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The Calm before the Storm? Coping with Corona in the Middle East

Itai Brun and Sarah Feuer

The coronavirus is making its way across the Middle East, forcing states to prepare for the possible collapse of governing systems. The virus struck a region already buckling under the weight of armed conflicts, social upheaval, severe economic distress, and identity-related clashes. The data on corona's spread is far from precise or reliable, given the lack of testing, lagging policies, and likely efforts at concealment on the part of certain regimes. But it is safe to assume that the number of infections is far greater than what is reported. Every regime seeks to mitigate corona's consequences, and for the moment governments across the region appear to enjoy support from the public in doing so. Still, the region could suffer an uncontrollable outbreak, given high population density in certain cities and the sizable clusters of refugees and displaced persons scattered throughout the area. Such an outbreak could spell a humanitarian disaster, exacerbating the region's endemic problems and in some cases leading to a level of chaos that regimes would be hard-pressed to manage. Israel must prepare for the possibility of serious instability on its borders stemming from the outbreak, principally in the West Bank and Gaza.

The corona crisis is in its early days, and the available data reflecting its impact across the Middle East and North Africa is incomplete and largely unreliable. The figures below are drawn from state reporting and independent sources as of March 25, 2020. The number of infections is likely far greater than what is reported due to the lack of adequate testing, difficulties associated with containment, and regime efforts to conceal the true extent of the virus's spread.

War in the Time of Corona

In Syria (population 17 million), the regime of Bashar al-Assad only acknowledged the first, and thus far only, instance of corona on March 22 after weeks of strenuously denying the virus's presence in the country. Independent estimates place the likely number of infections at 2,500, many reportedly stemming from contact with Iranians returning in recent weeks to join the Shiite militias fighting in Idlib and eastern Syria. The regime postponed parliamentary elections originally scheduled for April 13, partially sealed its borders (though flights from Iran continue), closed schools, banned pilgrimages to holy

sites, and canceled Friday prayers in the mosques. Since March 24 a curfew in major cities has been in effect from 6 AM to 6 PM.

In Yemen (pop. 29 million), officials on both sides of the conflict insist the virus has not yet reached the country, where an estimated 15 million people were already facing starvation prior to corona and roughly 70 percent of the population lacks access to basic healthcare. Still, both the internationally recognized government and the Houthi rebels seeking to overthrow it announced the suspension of flights, closure of schools, and establishment of quarantine zones.

In divided Libya (pop. 6 million), a lone case has been formally acknowledged, but the internationally recognized government in Tripoli suspended flights, closed border crossings, canceled sporting events and weddings, closed cafes and schools, and suspended prayers in mosques. The eastern-based (unrecognized) government of Khalifa Haftar imposed a nightly curfew and announced it would be closing its borders with Chad, Niger, Algeria, and Sudan. Despite statements from Western and Arab countries calling on the rival parties to cease hostilities in order to combat the virus, clashes reportedly continue in and around Tripoli.

Protests on Pause

Iran (pop. 83 million) appears to be the hardest hit country in the region. The country has officially confirmed more than 25,000 infections and a death toll of 1,800, but there is likely a great discrepancy between official and actual cases. The government, widely criticized at home for its lack of transparency in publicizing the risks associated with the virus's spread, suspended Friday prayers for three consecutive weeks but only shut down shrines and holy sites last week, and as late as March 18 the Associated Press was reporting that markets in Tehran remained packed with people. The government has turned to the International Monetary Fund for a \$5 billion emergency loan to assist in combating the virus, blaming United States sanctions for hampering the country's ability to adequately stem the epidemic.

Iran's regional footprint has been linked to the corona outbreak in Lebanon (pop. 6 million), where the first confirmed case in February was thought to emanate from the visit of a high-level Iranian delegation there. The official number of infections has risen to over 300, with 4 deaths. The government declared a "medical state of emergency" and closed schools, universities, and airports (except to allow flights bringing citizens home). Supermarkets and pharmacies remain open, but banks have closed, causing widespread panic given the country's precarious fiscal situation.

