Europe meet there, but the Mediterranean Sea, the Red Sea, the Arabian Sea, the Caspian Sea, and the Black Sea also converge there. It is adjacent to the four maritime strategic channels of the Bosphorus, the Dardanelles, Bab al-Mandeb, and the Hormuz. The Gulf countries can be referred to as the core of the region as they are the most influential countries in the Middle East. The Gulf's advantageous location, unique endowment of natural resources, and vast industrialization potential make it of supreme strategic importance to the implementation of the BRI.⁶⁹

The BRI framework could indeed explain the outbreak of the novel coronavirus in the Middle East, as China now has a greater physical presence in the region as it develops and constructs BRI infrastructure and multiplies its energy, investment, and cultural exchanges with the region. For example, because of Western sanctions, the Islamic Republic turned to Chinese workers to construct infrastructure in the area that ultimately served as the Middle Eastern vector of the disease. The first cases of the virus in the region were traced to the holy city of Qom, 140 km south of

Tehran and home to 1.2 million people. Qom receives business travelers and Islamic pilgrims from all over the globe and has the highest number of Shiite Muslim clerical students in the world (hundreds of whom are Chinese nationals). A Chinese company has been constructing a solar power plant in Qom. According to an Iranian Health Ministry official, the source of the virus was probably Chinese nationals who work in Qom and had recently traveled to China.⁷⁰

In Israel, Beijing has in recent years become the dominant force in the construction industry. In November 2016, five Chinese construction giants won Israeli government tenders to build and manage residential housing construction projects.⁷¹ In January 2017, after years of fruitless negotiations, Israel and China signed a final agreement that paved the way toward bringing 20,000 Chinese professional construction workers to Israel in the coming years.⁷²

During the first six months of the agreement, some 6,000 workers were expected to arrive in Israel. By March 2020, 3,500 of them had arrived, with another 700 commissioned by contractors and expected to arrive. The Israeli cabinet, motivated by coronavirus concerns, has approved extending the visas of 1,700 Chinese construction workers in order to retain them rather than replace them with new workers from China. As a result of the pandemic, 1,000 Chinese workers who were to have arrived in Israel starting in February 2020 will be unable to come. The Israeli Population and Immigration Authority has approved the residence status of 2,200 long-employed Chinese workers, most of whom have been in Israel for over 12 years.⁷³

The Levant region is of vital importance to Beijing's ambitious Silk Road strategy. The region, a subset of the Middle East, is geographically situated at the very heart of the proposed BRI, with routes connecting Asia to Africa, Europe, and the Mediterranean. The Levant offers an alternative route through the Suez Canal to the Mediterranean Sea through the China-Central Asia-West Asia economic corridor.⁷⁴

The BRI has become the main focus of strategic and economic engagement between Beijing and countries in the Persian Gulf region. The Gulf countries are key partners and play significant roles

in the successful implementation of the BRI due to their geostrategic location, vast reserves of oil and gas, and fast and steady economic growth. The Gulf also represents a rapid expansion of the market for consumer and merchandise goods, of which China has plenty.⁷⁵

In the GCC countries, the monarchies have begun applying stringent measures to contain the spread of the coronavirus pandemic. These countries can rely on their healthcare systems, which are some of the most efficient in the region and are freely and easily accessible to all citizens. As such, the GCC will likely be able to manage COVID-19 from a healthcare perspective, in light of the stringent social distancing measures they have applied throughout the crisis. With that said, there remains a high risk of contagion in these countries' communities of foreign laborers, many of whom lack access to healthcare and live in conditions in which social distancing is not an option.

The great fear is that COVID-19 will continue to spread in the Middle East and cause BRI infrastructure projects to come to a halt. Beijing has repatriated citizens working in Iran due to the spread of the virus, a measure it could apply to any severely afflicted BRI host country in the Middle East.⁷⁶ Most countries in the region have placed entry restrictions on Chinese citizens or individuals traveling from China. The longer Chinese workers are unable to return to projects overseas, the longer BRI projects will languish, and some may be abandoned altogether.⁷⁷

BRI projects are also predominantly reliant on Chinese rather than local materials and supplies, and the coronavirus outbreak has hampered China's manufacturing supply chains.⁷⁸ At present, almost half of China's oil imports are sourced from the Middle East, principally from the Persian Gulf.⁷⁹ The pandemic has compromised the global supply chains that keep BRI projects moving forward, limiting the goods flowing out of China to the point that Beijing ran a trade deficit during the first two months of the year.⁸⁰ China's shuttered factories not only need workers to be released from quarantine to resume normal output but also restored supplies of raw materials, adequate stores of protective gear for workers, and active truckers and shipping ports to deliver goods abroad.⁸¹ The virus has also disrupted the global shipping industry to the point that more

tonnage of container ships was idled around the world in February than during the worst moments of the 2008 financial crisis.⁸²

Restrictive travel bans, port closures, canceled flights, and blocked roads have prevented Chinese workers from returning to BRI worksites abroad, while the shutdown of Chinese factories that supply machinery and raw materials for BRI projects has hindered projects from moving forward. These and other disruptions are causing delays, missed deadlines, and increased costs of infrastructure construction—damage local economies will find difficult to absorb.

COVID-19 will not be fatal to the implementation of BRI projects, but its fast and lethal spread will cause Middle Eastern governments to rethink the risks attached to ever more integration and economic dependence on China's infrastructure-based development strategy.

Capital markets

The coronavirus outbreak has depressed global financial markets and had severe implications for trade, supply chains, and economies globally. In the Middle East, the virus threatens to undercut local economies that are already battling a downturn and struggling to wean themselves from their decades-old addiction to energy revenues. On March 2, the regional stock market experienced a dizzying drop as panic over coronavirus surged across the region. In Saudi Arabia, the stock market (the region's largest and one of the world's top 10 equity markets) closed down 3.7% to its lowest level in 18 months. The energy giant Saudi Aramco (the world's biggest listed company) dropped 2.1% to 32.65 riyals (\$8.7), its worst performance since listing its record-breaking IPO. On the Kuwaiti exchange, the All-Share Index fell 10%, triggering its automatic closure. The Dubai Financial Market dipped 4.5% and the market in Abu Dhabi was down 3.6% at the close of trading. Bahrain's stock market ended 3.4% down and the Muscat Securities Market in Oman finished down 1.2% on a dismal day for the GCC bloc.⁸³

The COVID-19 pandemic could lead to reduced borrowing and lending, which would affect banks with a bearing on corporate and personal finance in Dubai and the Middle East. In the past, the Middle East has shown resilience, demonstrating an ability to weather outbreaks

(as in the case of MERS in 2012), but the region is now facing new challenges as it attempts to cope with the outbreak of coronavirus. The growing anticipation of a cyclical economic downturn accelerated by the impact of the pandemic has worsened credit quality and limited funding, placing higher pressure on the liquidity of financial institutions, particularly banks.⁸⁴

According to the Financial Times, China has received a wave of debt relief requests from BRI countries hit by the coronavirus (Iran, Egypt, and UAE in the Middle East). Beijing is considering several responses, including the suspension of interest payments on loans, but it warned against any expectation that it will simply write off countries' debts.

Most of the 138 nations that have officially joined the BRI are developing countries, many of which have the lowest credit ratings in the world. The RWR Advisory, a Washington-based consulting firm, has estimated that loans announced by Chinese financial institutions to BRI projects since 2013 total \$461 billion. This sum makes the initiative the world's largest development program by far.⁸⁵

The Sino-Middle Eastern relationship

The post-Cold War order has provided China, a rising power, with a unique strategic opportunity to develop power and influence in the Middle East without facing overt challenges from the US. Balancing against Washington during the unipolar era would not advance Beijing's interests, but at the same time, neither would bandwagoning or neutrality, neither of which is consistent with Chinese ambitions. Neither is dynamic balancing.⁸⁶ Instead, Beijing has taken advantage of the relative stability provided by US dominance to develop strong ties with strategically important states in the Middle East (e.g., Iran, Egypt, Turkey, UAE, and Saudi Arabia). These relations have been built mostly on economic foundations, but as they become increasingly multifaceted, there is a corresponding growth of strategic considerations.

Beijing has had to build a regional presence that does not alienate the US or any Middle Eastern states while pursuing its interests. Chinese diplomacy has provided the space to methodically build economic relations while the US security umbrella provides a low-cost entry to

the region. Economic ties have become increasingly multifaceted and sophisticated, beginning with trade but now also incorporating finance and investment. Relationships with Middle Eastern states have progressed beyond the economic to include political and security objectives, but in a way that has consistently allowed China the flexibility to be everyone's friend in the competitive regional environment.⁸⁷

Since 2013, Beijing has gradually constructed a multidimensional global partnership network that involves great powers, neighboring countries, developing countries, and regional organizations. These layered partnerships are interlinked and mutually reinforcing. China's involvement in the Middle East is a crucial component of its global partnership network. These relationships, spread across the eastern Mediterranean, the Gulf, and the Red Sea, fall into four broad categories in line with their importance. The first involves comprehensive strategic partnerships with Egypt, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE. The second includes an innovative, comprehensive partnership with Israel and a strategic cooperative relationship with Turkey (the latter being inferior to a strategic partnership). The third covers strategic partnerships with several midsized countries: Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Oman, and Qatar. The fourth involves a relationship with smaller states: Bahrain, Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen.

Governments in the Middle East generally welcome partnerships with Beijing because they say it treats them as equals rather than as junior partners or colonial proxies. Through its policy of non-interference in other states' internal affairs, nonalignment, and refusal to engage in proxy wars, Beijing has stayed on good terms with conflicting parties (for example, Iran and Saudi Arabia). It has managed to accomplish this because its partnerships do not harm or provoke third parties.⁸⁸

In the wake of the Arab uprisings and civil wars, Middle Eastern countries have been pressed to rebuild their economies or boost economic growth to maintain social stability. To this end, they have been actively rolling out plans for long-term development and rehabilitation, the impetus for which will be provided by comprehensive and upgraded Chinese engagement. There is thus a common interest for both Beijing and the Middle Eastern countries to integrate and synergize the new Silk Road

strategy with major initiatives and reforms for national rejuvenation (e.g., Saudi Arabia's, Qatar's, and Bahrain's respective Vision 2030s; UAE's Vision 2021, Jordan's Vision 2025, Oman's Vision 2020; Kuwait's Vision 2035; and Egypt's Vision 2030 and Suez Canal Corridor Development Project).⁸⁹

According to an internal Chinese report, Beijing faces a rising wave of US-led global hostility in the wake of the coronavirus outbreak that could tip Sino-US relations into confrontation (relations were already difficult before the crisis began, and it has made them worse). The report concluded that global anti-China sentiment is at its highest since the 1989 Tiananmen Square crackdown. As a result of this rise in hostility, Beijing will need to be prepared for the worst-case scenario of an armed confrontation between the two global powers.⁹⁰

As COVID-19 continues to spread across the Middle East, the key question is how the pandemic will affect relations between China and countries in the region. President Donald Trump posted a tweet on March 16, 2020 calling coronavirus the "Chinese virus,"⁹¹ and two days later defended the term during a press conference ("because it comes from China").⁹² (After a week, he decided to pull back from associating the pandemic with China.)⁹³ In the Middle East, the response of local governments to the spreading virus was completely different. Though they introduced measures to restrict travel between the region and China, they also demonstrated surprising solidarity with Beijing.

In the early days of the outbreak, the Gulf States publicly expressed support for and delivered aid to Beijing. Several countries in the Middle East, particularly Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the UAE, have delivered a massive amount of aid to China. Qatar Airways delivered five cargo freighters carrying 300 tons of medical supplies to Beijing, while the Saudis signed six contracts in early February to deliver medical supplies and devices to China.⁹⁴ Some Gulf States have made symbolic gestures of solidarity with the Chinese struggle with coronavirus. For example, Iran projected China's national flag and words of support onto its famous Azadi Tower, while Dubai's iconic Burj Khalifa was lit up in solidarity, displaying the Chinese flag as well as the phrase, "Let's go Wuhan!" in Chinese. The Chinese government has expressed thanks to its counterparts in the Gulf for these expressions of support.⁹⁵

In Israel, Magen David Adom (Israel's national EMS organization and largest humanitarian organization) contributed 2,000 masks and 200 full protection kits (special suits, masks, glasses, shoes, and head covers) to help prevent the spread of coronavirus in China. Also, the humanitarian organization IsraAID sent a shipment of emergency medical supplies and protective gear to the Chinese Ministry of Health on the last flight from Tel Aviv to mainland China.⁹⁶

In recent years, China has emerged as the most significant economic partner for the Middle Eastern states. According to China Customs Statistics on export-import, its trade volume with Middle Eastern countries increased to \$294.4 billion by 2019.⁹⁷ There has also been substantial political and diplomatic outreach in both directions. The support and aid sent by Middle Eastern countries to China as it struggles with the COVID-19 pandemic signal a clear message to one of their most strategically important partners.

