



The coronavirus in the MENA region: Enhancing turbulence or mitigating conflicts?

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Abstract

The novel coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has affected the countries in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region in different ways, and the varying political structures, economic conditions and civil-crisis preparedness of the states in this region have resulted in it being handled in a variety of ways too. Even if it is difficult to assess how the crisis has affected the MENA region in more detail due to the region's general volatility and ongoing conflicts in Libya and Syria, current trends have so far not shown a diminution in regional conflicts. Nor have the pandemic's consequences in the Middle East lessened Europe's problems with the region. Thus the article argues that COVID-19 has not really led to a decrease in the conflicts and wars plaguing the MENA region, and that, therefore, the effects for Europe—both short- and long-term—will still be felt, as existing problems will continue to affect Europe.

Keywords

Coronavirus, COVID-19, Middle East, North Africa, MENA, Conflict

Introduction

This article seeks to give an overview of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic in the Middle East and how it has been dealt with in a sample of countries. It is important to point out that the paper also deals with the greater Middle East, that is, the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region as a whole. The reason for this is that the pandemic itself, along with the many conflicts and wars in the region, is affecting the whole area. Furthermore, the article aims to look at how conflicts and wars in the Middle East have been affected by the pandemic, if at all.

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The main argument of the article is that, however serious a problem COVID-19 is, its impact has not lessened current conflicts or decreased pre-existing tensions to any significant degree. On the contrary, if anything, the pandemic has exacerbated already difficult situations, economically, socially and politically. This can be seen, for example, in Libya, Lebanon, Syria and the tense Israeli-Iranian situation.

The first section of the article looks at how the pandemic has impacted a sample of countries, with comparative figures to better illustrate the situation. The second touches upon some underlying structural and political differences present in the region and how these have affected the impact of the pandemic. Finally, the conclusion sums up the argument of the article and points to some long-term effects that the pandemic may have in the region, as well as for Europe. It also suggests that the EU needs to shape up its responses to the many problems in the Middle East and to better coordinate those responses.

Regional overview

When COVID-19 first started to make an impact in the wider Middle East, two countries stood out. The first was Iran, because the virus rapidly spread there, causing significant levels of sickness and death (Ali 2020). The second was Israel, for the opposite reason, it being the first country to lock down, quickly implement testing and isolate affected areas—measures that led to comparatively few hospitalisations and deaths (Taub Center 2020).

Israel locked down on 19 March, but had by then already implemented various rules to limit the spread of the virus, such as social distancing, quarantines and travel restrictions. Israel has had fewer than 500 deaths since the outbreak began (from 62,000 infections) (Worldometers 2020c), but there has been a spike in cases since late June. In contrast, Iran did not impose a lockdown and has had, according to official statistics (which are not verifiable), nearly 16,000 deaths and 291,000 infections since February (Worldometers 2020b).

Iran and Israel are polar opposites in terms of how Middle Eastern countries have tackled the virus and how it has been combated. It is too early to draw any long-term conclusions about the effects of the virus in the Middle East, since it is still active in the region. However, some tentative general conclusions about responses to the pandemic can be made. To see this larger picture it is useful to start by looking at some concrete examples of the ways in which different countries have handled the outbreak.

As stated above, Israel initially handled the outbreak better than most, which resulted in a comparatively low mortality rate. Up until late June, when the second wave hit, Israel had only had just over 300 deaths (Worldometers 2020c). This compared favourably with countries such as Austria (705 deaths) and Switzerland (nearly 2,000 deaths) which have similar sized populations (Worldometers 2020a and 2020d; figures from 30 June for all countries). However, in late June/early July the country was hit by a second wave and found that it had opened up too soon and too quickly. As a result Israel suffered

backsliding, with steep increases in the number of people who were sick and testing positive (Jeffay 2020).

Neighbouring Jordan and the Palestinian areas fared better when opening up after lockdown but were obviously affected by their proximity to Israel (AFP 2020). However, the closure of the Gaza Strip, due to closed borders with Israel and Egypt, turned out to be a blessing in disguise, as very few people became sick or died there. With only two major entrance points (from Egypt and Israel), the spread of the virus was effectively stopped at the borders and the few cases that did develop were swiftly quarantined (Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center 2020).

Analysis

Across the MENA region, the population is generally young, with 85% being under the age of 55 (Feuer 2020). This factor might mitigate the impact of the virus since, according to the research conducted to date, younger people seem to suffer much less if they are infected (Schraer 2020). At the same time, though, other similarities among countries in the region, such as weak health systems, economic vulnerabilities and tense internal-security situations, have reduced preparedness to combat the pandemic. Examples in this regard are Iran and Algeria, both of which have long been dependent on hydrocarbons and slow to reorientate their economies.