In Iraq (pop. 39 million), where activists leading demonstrations against the government since October were forced to suspend their protests, the number of reported infections has reached 316, alongside 27 related deaths. Airports are closed, Baghdad has imposed a curfew, and a number of provinces have enforced lockdowns. Corona landed in Iraq at a politically fragile moment, with the recent nomination (as yet unconfirmed) of a new Prime Minister, Adnan al-Zurfi. Zurfi faces opposition from Iran-backed militias, some of which recently launched a series of missile and rocket attacks on US and coalition forces stationed at military bases outside Baghdad. Those attacks drew American retaliatory strikes, heightening prospects of an escalation between the US and Iran on Iraqi soil. Meanwhile, Iraq sealed its border to Iranians wishing to enter, but it has continued to permit Iraqi citizens to return home, despite widespread concerns they are likely bringing additional cases of corona into the country.

In Algeria (pop. 41 million), where a widespread protest movement demanding an overhaul of the political system recently reached its one-year mark, the government banned all public protests, shuttered mosques, canceled flights to and from Europe, and announced an upcoming suspension of domestic flights. The country has reported 264 infections and 19 deaths.

Official figures are much lower in Sudan (pop. 40 million), with only 2 acknowledged infections and 1 death, but the government has nonetheless closed schools and religious institutions, shut down airports, sealed off sea and inland borders, and reportedly begun preparing isolation centers near the border with Egypt.

Calm before the Storm?

In the West Bank and Gaza, authorities have largely copied Israel's approach to handling the outbreak, imposing severe restrictions in an effort to contain the virus.

In the West Bank (pop. 2.5 million), there have been 60 confirmed infections, mostly in and around Bethlehem, where the outbreak originated. The Palestinian Authority has implemented a full lockdown, and coordination between Israel and the PA has continued, including work permits issued to Palestinians on condition they remain in Israel for two months to prevent the virus from traversing the territories. Thus far, 50,000 Palestinians have accepted the offer. Israel has also provided several thousand corona test kits to the PA. In the event the PA is unable to continue controlling the situation, an outbreak of the virus could spill over into Israel. Restrictions on the movement of people and goods between Israel and the West Bank, which are slated to continue for several months, will increase the chances of a major economic crisis, heightening prospects of the PA's collapse and widening chaos in the West Bank.

The relative quiet from Gaza (pop. 2 million) in recent weeks has stemmed from Hamas's preoccupation in trying to prevent an outbreak there, and from Israeli relief measures vis-à-vis the Strip. There have been two reported cases in Gaza, where Hamas has closed schools, opened makeshift quarantine facilities, and required Palestinians returning to the Strip through the Rafah and Erez crossings to remain in quarantine for 14 days. Meanwhile, Israel facilitated the delivery of 500 corona test kits to authorities in the Strip. A reduction in such relief measures or more generally in the scope of cooperation surrounding the virus could bring an end to the quiet and increase the chances of escalation or even a resumption of the mass protests along the border fence with Israel.

In Egypt (pop. 98 million), the government has confirmed 402 infections and 20 deaths (among them two military generals), but reports in international media outlets have suggested the true extent of the virus's spread is far more severe, leading the Sisi regime to revoke the credentials of several Western journalists in the country. The government closed schools, universities, and tourist sites, instituted a nightly curfew, reduced work in the public sector, shuttered nightclubs and cinemas, suspended prayers in mosques, and imposed quarantines for workers in the tourism sector.

In Jordan (pop. 10 million), where 154 infections have been confirmed but no deaths reported, the regime took a relatively aggressive approach to containing the virus following initial concerns that the public was not heeding advice to remain at home. A state of emergency was declared, and the government imposed a lockdown, closing all government offices (except hospitals), ordering private firms to shut down, closing stores except for those selling food and medicine, sealing its land and sea border crossings, suspending all flights, and forbidding all social and communal religious activities. Several hundred Jordanians have reportedly been arrested for curfew violations, and the government has transformed 34 hotels into makeshift hospitals.