It is worth remembering that China's initial response to the novel coronavirus outbreak was to cover it up and submit its people to harsh containment tactics. However, Beijing never lost sight of its need to promote its status and image around the world—particularly in the Middle East, where it is in the Chinese interest to strengthen the desire of local countries to work closely with and rely on it. Hence, China announced a \$20 million donation to the WHO, sent medical specialists and supplies (in the form of hundreds of thousands of masks and thousands of testing kits) to Iran,⁹⁸ Iraq, and Italy, and shipped protective garments and equipment to Pakistan, Laos, and the Philippines. It also pledged to “do whatever it can” to provide medical assistance to Ethiopia, Chile, Cuba, Egypt, and Belarus, as well as dozens of other countries.⁹⁹

China has also expanded its help to the wider Middle East region. Its doctors, nurses, and researchers have held conference calls with doctors in Abu Dhabi. It sent test kits and ventilators to the Palestinian Authority and human temperature measuring equipment to the Beirut airport and is establishing a testing laboratory in Baghdad. It has also been reported that Beijing will send equipment to Egypt. China provided test kits to

Syria and has called for sanctions against that country to be lifted to enable the government to act more effectively against the pandemic. The Palestinian Health Ministry has reportedly shown interest in applying the Chinese model of lockdowns for households and travel between population centers to deal with the pandemic.¹⁰⁰

Given China's economic weight and position in the global supply chain, as well as its status as a leading trading partner for the Middle East and role as the world's largest oil importer and consumer, mean the Middle Eastern states need China to return to normality as quickly as possible. It is thus hardly surprising that an effect of the coronavirus outbreak has been to foster comradeship and partnership between Beijing and Middle Eastern states as they combat a common enemy. The global pandemic looks set to worsen shortly and to negatively affect states in the Middle East. These countries need to work closely with China for their shared interest in bringing the pandemic to an end.

Conclusion

As the Covid-19 pandemic has swept across the Middle East, local governments have responded to the threat in various ways. Some, like the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Israel, have been ahead of the curve, taking a slew of preemptive measures to minimize infections. In other states, like Iran and Turkey, inadequate, delayed, and fragmented responses have resulted in their becoming epicenters of the spread of the virus. Syria and Yemen, meanwhile, cannot control the spread of the virus, as their governments have insufficient control of their countries to take the necessary steps to curb infections.

The pandemic's human costs notwithstanding, its impact on the Middle East will be felt first and foremost in the economic field as capital markets tumble, tourists evaporate amid flight bans and lockdowns, and oil prices contract. As an example of a follow-on effect, Chinese buyers are involved in a significant portion of real estate transactions in Dubai. With China still recovering from the virus, many Chinese buyers have postponed making new purchases. Given the bubble economy of Dubai, which had a glut of property even before the virus, that city-state is confronting economic catastrophe.¹⁰¹

The novel coronavirus pandemic is still underway, preventing a comprehensive study of its impact on the relationship between China and the Middle Eastern states. However, the outbreak offers a prism through which to assess the ways in which Beijing interacts with Middle Eastern states in time of crisis. It is too early to tell how the coronavirus outbreak will play out, when it will end, or how it will affect economic growth and stability in the Middle East in the longer term. As of the end of May 2020, the Middle East had 9.4% of total cases of infection in the world, 6.2% of total active cases, and 4% of total reported deaths (see Table 4).

Table 4: Covid-19 in the Middle East and the world

	Cases	Deaths	Active	Recovered
Worldwide	6,160,299	371,006	3,051,007	2,738,286
Middle East	581,447 (9.4%)	14,802 (4%)	191,741 (6.2%)	389,706 (14.2 %)

Source: Worldometers. These data are as of May 31, 2020.

Middle Eastern states' measures to curtail the spread of the virus will undoubtedly affect economic activity and stability in the short term, but it is far more speculative to make assumptions about longer term effects. It may take months to see how the ramifications of the virus will unfold in Middle Eastern countries. It is therefore too soon to tell how the interaction will develop between China and the countries of the region.

It is safe to say, however, that at least for now, the relationship between China and the Middle Eastern states is close and supportive in both directions at this difficult time. Beijing will likely continue to provide medical equipment and aid to those Middle Eastern countries that want it. So long as China does this while other, more traditional donors delay, it will not only be able to project itself as an early responder to the regional coronavirus outbreak rather than its source but also avoid scrutiny about the quantity and quality of its assistance, especially in countries that are skeptical of the West.¹⁰²

Economic considerations very much influence the underlying calculation behind the positive interaction of Middle Eastern states with China. Once

COVID-19 has been brought under control, countries still struggling to rebound from the related economic shocks could use the outbreak as an excuse to abandon unsuccessful or politically unpopular projects with China. Conversely, Beijing may find new opportunities to expand its footprint in countries seeking to foster economic development.

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Israel

A Tale of Two Leaders: Netanyahu During the Coronavirus Crisis and Ben-Gurion During the War of Independence

by Maj. Gen. (res.) Gershon Hacohen

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Criticism of the Israeli government's handling of the coronavirus crisis has focused on its "on the move" decision-making and lack of an "exit strategy." But a consideration of David Ben-Gurion's leadership during the War of Independence reveals personal perspective to be an essential element in decision-making and shows the necessity of learning in the midst of change.

Israel's Independence Day, celebrated this year in the midst of the coronavirus crisis, invites an interesting comparison between PM David Ben-Gurion's leadership during the War of Independence and PM Benjamin Netanyahu's leadership during the pandemic. Despite the limitations entailed by the events' dissimilarity, they can be considered in light of the unprecedented test each of them posed for the top leadership as well as their respective patterns of organizing and decision-making. Such a comparison can shed light on how strategy is made in a complex national reality.

Criticism of Netanyahu's management of the coronavirus crisis focuses on the supposed lack of an orderly plan, decision-making "on the move," and the absence of a professional organizational body with the qualifications and powers to deal with a situation of this kind. Most of all, Netanyahu has been criticized for failing to craft an "exit strategy" from the start of the crisis.

Yet David Ben-Gurion, too, when it came to making key decisions during the War of Independence, navigated in a centralized and entirely personal manner. From the war's beginning to its end, he had no orderly plan for how to run it; he made major decisions on the move; and of course he had no exit strategy until its much later stages.

The wisdom of experts

When a national leader makes decisions in tumultuous situations, as in the coronavirus crisis, his staff is occupied with ensuring that his decisions are made in the most professional manner possible. For every problem, even on the strategic level, there is a certified, professional process of clarification. But that clarification is often subject to professional disagreement or controversy.

Ben-Gurion's centralized decision-making stemmed from the nature of strategic junctures. The choice of one path over another is not made solely by choosing one expert's advice over another's. It also involves values, beliefs, and opinions that the leader himself holds.

Consider, for example, a key decision Ben-Gurion made in April 1948. Flouting the position of the General Staff, he ordered a concentration of forces from all other fronts in an overriding effort to fight for Jerusalem. As Ben-Gurion explained in making his case: "If the country has a soul, then Jerusalem is its soul... The battle for Jerusalem is decisive, and not only from a military standpoint... That oath by the rivers of Babylon [if I forget thee, Jerusalem...] is obligatory today just as in those days; otherwise we will not deserve to be called the People of Israel." In that spirit he adjured the commander of Brigade 7, which had only just been established: "Jerusalem at any price."

Ben-Gurion's arguments involved national and value-driven considerations that went beyond professional military analysis.

In the case of a relatively simple medical dilemma, one might have to choose between, say, a medical opinion that recommends an operation and another that recommends against it. In such a situation, the decision—as Nobel Prize winner Daniel Kahneman taught in his writings—requires a wide latitude for risk calculation that goes beyond the purely professional domain.

Ben-Gurion's method of decision-making naturally sparked sharp opposition. When members of the General Staff cast doubt on the achievability of the war objectives Ben-Gurion had presented to them, he said:

The adjudicators in every matter will not be experts but civil representatives of the people. It is not the expert who determines whether to wage war or not. Not the expert who decides whether to defend the Negev or not. The expert will state his opinion on how to do things, but the civil echelon will decide whether to do things... Experts are needed... but decisions are based not only on the opinions of technicians regarding professional questions but on a general assessment, and for that the government is responsible.

A strategic decision by a leader goes beyond the purely professional recommendations that experts can provide.

A determined step into the unknown

Ever since the start of the coronavirus crisis, a multitude of “experts” have lamented the Israeli government's lack of an “exit strategy.” But during the War of Independence, for a long period—almost a year—the leadership had no orderly plan for successfully reaching the end of the war. No such “exit strategy” could have been devised because the conditions for crafting such a concept did not emerge during that time span.

At the height of the war, on September 11, 1948, before the turning point of Operation Yoav, Ben-Gurion presented a broad overview of the course of the conflict from the moment of its outbreak. He described the lack of knowledge for a situation assessment:

Even before the events began, I asked our experts: Do we have a Hagana unit that can hold its own against a regular army? Let me cite an answer I received from one of the commanders, who is now a front commander... He told me last summer that there was no Hagana unit that had the training of a regular army. I asked: And the Palmah? He replied: Neither does the Palmah soldier have the training of a regular soldier... and if a Palmah battalion has to face a battalion of a regular army, it may not be able to hold its own.

Amid the anxiety of stepping into the unknown, the military experts hardly bolstered Ben-Gurion's confidence in the chances of victory. Faith in the IDF's operational capability was built by learning on the move. It was out of the friction of war, by adjusting to unforeseen developments as they occurred, that critical knowledge was gleaned without which it would not have been possible to start formulating an exit strategy.

It was according to this logic that the War of Independence was conducted from the start and from one battle to another. This logic was particularly apparent in the shift that occurred with the defeat of the Egyptian enemy in Operation Yoav, as the stage was set for the concluding battles—the Horev and Uvda operations.

The notion of an “exit strategy,” as it is commonly expressed, is used mainly by academics who scrutinize strategic events with the benefit of hindsight. Ben-Gurion's approach to running the War of Independence presents an alternative to what academia regards as the requirements for strategic planning. Ben-Gurion's sensitivity to the way situations emerge, and his adroitness at exploiting, on the move, the possibilities that take shape in the course of battle, explain his strategic success at navigating the unknown.

If strategic dilemmas could be resolved entirely by resorting to expert opinion, we would not need leaders. Managing a railroad system is not akin to managing a complex, unprecedented, and largely chaotic event. Under crisis conditions, national leadership is ultimately judged on the basis of outcomes and can be examined primarily from a historical perspective.

With that said, the stature of a national leader can be seen from the start—in his acumen and his courage in deciding to take determined steps into the unknown.

This is an edited version of an article published in Israel Hayom on April 24, 2020.

The Coronavirus Pandemic: Israel Is America's Friend In Deed

by Dr. Frank Musmar

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: When President Donald Trump and other medical professionals touted the decades-old antimalarial drug hydroxychloroquine as a possible means of fighting the coronavirus pandemic, the Israeli generic drug giant Teva (the **most popular** big pharma stock on Wall Street) immediately **announced** that it will provide 10 million doses of its hydroxychloroquine drug to US hospitals free of charge. Rep. Rashida Tlaib and her fellow American detractors of Israel who claim that Israel does nothing but take from the US owe Israel an apology.

The Israeli **drug giant Teva** has announced that 6 million doses of hydroxychloroquine will be delivered to US hospitals by March 31 and more than 4 million more will be delivered within a month. “We are committed to helping to supply as many tablets as possible as demand for this treatment accelerates, at no cost,” Teva executive vice president Brendan O’Grady said.

Teva is the world’s leading generic drug manufacturer, employing 43,000 employees around the globe. In 2018, Teva produced 120 billion tablets, with one in nine generic prescriptions in the US containing the company’s products. Despite its global position, Teva says it has a unique understanding of local markets.

Many American detractors of Israel are giving a new airing to the myth that the Jewish state receives the lion’s share of US military aid. The suggestion conjures the demon of an all-powerful Israel lobby that has turned the US Congress into its pawn. **Rashida Tlaib** and Minnesota Democrat Ilhan Omar, the first two Muslim women elected to Congress, are at the forefront of those detractors. President Donald

Trump, along with many others, view Rep. Tlaib and her compatriots within the Democratic Party as antisemites, a perception they bolster by repeating the slander about Israel's aid relationship with the US.

The reality is that the US's alliance with Israel is based on **two key factors**: intelligence sharing and ideological unity, according to Michael Koplow, a Middle East analyst at the Israel Policy Forum. The Teva announcement is clear evidence of this ideological unity.