Interestingly, countries lacking natural resources (such as oil), for example, Morocco, have fared better, since they have had to liberalise their economies. Morocco is a good example of the benefits of opening up politically and economically, as it has shown that it is better prepared to endure the pandemic. This has to do with the fact that when opening up and liberalising their economies, countries benefit from a surge in external investment, including cooperative academic medical efforts and research (IMF 2001; Nguyen 2019).

Morocco's position as a gateway between Africa and Europe, the conflict with Algeria over the Western Sahara and being a neighbour to the Sahel mean that the country is constantly dealing with security-related issues. In this Morocco has been fairly successful, but the pandemic has compounded the country's economic problems, with its major trading partners (France, Spain, Italy and the US) restricting movements and trade (UN 2020).

For some of Morocco's neighbours in North Africa, such as Tunisia, the pandemic has highlighted structural dysfunctions and a lack of central planning, which have led to severe problems in handling the pandemic (Otay 2020a). Simultaneously Tunisia has had to deal with a dire economic situation and a difficult counter-terrorism problem at the borders with Algeria and Libya, mainly caused by the ongoing movement of Islamic terrorists across these borders (Otay 2020b; International Crisis Group 2016).

For poorer countries such as Egypt, the combination of corruption, weak medical structures and various degrees of authoritarianism has weakened the response to the

virus. In addition, a side-effect in Egypt has been a surge in conspiracy theories, such as the idea that the virus is a creation of Israel and the Jews and/or an attempt to hurt the country and Islam as a whole (Abdelaziz 2020).

For countries such as Syria, Yemen and Libya, where armed conflicts (including wars of shifting intensity) are raging, the pandemic has added to already serious problems. Because of the ongoing wars, it is impossible to accurately assess the numbers of people who are ill or have been affected by the virus, but the very fact that health systems are effectively non-existent (and in the case of Yemen, were weak even before the pandemic) means that infected people often do not receive the help they require. Furthermore, the various conflicting or warring sides are unable (or unwilling) to effectively meet the onslaught of the pandemic.

Finally, in Iran the combination of the pandemic and the ongoing sanctions (due to the nuclear issue), its meddling in Iraq and Syria, and the simmering conflicts with Israel and its Sunni Arab neighbours has been a real headache for the regime and has hindered the implementation of an effective response to the virus. The slow start when the virus first struck, including a conscious effort by the regime to understate the danger so as not to endanger the election, proved to be disastrous in the longer run. As a result, there have been a large number of deaths and infections in Iran (Ali 2020). Widespread corruption and the authoritarian and oppressive regime have also been obstacles in countering the virus, as the regime is viewed with suspicion by large parts of the population, rendering ineffective even proven measures, such as social distancing rules, which have been ignored by citizens. Iran is a good example of a situation where attempts by the regime to initially downplay the seriousness of the virus have added to an already high level of suspicion towards the leadership (Bozorgmehr 2020; Khalaji 2020).

Conclusion

None of the underlying conflicts (whether outright wars or lower-tension conflicts) in the MENA region has diminished or disappeared due to the COVID-19 crisis. On the contrary, some problems have been exacerbated, if not directly by the virus, at least by the effects of the pandemic. Despite the need for a cooperative international approach to combat COVID-19, tensions have been rising between Israel and Iran (Harel 2020). In the ongoing conflict between Egypt and Ethiopia about the Ethiopian dam on the Blue Nile (Malsin 2020) the parties are far from reaching an understanding, and in Libya the civil war simmers on, in large part because of meddling by Russia and Turkey (Polat 2020). This is without mentioning the fact that the war in Syria is nowhere near over.

What this means for Europe is really 'more of the same', with the additional problem of having to juggle travel, trade and communication with the Middle East without endangering the health situation at home. For example, the huge problem of people-trafficking in the Mediterranean has not visibly diminished during the pandemic (Morgan 2020). The only thing that has changed is that the European Mediterranean littoral states (France, Italy, Greece and Spain) have fewer resources to spend on combating this trafficking, making the crossings even more dangerous for people.

To better handle relations with the Middle East during the difficult circumstances created by the pandemic, the EU needs to reassess its policies. As Winston Churchill said, ‘Never let a good crisis go to waste!’

A first step is to put even more emphasis on helping countries on the southern and eastern littoral shores to better combat the underlying problems and stop the flow of people and illegal drugs at the source. Clearly, the various initiatives in recent years have not been enough.

Second, the Union must better coordinate its response to these challenges. Again, despite no lack of attempts, it is obvious that there is no common outlook on how to respond to and handle either the ongoing wars (in particular in Syria and Libya) or the illegal drug running and trafficking emanating from the Middle East. The EU certainly has the potential political and military clout to be a lot more assertive. What is lacking is the political will to live up to that potential.

Rightly assessed and handled, COVID-19, as a truly international problem, could offer the chance to establish a new EU-wide policy on the MENA region.

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