Turkey (pop. 83 million) formally acknowledged the outbreak relatively late, announcing its first infection only on March 11. By March 25, that number stood at 1,872 with 44 reported deaths. The government has closed schools and universities, restricted mosque activity to individual prayer, and suspended flights from over forty-six countries, although flights from Qatar remain operational. Turkish Airways has announced that as of March 27, the airline would only offer flights to Hong Kong, Moscow, Washington, New York, and Addis Ababa. In a speech on March 18, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan called upon citizens to stay at home for three weeks, and soon thereafter the Interior Minister announced a curfew for people over the age of 65 and those with a chronic health condition.

In Morocco (pop. 32 million) and Tunisia (pop. 12 million), a combined 284 infections and 9 deaths have been reported. Both countries scrambled to allow flights to bring tourists

back to their home countries, and both have closed mosques, cafes, schools, and universities. In Morocco, authorities have declared a state of emergency, and military personnel are patrolling the streets to ensure people remain in their homes. In Tunisia the government has imposed a curfew and implemented a nationwide lockdown.

Finally, across the six states of the Gulf Cooperation Council – Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Qatar, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, and Oman – 6 deaths and over 2,200 infections have been reported. The hardest hit Gulf state appears to be Qatar, which has registered 526 infections out of a population of 2.8 million (85 percent of whom are foreign workers). All governments have now suspended flights to varying degrees, closed schools and mosques, restricted work in the public and private sectors, and implemented quarantines. In Saudi Arabia (pop. 34 million), where 767 infections have been reported, the regime moved swiftly to seal off the Shiite-majority and oil-rich eastern region of Qatif in a bid to contain an expected spike in cases among citizens returning from the holy city of Qom in Iran.

Implications for Israel: Initial Assessment

Rapidly changing dynamics on the ground, coupled with the more general uncertainty surrounding the virus's spread, render any assessment of the outbreak's long term regional implications premature at this stage. Still, a number of considerations warrant attention in Israel:

1. The Middle East is poised to experience a severe outbreak of the virus, given the population density in certain cities and the millions of refugees scattered throughout the region. The outbreak could lead to a severe humanitarian crisis and exacerbate the region's endemic social and economic problems already threatening the stability of many regimes. The central challenge to these regimes is likely to stem from the collapse of governing systems unable to handle the burdens associated with containing the virus, and from ensuing chaos, rather than from the widespread protests seen in recent years.
2. On the eve of the outbreak, states in the region figured along a spectrum of stability, ranging from those in the throes of war to those experiencing significant social unrest in the form of mass protests to those enjoying a relative, if fragile, calm. This classification presumably rendered countries more or less vulnerable to damage from the virus, both in terms of human suffering and economic repercussions. Still, a snapshot of the region suggests the virus is likely to severely disrupt even states that enjoyed relative stability prior to corona.
3. States that were engulfed in armed conflict prior to corona have been the most handicapped, and the least transparent, in responding to the virus. Even as authorities have announced containment measures, the human toll in these

- countries could be catastrophic. The same can be said for states with large concentrations of refugees, such as Lebanon and Jordan.
4. In countries that have experienced mass protest movements since last year, corona's arrival presented a dilemma for protestors, insofar as congregating in large groups suddenly posed a health risk. By now, most protests have dissipated, offering governments a temporary reprieve. For the time being, publics are largely abiding by their governments' policies, which are perceived as necessary in stemming the virus's outbreak. If regimes manage to cope with the crisis reasonably well, they could ultimately emerge in a strengthened position.
 5. The relative stability of the remaining states may ultimately make them marginally better equipped to handle the outbreak. Still, in some cases that stability was fragile to begin with, and even in sturdier countries like Turkey and Morocco, the very integration with the global economy facilitating that stability will make them all the more vulnerable to economic shocks reverberating from containment measures.

Corona's impact across the region may require Israel to deal with the collapse of governing systems in a number of states. The most consequential developments, at least in the near term, will be in territories bordering Israel, first and foremost the West Bank and Gaza. In both territories, deteriorating conditions could even lead large numbers of people to seek entry into Israel. But alongside the challenges presented by the destabilizing effects of the virus, there may emerge opportunities for cooperation with countries similarly struggling to beat back the pandemic. As such, it will be crucial for Israel to advance cooperation with the Palestinian Authority, Egypt, and Jordan surrounding medical knowledge, the provision of medical equipment and available treatments, and border management.

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