Hydroxychloroquine sulfate tablets were in **short supply** throughout March, according to a **report** by the American Society of Health-System Pharmacists. **Hospitals have been** rushing to stockpile the decades-old antimalarial drug, which has been touted by President Trump and others as a possible treatment for the new coronavirus. From March 1 through March 17, US hospitals bought an average of 16,110 units of hydroxychloroquine, compared with an average of 8,800 units a month from January 2019 through February 2020, according to **Premier Inc.**, which helps 4,000 member hospitals buy and manage their supplies.

Teva indicated that it will do everything possible to accelerate production of hydroxychloroquine and also conduct research to see if, in its vast catalog of 3,500 drugs, others can be used to fight coronavirus. Another Israeli drug cited as possibly helpful is remdesivir, an experimental antiviral from Gilead Sciences.

Israel and the US coordinate scientific and cultural exchanges and have bilateral economic relations. The top five US exports to Israel are unmounted diamonds, semiconductors, civilian aircraft, telecommunications equipment, and agricultural products. The top five US imports from Israel are diamonds, pharmaceutical products, semiconductors, medicinal equipment, and telecommunications equipment. US direct investment in Israel is primarily in the manufacturing sector, as is Israeli investment in the US. The US and Israel have had a free trade agreement since 1985 that serves as the foundation for expanding trade and investment between the two countries by reducing barriers and promoting regulatory transparency.

The politicians, pundits, and IR scholars who accuse Israel and the Israel lobby of extracting the lion's share of US military aid from a gullible Congress are either themselves hopelessly gullible or know full well that they are spreading lies. Israel receives a small fraction of the real outlays of military assistance the US indirectly gives its allies and other countries. These experts, if they are in fact experts, should also know that 74% of military aid to Israel was spent on American arms, equipment, and services. Under the recently signed Memorandum of Understanding, that figure will be changed to 100%. The experts simply cite the wrong statistics.

Israel Is Fighting Spies at Home While It Battles Coronavirus

by Dr. Edy Cohen

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: While most of the world is focused on combating the coronavirus, Israel is fighting both the virus and terrorism. Israel's enemies are exploiting the instability caused by the pandemic in a variety of ways. In the past week alone, Gaza-based terrorist organization Hamas fired a barrage of rockets into southern Israel and Lebanon-based Hezbollah infiltrated Israel's airspace with a drone from the Golan Heights. Part of the efforts of terrorist organizations bent on Israel's destruction is the recruitment of Israeli Arab spies.

Israel's security challenges are much more complex than they appear on the surface. They extend far beyond the rocket and drone attacks that are often seen on the news. Clandestine warfare takes place under the radar on a daily basis, regardless of any global crisis that might be occurring.

This invisible war contains elements of cybersecurity and espionage. Although details of this kind of warfare are highly sensitive and therefore classified, recent events shed a bit of light on some of the challenges Israel copes with on a daily basis.

In the past two months, two Israeli Arabs were arrested for spying for Iran and Hezbollah. Israeli Arabs are an appealing target for recruitment by terrorist entities as they are full Israeli citizens with unlimited access to public places and the right to move freely throughout the country. Unlike Jewish Israelis, they are even privileged with access to the West Bank territories administered by the Palestinian Authority. It is a relatively easy task for native informants to collect intelligence on Israeli military sites.

It's likely that money is the central motivating factor driving these people to espionage. But no less of an influence for some is the ingrained ideology that seeks the Jewish state's destruction. Of course, this is not to say that Jews never spy for Israel's enemies. However, statistics show that the likelihood of Jewish citizens doing so is much lower than Arabs.

Spying for Iran

On March 16, an Israeli man was arrested and accused of spying for Iran (and also of having contact with the Palestinian terrorist organization the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, which is based in Lebanon). He was allegedly asked by his Iranian handlers to provide detailed information on Israeli security sites, ways of recruiting Israel's Arab population, means of deepening existing rifts in Israeli society, and means of carrying out terrorist attacks. While meeting with his Iranian handlers abroad, he is said to have received funds, training, and secret encryption tools.

Spying for Hamas

Aya Khatir, a 31-year-old Israeli citizen, resident of Arara in Wadi Ara, and mother of two, was arrested on February 17 for spying for Hamas. According to the investigation, she worked for a humanitarian organization aiding poor families in the Gaza Strip. Instead of helping Gaza's needy residents, she abused her position to funnel money to Hamas's terror infrastructure and provide the organization with intelligence on Israeli targets for the purpose of carrying out terrorist attacks.

Efforts by Hamas to infiltrate Israeli society for the purpose of enlisting its Arab population for espionage are not rare. In January, a Hamas-operated spy ring that handled Israeli informants was exposed by the IDF. Investigations revealed that elements within Hamas's armed wing recruited Israeli Arabs to cooperate with its intelligence services in order to collect vital information for the purpose of carrying out terrorist attacks inside Israel. It appears that the Israeli Arabs targeted for recruitment by Hamas were not chosen at random but were selected based on their familial connections in Gaza, which afforded them the ability to enter the Gaza Strip.

Terrorist organizations like Hamas are likely to step up their attempts to recruit spies. Social media platforms make this much easier as they enable terrorist bodies to reach Israeli citizens without detection. They operate numerous fake profiles on Facebook and Instagram targeting individuals based on the nature of their posts.

This is an edited version of an [article](#) that appeared in Israel Today on April 16, 2020.

Despite Coronavirus, Hezbollah Remains a Dangerous Threat to Israel

by Yaakov Lappin

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The coronavirus pandemic has turned into a serious challenge for the Iran-backed Lebanese terror organization Hezbollah, placing the world's most heavily equipped non-state armed group under strain. Nevertheless, recent reports indicate that these conditions have not stopped Hezbollah's ongoing military and terrorist activity in the region.

Three locations along Israel's security barrier on the Lebanese border were [sabotaged](#) on Friday, April 17, likely by Hezbollah operatives, in what appears to have been an attempt to infiltrate Israel. No breach was detected.

That event appears to have been a direct response to a dramatic incident that took place last Wednesday in Syria. According to international media reports, [an Israeli airstrike](#) hit a jeep carrying Hezbollah operatives who may have been involved in weapons trafficking from Syria to Lebanon.

A subsequent *Al-Arabiya* report said one of the occupants was Mustafa Mughniyeh, son of the late Hezbollah operations chief Imad Mughniyeh. Imad Mughniyeh was killed in a 2008 bomb attack in Damascus attributed to the Mossad and the CIA. Mustafa Mughniyeh and others in the vehicle reportedly escaped last week's strike unharmed.

International media reports indicate that even as the world battles the coronavirus, Hezbollah's ongoing force build-up and weapons trafficking continue to draw preemptive Israeli airstrikes in Syria.

This does not mean Hezbollah is not facing new challenges. The first is rooted in the distress the coronavirus is causing its patron, Iran. The

Islamic Republic is suffering high infection and mortality numbers, its economy is in crisis, and its embattled regime is trying to fend off charges of covering up and mismanaging the pandemic.

Hezbollah's mammoth arsenal, *estimated* by the IDF to be at around 130,000 surface-to-surface projectiles, is paid for by Iran and its Quds Force. Hezbollah's arsenal consists primarily of short-range Katyusha rockets with a 45-kilometer (28-mile) reach, but also includes more than 3,500 projectiles that put greater Tel Aviv in range and carry 150 kilogram warheads. The arsenal also includes more than 200 long-range ballistic missiles that carry half-ton warheads. These missiles can strike any point in Israel.

Israel's air defenses, made up of the Iron Dome, David's Sling, and Arrow systems, can stop many projectile attacks, but would be flooded by the scale of Hezbollah's arsenal in any full-scale conflict, meaning that some of Hezbollah's attacks would invariably get through. The attacks would paralyze the Israeli home front and economy, and if symbolic or strategic sites are targeted, could cause significant harm to critical national infrastructure. Hezbollah also has a number of anti-ship cruise missiles and air-to-surface missile batteries.

Iran and Hezbollah had planned on establishing a domestic precision-guided missile industry in Lebanon that would enable the serial production of a large number of missiles. They appear to have frozen this project following a series of Israeli warnings to desist or face military action. The more Iran struggles to pay for such activities, the more constraints Hezbollah will face.

In addition, Iran's newly appointed Quds Force Commander, Esmail Qaani, who replaced Qassem Soleimani following his killing by US drone strike in January, means Hezbollah's leadership is now working with a less charismatic and influential Iranian commander. While the Quds Force is expected to continue to make every effort to equip Hezbollah with a range of weapons, the dynamic between Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah and Qaani is an unknown quantity that could affect future cooperation.

In Lebanon, Hezbollah's home turf, the organization [has faced accusations](#) of importing the virus via flights from Iran. Brig. Gen. (ret.) Yossi Kuperwasser, former head of the research division in the IDF Military Intelligence Directorate, told the Investigative Project on Terrorism (IPT) that international flights out of Iran reportedly helped spread the disease in the Arab world, putting pressure on Hezbollah in Lebanon.

“Hezbollah is under pressure both because of the virus and because of its links to Iran,” he said. “Iranians continue to be active in Lebanon. Hezbollah operates in close proximity with Iranians in Syria and in other places. The whole episode reflects badly on Hezbollah. It has led to accusations [in Lebanon] against it.”

Although Hezbollah is using its extensive civilian and military infrastructure to battle the spread of coronavirus, the program [has a definitive sectarian](#) nature, since the efforts are mainly underway in Shiite areas of Lebanon.

Meanwhile, Lebanon's massive economic troubles, which predate the virus, have only grown more acute with the pandemic. Some in Lebanon, like former Lebanese PM Fouad Siniora, [blame Hezbollah](#) and its resistance to assistance from international financial institutions for ensuring that there is no way out of those troubles.

According to a report in March in *Arab Weekly*, Siniora said Lebanon is “sick and requires a stronger medicine than just ointments.” He added that the Lebanese are paying the price of “Hezbollah's hegemony over the state and its refraining from implementing reforms pledged by the state.”

The report also cited former Lebanese MP Fares Saeed, who said: “Hezbollah is the political decision-maker in the country and, while fighting in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen, it is trying to establish an economic-political system that matches its regional function by overthrowing the Lebanese financial system and removing the country from the international community in the interest of a resistance economy ... that is to say, importing goods through illegal channels and relations with Iran and China, in addition to severing all relations with Washington and international legitimacy.”

Lebanon's economy was on the brink of collapse before the pandemic struck and is in even worse shape now.

“Due to Hezbollah's closeness to Iran, Lebanon suffers,” Kuperwasser said. At the end of March, Lebanon expressed interest in an [IMF emergency loan](#). Hezbollah appeared to [change its tune](#) somewhat regarding the acceptance of aid, but the organization's chief, Hassan Nasrallah, conditioned any agreement against any terms that “would make the country explode.” Lebanon's interest mirrors Iran's [own unusual request](#) for a \$5 billion IMF loan to battle the coronavirus.

“Banks do not like connections with terror elements. This is one of the reasons why the IMF is not assisting Iran,” said Kuperwasser. “The banking systems in Iran and Lebanon are both contaminated with terror activities. Hence, the terrorism of Hezbollah, which is recognized by some of the international system, makes it difficult for Lebanon to uphold a banking system that is respectable and acceptable to the international community.”

US sanctions against several Lebanese banks accused of having ties to Hezbollah have also [exerted pressure](#) over recent years. Hezbollah is now stepping up a [campaign](#) “to place its allies at the heart of Lebanon's banking system as the US seeks to disrupt the armed group's financial networks,” according to the UAE's *The National*. Hezbollah is trying to install allies inside Lebanon's monetary authorities “to help the movement circumvent intensified US sanctions,” the report said.

The report, citing unnamed Arab financiers, warned that the outcome of such efforts in Lebanon could extend Hezbollah's reach into the nerve center “of Lebanon's banking sector—once the most important in the region—and could hamper any chance the country has of emerging from the worst financial crisis in its modern history.”

In addition, the role the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) play vis-à-vis Hezbollah continues to be a source of contention. Some observers point to [increased collaboration](#) between the two sides, such as joint patrols along the Lebanese-Israeli border. Others view the LAF as a potential counter-balance to Hezbollah. In 2018, the IPT [reported](#) that

Hezbollah and the LAF are increasingly cooperating, with Hezbollah personnel sometimes wearing LAF uniforms during joint patrols.

Since 2010, the US has invested more than \$1.82 billion in security assistance to the LAF. But the LAF's unwillingness or inability to actively counter Hezbollah in any way has raised deep questions about its role and fueled controversy over ongoing American assistance to it.

Despite all the strain, Hezbollah does not appear to have given up on its regional armed activities. It still has about 2,300 operatives in Syria.

Reports of routine Israeli strikes against threatening activity in Syria during the coronavirus outbreak seem to indicate that "there has been no substantial change in the scope of Hezbollah's activities in the area," Kuperwasser said. "The Iranians continue in their efforts to bring in weapons. Some reach Hezbollah, and some go to Syria. This activity continues."

Hezbollah continues to face its regular challenges—Israel's close intelligence coverage of the region and rapid, precise strike capabilities—on top of the added coronavirus pressure, but none of that has stopped its military consolidation efforts in Syria. The organization has invested resources in northern Syria and is building an armed infrastructure in the Syrian Golan Heights, near the Israeli border, Kuperwasser said. It is also maintaining its weapons smuggling routes linking Syria to Lebanon.

Evidence of this activity surfaced in recent days, when the IDF [released surveillance video showing](#) the Syrian army actively cooperating with Hezbollah in the south of the country.

"Even during the coronavirus period, the new commander of the Syrian army's 1st Division, Luaa Ali Ahmad Asaad, continues to help and allow the Hezbollah terror group [to] establish a front on the Golan Heights," the IDF stated.

The video footage showed Asaad meeting with Hezbollah's commander of its south Syria region, Hajj Hashem.

Last year, the IDF [named Hashem](#) as the man in charge of Hezbollah's "Golan file," a program to build an attack base for striking Israeli civilians and soldiers from Syria.

Recent reports indicate that the shadow war between Israel and the Shiite axis in Syria remains active despite the virus.

"Hezbollah's activities on this level do not appear to have been eroded," Kuperwasser said.

This is an edited version of an [article](#) published by the Investigative Project on Terrorism on April 21, 2020.

Iran

Iran's Nuclear and Military Efforts in the Shadow of Coronavirus and Economic Collapse

by Lt. Col. (res.) Dr. Raphael Ofek

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Notwithstanding the difficult challenges of the coronavirus crisis and a deteriorating economy, Iran is pushing ahead with its uranium enrichment and missile and space programs as well as its activities in Syria. It also has yet to concede to the US in their clash over sailing in the Gulf. Tehran fears that any sign of weakness might endanger the Islamist regime, particularly as resentment continues to grow among ordinary Iranians. With that in mind, it is doing all it can to flex its muscles for both domestic and international audiences.

In July 2019, Iran began to explicitly violate the July 2015 nuclear agreement. The recent IAEA report (March 3, 2020) addressed the following breaches by Iran on uranium enrichment:

- Iran pledged to reduce the number of centrifuges in the Natanz enrichment plant to 5,060 IR1 units and to limit its uranium enrichment to a 3.67% rate. However, as of July 8, 2019, it began to enrich up to a 4.5% rate.
- The agreement demands that the Fordow underground uranium enrichment facility, containing 2,710 IR1 centrifuges including 696 active centrifuges, be converted into a “Nuclear Research, Physics and Technology” center with 1,044 centrifuges cut off

from the UF6 feed pipeline (UF6, or uranium hexa-fluoride, is a uranium-fluorine compound that is fed in a gaseous state into centrifuges for enrichment). In addition, 348 unused centrifuges for uranium enrichment were to be used to separate stable isotopes for use in medicine, agriculture and industry, while the remaining centrifuges were to be transferred to storage at the Natanz plant. However, on November 9, 2019, uranium enrichment was renewed at Fordow with 1,044 units in operation. They include centrifuges that were intended for stable isotope separation.

- The agreement stipulates that the amount of uranium Iran is permitted to enrich at 3.67% is limited to 300 kg of UF6 (the uranium content of which is 202.8 kg). But as of February 19, 2020, the amount of uranium enriched by the Natanz plant and Fordow facility totaled 1,020.9 kg, or more than five times what is allowed. Its content is 806.3 kg uranium enriched to 4.5% and 214.6 kg enriched to 3.67%.
- On September 7, 2019, Iran began to violate the limit to which it had agreed regarding the operation of advanced highly enriching centrifuges. Contrary to the agreement, Iran is enriching uranium with about 400 centrifuges of advanced models (IR2m, IR4 and IR6). The enrichment capacity of the IR6 centrifuge is over eight times that of the IR1 centrifuge.

The latest IAEA report says the agency continues to liaise with Iranian authorities regarding IAEA inspections of natural (non-enriched) uranium particles of an anthropogenic (i.e., man-made) source from an Iranian site that has not yet been declared to IAEA: the warehouse in Turkuzabad, a suburb of Tehran, which was unveiled by Israeli PM Benjamin Netanyahu in a speech to the UN General Assembly on September 27, 2018. According to the BBC on March 3, the IAEA dispatched a document to several member states claiming that Iran has rejected a request to allow inspection access to three other unidentified sites as well. According to the document, the inspectors want to find out if natural uranium is being used at any of the sites from which they are being barred. At another site, the IAEA says there have been activities that are “consistent with efforts to sanitize part of the location.”

Iran's violations of the nuclear agreement—its raising of the uranium enrichment rate to 4.5% and accumulation of uranium in excess of the 300 kg UF₆ limit—does not currently have a military aspect. This is because uranium enriched at a rate of less than 5% is suitable solely as a nuclear fuel for power reactors and cannot be used for nuclear weapons (for which the enrichment degree required is at least 90%). Iranian officials claim these violations are meant to pressure the EU into neutralizing the sanctions imposed on Iran by the US.

However, the main concern about Iran's future ability to manufacture nuclear weapons is the advanced uranium enrichment centrifuges the regime is continuing to develop. Behrouz Kamalvandi, the spokesman for the Iranian Atomic Energy Organization, said at a conference at Fordow on November 9, 2019 that the enrichment rate is being increased “based on our own needs and instructions...[W]e have the possibility to produce 5%, 20%, and 60%, or any other uranium enrichment required.”

Furthermore, on March 27, Kamalvandi announced that on Iran's National Nuclear Technology Day on April 8 his organization was going to unveil a new advanced centrifuge. (The event was postponed due to the coronavirus crisis.) He added that “some of Iran's advanced centrifuges have reached a phase where we can industrialize them... [they] can be manufactured at 60 centrifuges per day.” He even bragged, “Production [enrichment] above 250,000 SWU (separative work units) is definitely achievable, but our goal is to reach one million SWU.” As the required enrichment quantity of natural uranium (containing about 0.7% uranium-235, the fissile uranium isotope) to the amount of about 20 kg of enriched uranium to at least 90% is about 5,000 SWU, Iran is quite close to obtaining enough enriched uranium to use as fissile material for its first nuclear bomb.

As for Iran's missile and space program, on April 22 the Islamic Revolutionary Guards (IRGC) announced the successful launch of the Noor-1, Iran's first military satellite. According to the Guards, the Noor-1, which is an imaging satellite, began within 90 minutes to orbit the Earth in a 425-km orbit. This is after several recent failures by Iran to launch satellites into space.

The satellite was launched using a three-stage missile launcher nicknamed Qased (“messenger”). Its first stage was based on a rocket fueled with liquid fuel, with the two additional stages fueled by solid propellant. Solid fuel propulsion indicates an impressive advance of Iran’s missile technology.

While Tehran claims the satellite launch was part of a civilian space research and exploration program, US military experts have expressed concern that the program is intended to develop intercontinental ballistic missiles that can threaten the US with nuclear warheads. Iranian ballistic missiles are also being developed for a 2,000 km range, which could threaten Israel.

On April 29, Iran marked National Persian Gulf Day. There have been recent incidents in the Gulf—to which Tehran has claimed paramouncy since the days of the Shah—between IRGC ships and US Navy ships. Also, following Qassem Soleimani’s killing on January 3, Iran launched more than 15 missile and rocket attacks against US bases and targets in Iraq.

Tehran has also continued its military entrenchment in Syria. Despite recent claims by Israeli security officials that due to the IDF’s intense activity Tehran has become a liability rather than an asset to Damascus, Iranian-backed Shiite militias, Hezbollah in particular, seem to be continuing their operations on the Golan Heights.

Iran’s overall situation is quite distressing. The Iranian people have lost faith in the regime—especially now, in view of the ravages of the coronavirus pandemic. The people (along with the rest of the world) doubt the official casualty figures. At this writing, the regime is claiming about 110,000 cases and about 6,800 deaths, but the true numbers are estimated to be much higher. This distrust became stronger against the backdrop of the authorities’ false reporting of the downing of a Ukrainian passenger jet on January 8 after takeoff from Tehran (most of its passengers were either Iranian or of Iranian origin).

The coronavirus outbreak has dealt a new blow to the Iranian economy, which had already collapsed in 2018 as a result of US sanctions. The real (the Iranian currency) plummeted to unprecedented lows, and

the Iranian street expressed its anger that the regime had wasted so much money on its operations in Syria. According to the London Arab newspaper *al-Sharq al-Awsat* on January 1, 2020, Iranian president Rouhani said damage to the Iranian economy resulting from sanctions by the end of 2019 was \$200 billion.

In 1965, Pakistan's foreign minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto responded to the development of Indian nuclear weapons by saying: "If we have to feed on grass and leaves, or even if we have to starve, we shall also produce an atomic bomb." Indeed, in 1972, at the beginning of his tenure as Pakistan's president, he set his country's nuclear weapons project in motion.

It is highly doubtful that the Iranian people are ready to eat grass in order to bring the regime's dreams of an Iranian nuclear bomb to fruition. Though the mullahs' goal of becoming a regional power that controls Shiite Islam across the Middle East remains unfulfilled, the regime continues to do what it can to demonstrate its power. The object is to show the world that Iran is not capitulating to the US in any way—not regarding its nuclear and space programs, and not militarily. It also seeks to project an image of strength to the increasingly resentful Iranian people, as it fears that signs of weakness could bring an end to its rule. However, the regime's investments in security at the expense of the nation's welfare may turn out to boomerang against it.

Iran's Coronavirus Economic Meltdown

by Prof. Hillel Frisch

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: As the coronavirus pandemic intensifies, Iran is in economic meltdown. Its international isolation is ever more severe, as can be seen in the sharp decline in flights landing in Iran's two busiest airports.

All Iran experts know how hard it is to get reliable data on that country. The regime obscures everything from basic macroeconomic figures to government expenditures and allocations of how much oil and gas Iran sells.

Figuring out the full extent of the COVID-19 (coronavirus) epidemic in Iran is as difficult as determining accurate figures on anything else there.

Some figures cannot be doctored, however. These include the lists of flight arrivals into the two major Iranian airports: Khomeini International, which is the major Iranian access point to the outside world, and the older Mehrabad Airport, which is Iran's busiest domestic hub.

Flight activity at both airports shows in no uncertain terms the extent of economic meltdown in Iran caused by the coronavirus. This crisis comes in the wake of punishing sanctions imposed by the Trump administration in 2018.

Before the sanctions were imposed, a daily average of 100 flights, mostly from abroad, landed at Khomeini Airport and 130 flights at Mehrabad, the nexus for domestic flights from Iran's far-flung cities.

After the second round of sanctions was imposed in the fall of 2018, flight activity fell to approximately 60 flights to Khomeini and 100 to Mehrabad, a steep decline.

That decline became a plunging crash as news of Iran's epidemic unfolded, especially in international flights. A look at arrivals into Khomeini Airport on March 3, 2020 shows 32 flights with 11 cancellations, a net 21 landings.

A day later, out of 22 flights scheduled to land, only five actually did so. Ten of the flights were listed as "unknown" (which Israel often identifies as flights dealing with arms transport). Six were listed as "scheduled" but never arrived. Significantly, the five planes that landed were all Iranian carriers.

Most of Iran's plunge into international isolation can be attributed to the fiat of governments that compelled air carriers to their airports to cease flights to Iran out of a sense that the Iranian authorities had lost control over the epidemic, at least for the time being.

The devastating economic effect of this isolation can be seen in the flights by the Iranian air carriers that have continued to fly. Of eight scheduled flights to Istanbul, Iran's major gateway to the outside world, none landed. Obviously they were cancelled because of lack of demand. The same was true of the Iranian carriers from Doha and Dubai, two major international connections for Iran.

While economics explain why many of these planes did not land, politics probably explain at least some of the five landings that did occur. Two were from Chinese destinations (Shanghai and Shenzhen) and one was from Beirut, where Hezbollah, Iran's major proxy, is based.

Iranians have accused their government of continuing flights unabated with China for political and economic reasons despite the linkage between the Chinese source of coronavirus and its spread to Iran. China is Iran's only major friendly power, as its relationships with Turkey and Russia are problematic. Beijing is heavily invested in Iranian energy production.

Iranian domestic travel has also come to a near halt. Of the 89 flight landings at Mehrabad from domestic destinations scheduled for March 3, 2020, only 27 landed. The overwhelming remainder were listed as "unknown". Recall that in better days, 130 landings took place daily.

All told, there were 32 landings at both airports combined, which together service three provinces with a total population of at least 17 million. At Cairo Airport, in a country with half the standard of living of Iranians, there were 211 flights to the airport on the same day, even in the face of the coronavirus crisis.

Iran's leadership no doubt started praying for President Trump's demise long before the Super Tuesday Democratic primaries and was probably relieved to see Joe Biden's strong comeback in the hope that he will defeat Trump and ease the harsh US sanctions.

They have a great many other things to pray about, however. No relief from the coronavirus crisis is on the horizon. The economic devastation caused by the crisis will only increase the anxiety of the Iranian people toward the disease and stoke their anger over the way the government has handled it. The regime has transformed Iran from a nexus of civilizations into an international pariah.

This is an edited version of an article that appeared in the Jerusalem Post on March 11, 2020.

Coronavirus Delivers Another Devastating Blow to the Iranian Regime

by Yaakov Lappin

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The coronavirus pandemic has hit Iran hard, and not only on the health front. The virus is the latest in a succession of blows to the Iranian regime's domestic status, fractured economy, and already low credibility level at home. The virus also appears to be slowing down the regime's malign activities across the Middle East.

The Iranian regime has, in recent months, taken one uppercut after another. The setbacks include a deteriorating economic crisis [fueled](#) by US sanctions—a crisis with no clear resolution; the US [drone strike](#) that killed Iranian Quds Force commander Qassem Soleimani; the [fiasco](#) of the downing of the Ukrainian aircraft that followed soon after; and growing [anti-regime demonstrations](#) driven by an Iranian public demanding a better quality of life.

An ongoing oil war, which has seen prices decrease sharply, [has also struck a damaging blow to Iran](#), which still relies in part on oil exports to generate income. And the coronavirus pandemic is unlikely to help quell Iran's domestic instability.

Even before the virus hit, leaving an estimated 2,000 Iranians dead and 25,000 infected according to official figures [at the time of this writing](#), the regime had hit its lowest point since the 1979 revolution.

Iran's consumer price index and the cost of basic commodities indicate [runaway inflation](#). Protesters demanding a better economic life had, until the pandemic struck, been out in the streets on a regular basis since November, and the fact that the protests reappeared within days of Soleimani's mass funeral procession indicates that public anger is deeply entrenched.

In its attempt to suppress the unrest, the regime's security forces have killed more than 300 of their own people, wounded 3,500, and imprisoned more than 700. Internet access is routinely cut off. These developments signal massive public disappointment in the Islamic Republic's leadership and a domestic challenge that is shaking the Iranian leadership to its core.

The fact that Iran had to [cut fuel subsidies last year](#), sparking the initial wave of protests, reflects an understanding by Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei that the Trump administration's maximum pressure campaign of sanctions isn't going anywhere.

At first, Iran responded by stepping up both its malign regional activity and its nuclear program activities. Now, while the nuclear program continues [to make alarming progress](#), Iran's subversive and terrorist activities in the region are decreasing due to the domestic strain.

Earlier this month, an IDF spokesperson said the Israeli military was seeing a [reduction](#) in the level of activity by Iran and other adversaries against Israel. With more than 30% of Iranians [living below the poverty line](#) and struggling for basic goods even before the coronavirus lockdown, Iran may be unable to fund and organize large-scale regional entrenchment and terrorism as aggressively as it could before.

Large scale domestic unrest—the scenario that most frightens the leadership—is unlikely to happen immediately, as the population is practicing social distancing and staying at home. But the shock wave created by the coronavirus and the regime's mishandling of the crisis will be felt acutely after the pandemic passes, and will hold the potential to contribute to the regime's destabilization.

In recent days, the Iranian military has [cleared the streets](#) of citizens to enforce isolation.

Recent statements by Khamenei [in which he peddles baseless anti-American conspiracy theories](#) about the virus's origins indicate how disconnected the Iranian leadership is from the extreme predicament of its people. Khamenei has [rejected](#) an American offer of a medical assistance program.

Khamenei's worldview and radical Shiite Islamist ideology appear to be wearing thin among many Iranians, whose main goal these days is economic survival and achieving a reasonable standard of living. Responding to Khamenei's statements, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo [noted](#) Monday that the regime allowed many flights from China to land in Iran during the virus outbreak, ignored "repeated warnings from its own health officials, and denied its first death from the coronavirus for at least nine days."

"It is important to note that since 2012, Iran has spent over \$16 billion on terror abroad, and used sanctions relief from the JCPOA to fill up its proxies' coffers. Regime officials stole over a billion Euros intended for medical supplies, and continue to hoard desperately needed masks, gloves, and other medical equipment for sale on the black market," Pompeo said.

Not long ago, Iran was sending [around \\$1 billion a year](#) to Hezbollah, Hamas, and other terror organizations while spending [tens of billions of dollars on its military and terror activities in Syria](#). Current Iranian overseas military and terror financing figures are not immediately available, but it is difficult to imagine how Tehran can keep up this level of funding for its foreign destabilization projects.

The Iranian regime recently took [the unprecedented](#) step of asking the IMF for a \$5 billion loan, revealing the extent of its economic crisis. Iran's request for help from an international financial institution marks a complete break with past policy and reflects the urgency its decision-makers feel regarding the country's economic problems.

Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps is [estimated to control](#) between 20% and 40% of the Iranian economy, a factor that likely further drives resentment among sections of the public.

As James M. Dorsey, a non-resident senior associate at the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies, [recently noted](#), "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."

In the long term, it remains unclear whether these dire conditions will force the regime to cut back on its long-term terrorist sponsorship and armament program for its network of radical proxies, but if it fails to do this, that failure might accelerate unrest at home.

In the meantime, a [mysterious airstrike](#) on Sunday targeted Iran's Albukamal military base on the Syrian-Iraqi border, a site reportedly used by the Quds Force to traffic weapons and personnel from Iraq into Syria. Pro-Iranian militias have been [active in recent weeks in Iraq](#), launching a deadly rocket attack on a US base, absorbing American air strikes, and still continuing attacks afterwards.

While these incidents reflect an Iranian determination to continue to use its proxies against the US and its allies in the region, they do not conceal the extreme position in which Tehran finds itself—a position that may yet worsen once the coronavirus crisis passes.

This is an edited version of an [article](#) published by The Investigative Project on Terrorism on March 25, 2020.

Why Iran Is Struggling with Coronavirus

by Dr. Frank Musmar

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Iran is struggling with a devastating coronavirus outbreak, a broken economy, and a severe shortage of medical equipment. Iran's lack of **transparency** about its coronavirus outbreak has resulted in a catastrophic public health risk not only to the Iranian people but also to its neighbors. Tehran has **confirmed** more than 47,000 cases and more than 3,000 deaths, though public health experts estimate the real toll to be significantly higher.

Rather than take responsibility and do their best to provide for the health and wellbeing of their subjects, Iran's leaders are wasting time and resources as the coronavirus crisis rages. In keeping with their longstanding policy of attempting to deflect blame by lashing out at foreign parties, the mullahs are trying to distract Iranians from their own failure to handle the crisis by spreading lies that the US engineered the virus. The Iranian media are intensifying the regime's failures by promoting false cures, which has led hundreds of Iranians to **blind and even kill themselves** by consuming bootleg methanol. The regime also avoided taking steps to curb mass visits to imams' tombs, a practice that exponentially spread the virus.

Iran reported its first confirmed coronavirus cases on February 19: two fatalities in the Shiite holy city of Qom. Instead of rushing to stop the spread of the virus, the regime turned the country into a vector of infection by applying such measures as these:

- Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei implored Iranians to come out to vote in the parliamentary elections, going so far as to describe the virus as a ploy to discourage people from voting. The **regime threatened** and imprisoned dozens of Iranians who told the truth about the outbreak.

- The government resisted imposing social distancing. On February 25, President Rouhani called the coronavirus “one of the enemy’s plots to bring our country into closure by spreading panic.”
- After the [first deaths](#) from the virus were reported in Qom on February 19, the regime refused to take measures that could have contained the virus. Qom is a holy site that beckons pilgrims from across Iran and abroad. The government kept the shrines of Qom open until March 17, and businesses and restaurants in Tehran remain open.
- The mullahs’ airline, Mahan Air, flew at least 55 times between Tehran and China in February, transporting [religious students](#) between China and Qom. At least five of Iran’s first cases of coronavirus were connected to these flights.
- The government refused all offers of aid, even revoking the [permission](#) it had granted to Doctors without Borders to set up a 50-bed field hospital in Isfahan to treat coronavirus patients.
- The regime [favored the economy over public health](#). On March 29, Rouhani said the government had to weigh economic effects of mass quarantine on an already beleaguered economy. “Health is a principle for us, but the production and security of society is also a principle for us,” he said at a cabinet meeting. “We must put these principles together to reach a final decision.” In practice, the government did not attempt to find any such balance. It ignored the health side of the issue completely and focused exclusively on the economic side.

Iran is now facing a public health disaster of potentially catastrophic proportions because of the paranoia, lack of transparency, and incompetence of the Iranian regime. Tehran’s official figures on the numbers of Iranians who are suffering from or have died from the virus, while high, are only a fraction of the true numbers.

Opportunity Out of Crisis: The Case of Iran

by Col. (res.) Dr. Raphael G. Bouchnik-Chen

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Coronavirus has killed thousands in Iran and sickened more than 60,000. If the virus is not contained, hundreds of thousands more Iranians risk infection and death. If skillfully handled, this crisis might present the Trump administration with a unique opportunity to reduce the Iranian nuclear threat.

It's too early to say that the coronavirus pandemic is out of control, but several countries critically hit by the virus are desperately calling for help. While in the US and Europe full transparency is an indispensable tool in combatting the disease, countries in the Middle East are sticking to their traditionally opaque approach to crises in an effort to downplay the full scale of the emergency.

Iran is the outstanding example of this syndrome. A steady stream of news from that country, consisting primarily of leaks from unofficial sources, suggests that the disease is rampant. The death and sickness toll in Iran is already terrible and if the virus is not contained, it will threaten the lives of hundreds of thousands more Iranians. The country may well be approaching the point of no return.

The severity of the situation is an indictment of the ruling regime's incompetence. It critically failed to ready the country for a crisis of this kind, leaving medical personnel scrambling to cope with extreme shortages of even the most basic supplies necessary to fight the virus and protect themselves. The state-run daily *Ressalat*, reflecting the regime's orchestrated cover-up policy, wrote in early March that "the statistics [of medical personnel infected] are completely security-related and cannot be revealed."

This policy of obfuscation is not only a danger to Iranian medical professionals. As *The New York Times* wrote, "the [Iranian] authorities seem as worried about controlling information as they are about controlling the virus," and *The Washington Post* cautioned that "Iran's reaction to coronavirus has become a danger for the world."

Unofficial reports from Iran suggest that the IRGC and the Ministry of Intelligence have been tasked to threaten families of victims into keeping silent in an effort to cover up the true number of fatalities. IRGC command has ordered its provincial divisions to be present at hospitals and medical centers to control reporting on the numbers of patients infected or killed by the virus. Families of coronavirus victims are pressured not to disclose the real cause of death, and an almost hermetic censorship has been imposed on social networks and online media.

Looking backward, it is now clear that the coronavirus outbreak in Iran started in the holy city of Qom in February 2020. Calls to quarantine the city were strongly opposed by the mullahs and by Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, who not only would not allow the city's holy shrine to be closed but urged pilgrims to continue to visit it. One of Khamenei's aides was quoted on February 22nd as saying, "The enemy intends to show that Qom is insecure and take revenge, but it will never succeed". Another cleric said four days later, "We consider the holy shrine a 'house of cure' and it must remain open and people must resolutely visit the shrine."

On March 29, a group of 100 Iranian academics and political and social activists published a letter holding Khamenei chiefly responsible for the epidemic's becoming a national disaster. They claim that Khamenei is preventing citizens from receiving American or other humanitarian aid while ensuring that he and other regime officials have access to medical treatment.

The clerics in Iran are holding fast to their policy of denial or at least minimization of the coronavirus catastrophe while encouraging the IRGC to proceed with its regional activities in support of Iran's aspirations in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen. On April 1, President Trump

warned Iran against using its proxy forces to attack American troops in Iraq and hinted that the US military is considering a direct strike on Iranian forces. He said his administration has “very good information” that Iran-backed militias are planning more assaults. In parallel, it appears that the Iran-backed Houthi militia in Yemen has augmented its ballistic missile launches against Saudi strategic assets as well as Yemen’s governmental targets during the crisis. The latest attack, which was directed at the Yemenite district of Saada, occurred on April 5.

An additional worrisome dimension has to do with Iran’s activities in the nuclear domain. Unofficial Israeli sources have expressed concern that Iran is taking advantage of the coronavirus crisis to accelerate uranium enrichment under the radar. This is entirely possible, as IAEA inspectors are refraining from visiting Iranian nuclear sites and several have fled Iran entirely due to the high risk of contamination. Iran’s continued violations of its commitments according to the JCPOA have potentially dangerous ramifications, as the US is of course fully aware.

Iran poses a triple threat that must be acknowledged and assessed by the international community: a catastrophic and possibly out-of-control outbreak of coronavirus, ongoing aggressive efforts led by IRGC-related proxies to interfere in and disrupt the region, and a prohibited acceleration of the national nuclear program.

The world is thus faced with a dilemma: a moral obligation to take a humanitarian approach to Iran versus a policy of squeezing the Iranian regime economically and psychologically to achieve strategic gains. Does the extremity of the crisis faced by Tehran present an opportunity for Washington?

On April 12, 1959, John F. Kennedy said, “The Chinese use two brush strokes to write the word ‘crisis.’ One brush stroke stands for danger; the other for opportunity. In a crisis, be aware of the danger—but recognize the opportunity.” A similar saying attributed to the Italian Renaissance writer Niccolo Machiavelli recommends that we “never waste the opportunity offered by a good crisis.”

Crisis and opportunity are two sides of a single coin. Should we focus on the crisis or look for the opportunity? Considering how long-lasting and potentially explosive the Iranian nuclear issue is, it seems sensible to consider the strategic dimension under the current extraordinary circumstances.

Provided that it is handled skillfully by the Trump administration, the coronavirus crisis could present a unique opportunity to reduce the Iranian nuclear threat. The plan should be twofold: an international campaign led by the US to offer Iran the maximum humanitarian and medical assistance to contain the epidemic, and the acquiring of Iran's commitment to a new nuclear agreement that fills the gaps left by the JCPOA.

Though the US is itself in the midst of fighting the virus, it can handle such an initiative, as it holds the winning cards. The outcome of such a far-reaching approach to Iran could be worthwhile in both the short and the long terms.

Timing is the name of the game, considering the scale of the catastrophe in Iran as well as the simmering domestic rage against the clerical regime. The walls are closing in on Khamenei and his entourage.

Why Coronavirus Hasn't Stopped Iranian Aggression

by Irina Tsukerman

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: In sum and substance, Iran has a clear objective, a strategy, and the willingness to invest and take risks to fulfill it. The US demonstrates exactly the opposite in every respect. Thanks to its unswervable focus and determination even in the face of calamity, the Islamic Republic's march through the Middle East is likely unstoppable.

Despite the deadly spread of coronavirus (COVID-19) throughout Iran, which may have affected as many as 500,000 people according to internal reports, Iran's aggression and military adventurism continue unabated. It is pushing the envelope in Iraq, planning attacks on US targets, continuing to arm Houthis in Yemen, and defying calls for a ceasefire in that country to combat the pandemic. According to the latest reports, Iranian authorities just [killed](#) 36 Ahwazi Arab prisoners who had tried to break out of overcrowded, unsanitary prisons known for their brutality after the regime failed to liberate any Ahwazi prisoners either for holidays or for humanitarian reasons related to the outbreak.

According to Israeli academic Raz Zimmt, this regional aggression is likely to [continue unabated](#) no matter what the obstacles and despite all predictions that tough sanctions or an increased US military presence will deter Tehran and force it to backtrack. There is a variety of reasons for this.

First, as Zimmt correctly notes, Iran's regional and nuclear agenda predate the Islamic Revolution. The Shah contemplated developing nuclear capabilities, shelved the idea temporarily, and never had a chance to revisit it. As Zimmt writes:

...time and time again, Iran has proved that, despite its limitations and weaknesses, it manages to hold on and turn threats into opportunities that preserve not only the regime's survival, but its regional influence, as well. Iran certainly knows how to play the regional game in comparison to other nearby players. Tehran has the patience to wait until its ambitions are fulfilled and is highly determined and pragmatic, knowing how to adapt its strategy to meet new challenges.

Iran's persistent ground game, also known as its "ideological land bridge," has been noted by many other scholars, including Al Hurra's Alberto Fernandez, Jonathan Spyer, and Reza Parchizadeh.

Reported planned attacks on US targets, despite increased US willingness to push back against Iran-funded militias and the relocation of air defense to the region, are an illustration of this ground game. Far from being reckless ideological fanatics when it comes to military strategy in the narrow sense, Iran has utilized its strong understanding of the geopolitical context to advance its agenda. From Iran's perspective, it is at an advantage right now for several reasons.

Unlike Western societies, Iran is willing to sacrifice whatever it takes to get where it wants to go. That is why the propaganda about "endless wars" presumably resulting from any strong response to Iran's aggression has worked so well in the US, which has demonstrated a lack of stamina for protracted asymmetrical conflicts and a lack of tolerance for even minimal loss of American lives over anything that is not a direct defense of US territory. Part of this has to do with the media coverage of conflicts, part to weariness resulting from past failed involvements in the Middle East, and part to a changing culture increasingly unwilling to deal with any perceived pain, however distant.

The US loss to the Taliban in Afghanistan is due not so much to the inherent superiority of local knowledge as to a lack of willingness to a) summon the sufficient political will to set realistic parameters, b) commit to long-term investments in the region, and c) confront and

challenge state actors backing terrorist groups. A similar dynamic can be observed in Iraq, where Iran has been willing to invest in “state building” for its supporters while the US has limited its involvement to minimal necessary military operations. Iran is willing to divert infinite resources away from the needs of its own population for the support of its militias and for outreach to potential recruits. At the same time, the regime views the Iraqi militias and its other foreign troops, including Afghanis and Pakistanis, as expendable. Throwing these forces at the US will always be a “win” for Iran.

Even if they cost the lives of some leaders, Iran’s attacks demonstrate its unabating fervor and dedication to expelling the US from the region. The Americans’ continued exclusive focus on ISIS and unwillingness to treat the Iraqi government as a colony of Iran—a sort of willful blindness conveyed by the US administration to its own people—play into Iran’s hands. With the US increasingly treated as an unwelcome guest in Iraq while the US government grasps at straws to defend its relationship with Baghdad, Iran is successfully weaponizing the supposedly nationalist Muqtada Sadr and using the cover of the coronavirus pandemic to push ahead. While it is unlikely that the US will exit Iraq altogether after moving forces from Syria to that country, it will likely continue to play defense for the foreseeable future. That’s all Iran needs at this point.

Iran has correctly calculated that the US is highly unlikely to be willing to commit to anything that could possibly increase the optics of violence and increased commitment abroad in an election year—especially in the middle of a pandemic. Coronavirus has put a strain on US naval resources, and the Iranians proliferating throughout Iraq and Syria are a walking biohazard. Limited retaliatory airstrikes are the most that can be counted on in response to violent provocations.

Iran, meanwhile, is continuing to receive the infusions of cash it needs to proceed down its path. That cash flow is not hindered in any way by the striking down of Iranian officials by the virus thanks to the regime’s denialism and the country’s poor medical care. European willingness to provide humanitarian aid; continuing business with Europeans, Chinese, and Russians; civil nuclear waivers provided

by the US; and the acquiescence by various countries to the circumventing of sanctions offset the economic pressure delivered by the Americans' unwillingness to lift those sanctions. Furthermore, Iran's shadow economy, which is based in overlooked ventures in Oman and other places, illicit investments, drug trafficking, and organized crime schemes, continues to be a stable source of income even in these trying times.

Iran also has the advantage of a clear objective and strategy in terms of exporting its revolution and asserting its presence beyond the Levant into the Mediterranean. The US, while claiming an interest in rolling back Iranian influence, has put forth no vision of what that entails. It has already tacitly admitted that containment has failed, and despite tough talk from the White House, there appears to be no possibility of an internal coup that would topple the regime from within. "Rolling back" Iranian ideology and outreach would require a detailed plan, close cooperation with other major regional actors, ideological involvement, and the dedication of financial, intelligence, and technological resources. The US is in no position to dedicate itself to such a project right now, and in any case is not willing to do so.

Furthermore, this is a new era. Where once the US had the bold vision and willingness to strategically invest in goading the Soviet Union into underwriting space and arms programs that drained its resources, revealed its weaknesses to the public, countered decades of propaganda, and inspired generations on both sides of the Iron Curtain to admire the US as a vanguard for scientific progress, the US of today is focused on domestic political spats and lags China on investment in AI and quantum technology. And while the US is by far superior to Iran in terms of military force, Iran's reliance on asymmetrical warfare, combined with the American unwillingness to decisively use its formidable power, essentially neuter this operational superiority in terms of both its physical and its psychological impact on the adversary.

Despite the many challenges it faces, the Iranian revolutionary establishment is empowered by its successful division of all opposition movements, ability to manipulate portions of the population, and that population's continued dependency on the regime.

While uprisings occasionally send Basiji or other Iranian regime apparatchiks fleeing in the periphery, the opposition movements lack the level of cohesion that might tempt key players inside the sprawling Iranian bureaucracy to abandon their positions and undermine the regime into a state of collapse. Furthermore, the IRGC has taken on an increasingly central role in the running of the state. Despite obstacles, it is still a formidable, disciplined, aggressive, and well-armed machine and it remains vigilant about preventing any penetration by the perceived adversary. US policy experts have shown no understanding of the political divisions inside the Iranian government or its intelligence apparatus that could be effective if played against one another until the regime is enfeebled and self-destructive. (Neither has anyone else.)

Finally, the regime has observed US internal divisions and [inconsistency](#) in shaping any sort of foreign policy strategy and has learned to take advantage of the wealth of information the US reveals about its [own vulnerabilities](#).

The combination of all these factors explains Iran's brazen push forward despite the seemingly tough rhetoric emanating from the White House. Actions speak louder than words, and while Iran is willing to walk the walk, the US does not back up its escalating talk with anything more than an occasional show of force. When the US appears to have no plan of any kind, Iran's strategy wins by default.

Turkey

Turkey and Coronavirus: Devout Muslims Will Defeat the “Jewish Plot”

by Burak Bekdil

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Turkey appears to be handling the coronavirus crisis relatively well, although its low case numbers reflect the low number of tests being administered. Pious Turkish Muslims are blaming dark anti-Turkish forces and, of course, the Jews for unleashing the virus on the world.

Turkey’s fight against coronavirus (COVID-19) is generally accepted to be rational, well-timed, not too badly planned, and fairly effective. At the time when the German case toll was 7,000 (and the Dutch and UK case tolls were at around 2,000 each), Turkey’s was just 98. And when, on March 19, the Italian death toll surpassed China’s at 4,400, the Turkish mortality figure was just three. The government sealed borders—most significantly with Iran—just in time; cancelled all public gatherings and events, including football games; ordered most businesses to be shuttered; and launched an effective awareness campaign to keep Turks at home. About 3,000 Turkish pilgrims on their way home from Mecca were quarantined. The Turkish awareness rate of coronavirus was 100% by mid-March, according to one poll.

But several questions remain unanswered. Why did the Turkish religious authorities allow 21,500 people to travel to Mecca in the first place? Would it not have been safer for them to wait to fulfill their pilgrimage until after the world goes back to normal? And why were only 3,000 pilgrims quarantined? The other 18,500 returnees from Mecca are walking free in Turkey.

The question also arises: was the number of Turkish cases low because of government censorship? No, the “Turkish success” can be much more easily explained. The number of reported Turkish cases was low because the number of tests Turkey conducted was low. As of March 16, Turkey had performed just 2,800 tests (two tested positive out of a population of 83 million). Compare that to South Korea, which has performed 250,000 tests (8,100 tested positive out of a population of 51 million). It’s simple: if you don’t test people, you don’t put cases on the books.

Coronavirus in Turkey, like most things in that country, highlights the black humor in tragedy. As ever, Turkey is fun unless you have to live there.

Professor Ali Erbaş, president of Diyanet, Turkey’s highest religious authority, gave a Friday sermon in which he warned Muslims not to attend crowded events. He delivered this sermon at a mosque containing 5,000 people. A few days later, Diyanet issued a *fatwa* indefinitely suspending Friday prayers.

Turks are a brave people, and pious Turks are apparently the bravest of all. Large groups of Muslims protested Diyanet for the suspension of Friday prayers on the logic that prayers would surely protect the pious from any evil, up to and including a silly little virus. Reading the news of the protests, a friend of the author said, “It’s a view we should respect. It’s also a theory worth testing. How about injecting the coronavirus into all these pious folks?”

But the way “better-educated” Turks, including journalists and columnists, interpret the coronavirus crisis is even more entertaining.

One Islamist writer suggested that “now that all bars and alcohol-licensed enterprises are (temporarily) shut maybe we should consider keeping them shut forever due to the risk of coronavirus.”

Another suggested that the “CHP virus”—CHP is the acronym for Turkey’s secular main opposition party—is far more dangerous than coronavirus.

Pro-government media claimed they had found the real conspiracy: the virus was first detected in Turkey on the day a new opposition party, DEVA, was officially inaugurated, which cannot be a coincidence. Any opposition party challenging President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan is tantamount to a deadly virus threatening Turkey.

Other Islamists had a more intellectual, global response to the virus: they threw down a gauntlet before science. Tell us, positivists, secularists: where is your cure? Where is the “science” you always put before religion?

Turkish social media is of course a rich source of “scientific” interpretations of the coronavirus crisis, many of them larded with predictable self-aggrandizement, paranoia, and antisemitism:

- “Thanks to the power we inherited from our (Ottoman) ancestors we will kill all viruses and infidels.”
- “We will defeat the virus as we will defeat the entire world.”
- “Jews manufactured and spread the virus to end western civilization.”
- “We will annihilate the global masters behind the virus.”
- “The virus is only a minor part of a bigger game that targets Turkey.”
- “The virus was created to overthrow Erdoğan, leader of the *umma*.”
- “The Islamic army will defeat the infidel virus.”

Viruses change, but Islamist rhetoric does not. Yeniden Refah, a small Islamist party, said: “Though we do not have certain evidence, this virus serves Zionism’s goals of decreasing the number of people and preventing it from increasing, and important research expresses this. Zionism is a five-thousand-year-old bacteria that has caused the suffering of people.”

One collective response that neatly illustrates the Turkish approach to a crisis was a television interview with ordinary citizens in the marketplace in Elaziğ, a province in eastern Turkey. A local broadcaster sent a team to interview the locals after reporters noticed with shock that the streets and main marketplace of Elaziğ were full of people, so much so that the province was even more crowded than it had been before coronavirus. The crew asked passersby, “What about

coronavirus? Aren't you afraid to be in crowded public places?"

Three interviewees expressed confidence that the power of prayer will defeat all viruses. A few claimed that coronavirus does not exist—it is a lie swallowed by a credulous world. Another said, "Allah always protects the believer." Another contributed this theory: "The entire world is at war with Turkey. This virus is Allah's curse on them."

Turkey and Coronavirus: Divided We Stand

by Burak Bekdil

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The Erdoğan government in Turkey has banned fundraising efforts to fight the coronavirus in municipalities controlled by the opposition. It has frozen the bank accounts of the city of Istanbul and of soup kitchens, shut down hastily constructed coronavirus field hospitals, and cut off free bread distribution—all in opposition-controlled areas. The pandemic has forcefully reminded Turks how divided they remain—a division that is stopping them from coming together to stem a potential catastrophe that is national, not ideological.

Turks often boast about their strong national unity “in good and bad times.” “Dozens of ethnicities came together to win the War of Independence (1920-22),” they learn at school. “The only friend to a Turk is another Turk,” they learn from their elders. Regardless of ideology, ethnicity, or social class, they are equally devoted to their national sports squads. The Crescent and Star, a symbol of unity, is considered a sacrosanct image. The national anthem commands uniform respect: a person might be violently confronted if he keeps walking when others stand still when the anthem is playing.

Yet all that signaling behavior hides a bitter truth: Turks remain deeply and increasingly divided along ideological, ethnic, religious, sectarian, and social lines. The country is even split about whether or not the country is split. A survey in January by Istanbul’s Kadir Has University found that 50.8% of Turks think their society is divided and 49.2% think it is not.

In a 2016 survey commissioned by the German Marshall Fund and conducted by the pollsters Infakto RW, 70.4% of Turks said they

thought differences in lifestyle had grown in recent years while 69% thought political differences had grown too. The study found that 83.4% of Turks would not agree to his or her daughter marrying a spouse who supports a “hostile party.” Similarly, 78.4% would not do business with “the political other,” 76% would not accept them as neighbors, and 73.9% would object to their children making friends with children of “the other.”

This deep underlying hostility has dark implications. A study conducted in 2018 by Istanbul’s Bilgi University found that viewing the political other as different, wishing to remain socially separate from the other, and viewing oneself as “morally superior to the other” results in “demands to restrict the rights of the other.”

The ongoing coronavirus pandemic has forcefully reminded Turks of their deep underlying divisions. Those divisions are making it impossible for them to come together to fight a potential catastrophe that is national, not ideological.

In an address to the nation on March 30, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan launched a national donation campaign asking wealthier Turks, individual or corporate, to help poorer Turks. The campaign only managed to collect an embarrassing \$245 million from a country of 83 million people, and most of that came from government-controlled companies.

Parallel to Erdoğan’s campaign, mayor of Istanbul Ekrem İmamoğlu and mayor of Ankara Mansur Yavaş tried to launch local campaigns to collect donations to help the poorest in their cities, which are Turkey’s largest. But there was a problem. İmamoğlu and Yavaş are opposition mayors who brought Islamist rule in Istanbul and Ankara to an end last year after 25 consecutive years.

The national government declared that city councils, according to law, must obtain permission from the Interior Ministry to launch money-raising initiatives. İmamoğlu and Yavaş argued that other, government-controlled municipalities were raising donations to help workers and small business owners who had lost their incomes due to the coronavirus. Yes, the government said, but they had obtained permission whereas Istanbul and Ankara had not.

On March 31, Vakıfbank, a state-owned lender, froze the Istanbul municipality's account, where coronavirus donations had reached \$130 million. "Pathetic" was all Imamoglu could say. But there was more to come. The Interior Ministry launched criminal investigations against both mayors on charges of illegal fundraising.

"This ban [on municipal donation campaigns] was imposed on orders from Erdoğan," said Kemal Kilicdaroglu, leader of the main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP). "The government has still not recovered from the shock of losing the big cities to the opposition last year," Utku Çakırözer, a CHP member of parliament, told *Al-Monitor*. "At a time when the entire world is looking for ways to protect their citizens against this calamity, in Turkey alone there is a government that is setting such concerns aside to focus on how it can best prevent opposition municipalities from performing their duties."

In the following days the Interior Ministry banned the CHP-controlled Mersin municipality's free bread distribution campaign even as the Central Anatolian province of Kayseri, which is controlled by the government, distributed thousands of free loaves. In Adana, another CHP-controlled city, the municipality's newly opened field hospital for coronavirus patients was closed down by the government because "it did not have the necessary licenses to operate." In Istanbul's Kadıkoy district, another CHP stronghold, a public concert of "national solidarity songs" was banned by the government. On Apr. 10, the Interior Ministry blocked the bank accounts of soup kitchens run by the CHP-controlled municipality of Eskisehir.

After the coronavirus crisis passes, Turks will continue to proudly chant songs and slogans of national unity. They will keep adoring their flag and national anthem. They will fill the stadiums to root for their national teams. They will still believe the only friend to a Turk is another Turk. And half of them will keep privately hating the other half.

Turkey: Post-Coronavirus Challenges Are Likely to Hurt

by Burak Bekdil

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan is faced with a dilemma: in order to avoid US sanctions, he must keep the S-400 system he purchased from Russia unopened, but doing so might open Turkey up to Russian sanctions. Erdoğan's worst nightmare is President Donald Trump following through on his threat of last year: "I will devastate the economy of Turkey."

The coronavirus pandemic has deepened fundamental imbalances in the Turkish economy, making a post-crisis freefall quite likely. However, as far as Turkey's difficult foreign policy challenges are concerned, the virus was like a bell going off at just the right moment to rescue a boxer cornered in the ring. Turkey's Islamist president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan might be privately hoping the world never goes back to normal.

The post-coronavirus period could be payback time for Erdoğan's policy miscalculations and blind ideology calculus. At the start of the Arab Spring, he thought he'd found his moment to build Turkey-friendly Sunni regimes across the Arab Middle East with which he would eventually revive the Turkish empire. Nearly a decade later, those visions of a caliphate, a worshipful *umma*, and Ottoman grandeur spread far and wide appear as illusory as Erdoğan's ambitions to make Turkey a major world power.

One very hot potato is the Russian-made S-400 air and anti-missile defense system Moscow delivered to Ankara last July. No doubt, champagne will uncorked in Moscow the moment the Turkish military turns on the system, which it promised would happen in

April. Turkish officials cite coronavirus as the *force majeure* that has delayed that deeply controversial activation. Turkey's top defense procurement official, Ismail Demir, told state broadcaster TRT on April 28 that the pandemic inevitably slowed down the activation process due to restrictions on official visits and meetings. That may well be true, but Erdoğan's government—especially at a time when unemployment is skyrocketing, the national currency is in freefall, and there is a booming debt stock and prospects of stagflation—does not wish to be questioned about the merits of spending \$2.5 billion on a system that will never be used.

On April 20, *Reuters* [quoted](#) a senior government official who spoke on condition of anonymity as saying, “There is no going back on the decision to activate the S-400s (but) due to COVID-19 ... the plan for them to be ready in April will be delayed.” The phrase “there is no going back” may keep Turkey in the Russian orbit, but this will come at a cost.

“We made our position quite explicit to President [Recep Tayyip] Erdoğan, to all the senior leadership of Turkey, and that is the operation of the S-400 system ... exposes Turkey to the very significant possibility of congressional sanctions, both those that invoke the [Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act] legislation and additional freestanding legislative sanctions,” David Satterfield, the US envoy in Ankara, [told](#) an online panel hosted by the Atlantic Council. The ambassador added: “We do not have in our possession the assurances from the government of Turkey that would allow us to mitigate those concerns.”

“This will be a top-down decision coming from President Erdoğan,” a senior defense official told this author on May 4. “There have been no signs that the president may be rethinking the activation of the system.”

Turkey has already paid a price for the S-400 purchase by being suspended from the US-led multinational consortium that is building the next-generation F-35 Lightning II fighter jet. If sanctioned via CAATSA, Turkey's entire thriving defense industry will suffer. But Erdoğan fears even worse consequences.

Activating the S-400 might trigger punishing sanctions on state lender Halkbank, which is facing US charges of violating the sanctions on Iran. A multibillion-dollar fine on Halkbank could cripple Erdoğan's post-corona economic recovery plans. His worst nightmare is President Donald Trump following through on his threat last year to “devastate the economy of Turkey.”

That would be a losing war for Erdoğan, with both economic and political repercussions. A debt default, collapsing markets, and a further nosedive of the Turkish lira would be the perfect recipe for a punishing financial crisis that could spark early elections.

Ironically, in order to avoid US sanctions, Erdoğan must keep the S-400 system unopened—which would expose Turkey to possible Russian sanctions. Russian economic sanctions cost Turkey billions of dollars within just a few months early in 2016 in the aftermath of the Turkish shooting down of a Russian Su-24 fighter jet in Syrian airspace in November 2015.

In order to minimize diplomatic damage, Erdoğan has launched a public diplomacy campaign to make himself look as pretty as possible to the world at large. Turkey has sent medical kits to 57 countries to show solidarity in the fight against coronavirus, including two consignments of supplies to the US. The boxes bore the [words](#) of 13th-century poet Jalaluddin Rumi in Turkish and English: “After hopelessness there is so much hope and after darkness there is much brighter sun.”

Abdulkadir Selvi, a prominent pro-Erdoğan columnist, [wrote](#) in *Hürriyet*: “America has moved from sanctions talk to a favorable opinion of Turkey ... You could not do this [PR] work even if you spent billions.” That may be too optimistic, but Erdoğan's Islamist supporters continue to believe a few cargo planes full of medical supplies can win hearts and minds in a world half of which remains hostile to Erdoğan's Turkey.

As the S-400 is being frozen because of the pandemic, a Syrian town near the country's Turkish border awaits a return to normal so it can resume its challenge to Ankara. The Turkish military embarrassingly suffered the deaths of around 50 soldiers in February in Idlib. The fire came from Syrian forces with air support from Russia. These deaths shocked Turkey: If the Russians are our allies, why did they kill our soldiers? It's a good question, and one Erdoğan prefers not to answer. Once coronavirus fades away, fire will resume in the Idlib theatre.

On May 3 a convoy of 30 Turkish military trucks entered Syrian soil, most likely carrying supplies to Turkish military outposts around Idlib. On the same day, local observers reported that Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham (HTS), one of the jihadist groups fighting in the Idlib area, **blocked** a Turkish Army column from entering the militant stronghold of Daret Izza near Aleppo. Erdoğan should prepare for the moment when his Russian friends, in the show's final act, force his troops and their jihadist auxiliaries out of Syria.

In addition, accession talks with the EU remain stalled; Turkey will have to find a better way out than gunboat diplomacy if it wants to amicably resolve the disputes over Eastern Mediterranean hydrocarbons; and tensions might well deepen in Libya and elsewhere in the Middle East between Turkey and Egypt, the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Israel, Cyprus, and Greece.

This may be a long, hot summer for Erdoğan.

The Arab World

Coronavirus and the Arab Culture of Secrecy

by Dr. Edy Cohen

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.

Saudi Arabia's Problems: Coronavirus, the Economy, and Geopolitics

by Dr. James M. Dorsey

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Combatting the coronavirus pandemic and coping with its economic fallout may be Saudi Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman's most immediate challenge. Equally urgent is repairing strained relations with the US and ensuring the kingdom's competitiveness with Iran as the two rivals compete for China's favor.

Saudi Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman may feel the global coronavirus pandemic and its economic fallout are the more immediate of his problems as the kingdom gradually lifts restrictions put in place to stymie its spread.

However, looming large on the horizon is a potential rift with the US resulting from the kingdom's oil price war with Russia, which contributed to the collapse of oil markets and an existential crisis for America's shale industry.

President Donald Trump is believed to be weighing [a ban on import of Saudi oil](#) in a bid to force the kingdom to reroute tankers carrying some 40 million barrels of crude to the US.

More fundamentally, Prince Muhammad has put the kingdom's relationship with the US at risk without having any real alternatives. At this time, an agreement among oil producers to cut production amounts to at best a timeout in a price war that is all about market share.

The price war has further strained Saudi Arabia's ties to the US Congress, which was already troubled by the war in Yemen, the kingdom's record of human rights abuse, and the assassination of journalist Jamal Khashoggi at the Saudi consulate in Istanbul in 2018.

Recent Saudi judiciary reforms, including the abolishing of flogging as a legal punishment and death sentences for minors who commit crimes, were an effort to respond to criticism but were unlikely to turn the tide.

Speaking for Congressmen representing US shale states, North Dakota Senator Kevin Cramer [warned](#) that “Saudi Arabia’s next steps will determine whether our strategic partnership is salvageable.”

Salvaging Saudi-US relations may be Prince Muhammad’s only option.

Russian president Vladimir Putin is unlikely to have taken kindly to a [reported shouting match](#) over the phone with the crown prince at the outset of the price war.

Signaling that the production cuts are a ceasefire rather than an end to the war, Saudi Arabia and Russia continued to fight it out on oil markets with the kingdom undercutting Russia with discounts and special offers, according to a [Reuters investigation](#).

Strained relations did not prevent the two countries from moving forward with an agreement on Russian wheat sales to the kingdom. A first Russian shipment of 60,000 tons set sail for Saudi Arabia last month.

Irrespective of the state of Saudi-Russian relations, Russia’s call for replacing the US defense umbrella in the Gulf with a multilateral security arrangement that would involve the US as well as China, Europe, and India is a skeleton with no flesh.

Russia has neither the wherewithal nor the will to shoulder responsibility for Gulf security. Nor do the other states envisioned by Russia as participants in a revised Gulf security arrangement.

Moreover, the proposal is stillborn as long as Saudi Arabia refuses to engage with Iran with no preconditions. During the coronavirus pandemic, the kingdom has hardened fault lines with the Islamic Republic rather than take opportunities to build bridges with goodwill gestures.

China has no appetite for a major military role in the Middle East despite having established its first foreign military base in Djibouti and contributing to anti-piracy operations off the coast of Somalia.

Equally troubling for Prince Muhammad is the fact that he cannot be certain that China would maintain its neutrality if US-Iranian tensions were to explode into all-out war. When the chips are down, Tehran may be of greater strategic significance to Beijing than Riyadh.

Iran's geography, demography, and highly educated population give it a leg up on Saudi Arabia for Chinese favor. So does the fact that China and Iran see each other as the bookends of Asia and share a civilizational history that goes back thousands of years.

Iran also plays a pivotal role in China's Belt and Road-related efforts to link to Europe by a rail line that would traverse Central Asia and the Islamic Republic. This route would end the expensive and time-consuming process of having to transfer goods to ships at one end of the Caspian Sea and then load them back onto trains on the Caspian's opposite shore.

Prince Muhammad's maneuvering to strike a balance in securing Saudi Arabia's place in a world of contentious big power relationships is reflected in coverage by the kingdom's tightly controlled media of Chinese and US efforts to combat the pandemic.

[Andrew Leber](#), a student of Saudi policymaking, noted that "China's mixed record in boosting its image in Riyadh is a reminder that soft-power competition is not a zero-sum game. Even as Saudi outlets have grown more willing to air criticisms of China, some have derided the efforts of President Donald Trump and his administration to blame COVID-19 on Beijing."

Leber's analysis of Saudi media coverage suggests that Prince Muhammad is seeking to keep all doors open. Still, it will take a lot more than vacillating media coverage and reform of the kingdom's penal code to polish Saudi Arabia's tarnished image in the US and level the playing field with Iran when it comes to China.

Coronavirus Threatens to Drive Wedge into US-Gulf Relations

by Dr. James M. Dorsey

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.

Gulf Security: The Arab Gulf States Have No Good Options

by Dr. James M. Dorsey

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The coronavirus pandemic and its economic fallout may rewrite the security as well as the political and economic map of the Middle East. The crisis will probably color Gulf attitudes towards the region's major external players: the US, China, and Russia. Yet the Gulf States are likely to discover that their ability to shape the region's map has significantly diminished.

The US faces a stark choice in the Middle East if it continues its [maximum pressure campaign](#) against Iran: confront the Islamic Republic militarily or withdraw from the region.

Trita Parsi, executive VP of the Quincy Institute in Washington and a former head of the National Iranian American Council, recently [drew that harsh conclusion](#). No doubt, Parsi may be correct in his ultimate analysis. US-Iranian tensions could easily spin out of control into an all-out war that neither Iran nor the US wants.

There are, however, shades of grey that separate longstanding tit-for-tat attacks on US targets—primarily in Iraq, occasional Iranian harassment of US naval vessels in the Gulf, and sporadic US responses—from all-out war.

The US and Iran have been engaged in tit-for-tats with varying degrees of intensity for years and so far have avoided an uncontrolled escalation despite incidents such as the 1988 downing of Iran Air flight 655, which killed 274 people, and the targeted assassination by the US earlier this year of Iranian Quds chief Qassem Soleimani.

Leaving aside potential black swans, a likely scenario is that a US desire to reduce its commitment to the Gulf States, increased Gulf

doubts about US reliability as a regional security guarantor, and a new world in which Gulf and Western states struggle to come to grips with the economic fallout of the coronavirus pandemic combine to create an environment more conducive to a multilateral security arrangement—one that would reduce the risk of war, even if multilateralism seems to be on the retreat around the world.

President Donald Trump's [threat](#) in early April to cut off military sales to Saudi Arabia if the kingdom did not bury the hatchet in its oil price war with Russia, sparking the collapse of the oil markets, is an inevitable epic battle for market share.

More immediately, it drove the message home in Riyadh that US security guarantees were conditional and reinforced Saudi perceptions that the US was getting disproportionately more out of its close ties to the kingdom than the other way around.

The Trump administration, in a little noticed sign of the times, put Saudi Arabia in late April on a [priority watch list](#) for violations of intellectual property rights because of its pirating of sports broadcasting rights owned by Qatar's beIN television franchise. The listing threatened to complicate Riyadh's already controversial bid to acquire English soccer club Newcastle United.

It is still too early to assess the geopolitical impact of the global economic downturn. Depressed demand and pricing for oil and gas could enable China to diversify its sourcing and potentially reduce its dependence on the Middle East, a volatile region with heightened security risks. China imported 31% more oil from Russia last month while its intake of Saudi crude slipped by 1.8 percent compared to March 2019.

At the same time, low oil prices that make US production commercially less viable could temporarily increase Washington's interest in Gulf security.

Fundamentally, and irrespective of what scenario plays out, little will change. The US will still want to reduce its exposure to the Middle East. For its part, China will still need to secure oil and gas supplies

as well as its investments and significant diaspora community in the region while seeking to avoid being sucked into intractable regional conflicts.

By the same token, the gradual revival of economic life, including a probable phased revitalization of supply chains and international travel, combined with a need to rethink migrant worker housing and create local employment, could alter Middle Eastern perspectives of China's way of doing business.

China's BRI projects often have a China-wins-twice aspect to them which, while they have always been problematic, will be even more so in a post-pandemic economic environment. China-funded projects rely by and large on Chinese labor and materials supply rather than local sourcing.

The People's Republic's "China First" approach extends beyond economics and commerce. In an environment in which the US is an irreplaceable but unreliable partner, Gulf States may look differently at Chinese hesitancy to co-shoulder responsibility for regional security with the risk of having to involve itself in multiple conflicts from which it has managed so far to remain aloof.

The coronavirus pandemic is a watershed that will color Middle Eastern attitudes toward all the region's foremost external players: the US, China, and Russia. Prior to the crisis, Russia, the weakest of the three, was playing a weak economic hand well, but it may now find that more difficult.

Gulf States are likely to conclude that assertive go-it-alone policies are risky and only work in circumstances where big powers are either part of the ploy or look the other way—though they were easier to pursue in a stable economic environment in which their oil and gas revenue base appeared secure.

The UAE appears to have read the writing on the wall. It began a year ago to hedge its bets by reaching out to Iran in a bid to ensure that it would not become a theater of war if US-Iranian tensions were to spin out of control. Still, that has not stopped its support for rebel forces in

Libya led by renegade Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar in violation of an international arms embargo.

Trump's threat to cut off military sales to Saudi Arabia should have driven the point home. Yet the kingdom and other Gulf States, which are financially and economically weakened, less able to play big powers off against one another, and deprived of any viable alternative options, may find that a multilateral security arrangement that incorporates rather than replaces the US regional defense umbrella is the only security straw they can hold on to.

But in eventually attempting to negotiate a new arrangement, they may find they no longer have the kind of leverage they had prior to a pandemic that in many ways has pulled the rug from beneath them.

Can the Arab World Cope with the Coronavirus?

by Dr. Edy Cohen

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The coronavirus pandemic caught the Western world unprepared despite all the technology and medical advances available in those countries. What about Iran and the Arab world? How are they coping? These dictatorial states know how to control their populations and suppress both information and unrest, but appear for the most part to have no idea how to fight an invisible virus.

Just as Italy is the source of much of the spread of the virus in the Western world, Iran has been the source of most of the infections in the Arab world. Almost every single case in Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon originated in Iran.

The Iranian regime has no idea how to contain the epidemic. The country has dealt with earthquakes, wars, and revolutions, but is finding it impossible to cope with the rapid spread of the coronavirus.

Arab nations and coronavirus

Photos and videos of night-time burials and dead people lying in the streets are going viral on Arabic social networks.

Ten members of the Iraqi parliament have been infected with the virus. People tracking its spread in the Arab world say only Saudi Arabia has succeeded in dealing with the outbreak and preventing widespread infection among its population.

Some Arab countries simply deny the existence of the virus. Dozens of people have returned infected to Cairo on flights from the US and Europe, but the Egyptian government continues to insist that there are

no coronavirus cases in the country, classifying anyone with symptoms as suffering from “normal influenza.” Egypt has yet to cancel flights arriving from China, unlike most countries of the world. Even after the Egyptian health minister traveled to China to learn about the new virus, deaths linked to it continued to be defined as lung infections.

Saudi Arabia has managed to prevent a serious local outbreak by closing its borders and barring flights from Lebanon, Egypt, Algeria, and Iraq. Iraq has yet to close its border with corona-infested Iran. Lebanon, too, is still running commercial flights to and from Iran, though it was the source of Lebanon’s first cases.

Stories are quietly circulating that many Iranian Revolutionary Guards are escaping to Lebanon with their families to avoid contamination and get medical attention. Lebanon has become a dumping ground for Iran’s sick and fearful.

Palestinian contamination

In the Palestinian Authority, the entire city of Bethlehem is under curfew following the infection of seven local residents, apparently through contact with a group of Greek tourists who were later found to have been infected. No one is allowed to enter or exit the city. Residents of Bethlehem are panicking and hoarding foodstuffs, causing a serious shortage of groceries. A city that was bustling just a short time ago now looks like a ghost town.

A hotel in nearby Beit Jala is packed with infected Palestinians who are being held in isolation along with 15 infected American tourists. It is estimated that thousands of individuals might be carrying the virus throughout the Palestinian Authority-controlled territories.

Meanwhile, countries like Jordan and Egypt are censoring publication of the number of victims infected with the coronavirus. Videos are circulating on social media showing Egyptian authorities moving patients from place to place under cover of darkness.

Some Arab states grasped the danger inherent in the virus and began taking steps early to prevent its spread by closing borders and barring flights from China, Thailand, South Korea, and Italy. Others are

isolating suspected carriers or those who were in contact with a carrier and preventing large gatherings, including mass prayers on Fridays. For the first time in modern history, Saudi Arabia has shut down the holy places in Mecca.

Other Arab states, however, are suppressing and distorting information and denying that the problem exists within their borders. This can have extremely grave consequences, not only for the states themselves and their populations but for the entire region.

This is an edited version of an [article](#) that appeared in Israel Today on March 11, 2020.

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