



Liberal Democracy Institute

Report

100 Days of COVID-19

The indirect effects of COVID-19 Crisis on the
Middle East

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Introduction:

The world is, seemingly, starting to get over the state of denial, which most people adopted as a defense mechanism against the global pandemic labeled as the Coronavirus (COVID-19). We are, bitterly, realizing that we are too weak to stop a microscopic being from attacking our respiratory system and laying many of us dead or sick. The people of planet Earth, with their scientific expertise, mighty militaries, political prejudices, and clashing civilizations, are still struggling, not only to find a medical solution for containing the new virus, but most importantly for minimizing the political and economic damage that shall, inevitably, result from this brutal attack on our human race.

The “divide and conquer” strategy of this cruel attack, by nature on man, forced nations, not only individuals, to apply social and diplomatic distancing. This turned the global crisis into an infinite number of domestic crises. To limit the spread of the Coronavirus, countries had to close its borders and isolate itself from the rest of the world, while domestically forcing a curfew or a complete lockdown. Every government, in every state, is, thus, forced to face the crisis alone. A state’s foreign affairs or regional status, have become of no tangible value, in aiding the “solitary confined” government in the tough battle to rescue peoples’ lives, while preserving a stable economy and an unwavering system of governance.

In this report, the Liberal Democracy Institute, documents and analyzes the indirect influences caused by the COVID-19 political and economic crises, in the world



in general, and in the Middle East in particular, in relation to five main issues: democracy, human rights, terrorism, military affairs, and the foreign policy of the United States in the Middle East.

(1) Coronavirus and Death of Democracy

Unlike historical world crises, such as the World Wars, the Arab Spring, and the global threat of terrorism, as recent examples, the Coronavirus shall not change the world order as much as it is expected to change the political centers of power and governance systems in each country, on an individual basis. This is based on how each government, in each country, is going to perform in its own battle against the ongoing biological threat.

Ironically, the illiberal and non-democratic governments are the ones that are performing the best in fighting the Coronavirus and controlling its economic and political consequences. In those countries, the government have stronger control on private sector businesses and individual citizens and most of the wealth of the country is under government's control. This, surely, played a tremendous role in their government's capacity to provide a quick and effective response to the crisis.

Sadly, the United States of America, the mother of liberalism and democracy in the world, had to compromise its cherished liberal democratic values in face of the crisis. Since the beginning of the pandemic crisis, more than three million citizens lost their jobs. The tycoons of the American private sector ignored several pleas by the Trump administration to intervene to support the economy and to produce emergent medical supplies for hospitals. As a result, President Trump had to reactivate the "Defense Production Act"



of 1950, which, according to the Congressional Research Service report, expands presidential authorities to “influence domestic industry in the interest of national defense... The authorities can be used across the federal government to shape the domestic industrial base so that, when called upon, it is capable of providing essential materials and goods needed for the national defense.

In Europe, there is a strong resentment against the European Union for, shamefully, abandoning Italy and Spain during the biological crisis. While the European Union immersed its head into routine unfruitful procedures, China and Egypt jumped to provide Italy with emergency medical supplies. This situation makes people view the lofty European values of liberalism and fraternity as mere ink on paper. Soon after this crisis is relieved, people’s belief in their European values will be strongly shaken.

In the greater Middle East, the situation is not any better than it is in the rest of the world. According to a recent policy brief by the United Nations’ Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA); “COVID-19 will be responsible for pushing a further 8.3 million people in the Arab region into poverty.”

Yet, on the bright side of affairs, it seems that the Coronavirus pandemic may positively influence the dynamics of ever-boiling troubles in the region. The civil wars in Syria are going through a forced truce, since the beginning of the pandemic. There are higher levels of political and medical cooperation between Israeli and Palestinian authorities in combating the pandemic. The Islamic State (ISIS) terrorists are forced to hide, especially with less monetary funding pouring into their veins via Qatar and Turkey. Iran and Turkey are, respectively, the highest two countries in terms with the number of COVID-19



infections in the greater Middle East. The already suffering economy of the two states shall worsen due to their failure in controlling the spread of the pandemic. This will, definitely, lessen their ability to resume their support and deployment of terrorist organizations in the Middle East.

No one can predict when or how this biological crisis would end. However, we all agree that massive changes, on all forms of beings, are transforming human life as we know it. Despite the global nature of the challenge, the changes resulting from it shall not affect the world order as much as it would affect individual citizens and singular states. Those who may survive are the ones who could adapt, with swiftness and flexibility, regardless of the nobleness or meanness of their political values.

(2) The Future of Human Rights after COVID-19

Due to the ensuing shocks implied by the Coronavirus crisis, governments, worldwide, had to reset their priorities. Human rights issues are among the priorities that are currently subject to massive re-arrangement and re-evaluation to their importance in maintaining the stability and security of human-beings, within the global system, in times of crises.

On the global level, international bodies, such as the United Nations and the Council of Europe issued several statements and guides urging governments to respect and protect human rights while dealing with the Coronavirus pandemic and its consequential political, economic and social crises. They may take years to cure its damaging effects, after controlling the spread of the pandemic. Given the modest role of these international bodies in making a tangible contribution to solving the global pandemic crisis or



mitigating its effects, since the outbreak of the Coronavirus in December, people around the world received their statements and guidance with indifference.

This makes us wonder about the fate of human rights after the world recovers from the Coronavirus crisis. To which extent will people continue to believe in the importance of upholding human rights values? Will governments continue to show commitment to protecting human rights? Yet, the most important question, in this situation, is about the future roles and feasibility of the international bodies, such as the United Nations, which are responsible for preserving and protecting human rights, worldwide.

The pandemic crisis came as a new reminder that these international bodies are dangerously detached and, thus, incapable of resolving the actual sufferings of the human race; except with media statements of solidarity or condemnation. Time and experience have proven the invalidity and lack of influence of their work on protecting human rights. They spent decades promoting a human rights discourse that is too idealistic and too unrealistic to apply in real life for most people and systems of governance.

To be clear, this criticism is not directed at the bare principles of human rights, but rather to the rhetoric adopted to promote the high ideals of human rights, in our world today. Human rights and the international laws associated with them played a tremendous role in preserving the coherence and continuity of the world system post world wars era. However, the current human rights discourse has been abused and taken out of its context, in many instances, to serve the immediate interests of certain countries or political groups. Even worse, we have seen reputable human rights defenders and organizations using human rights rhetoric to justify their support to terrorist



groups and political Islamist organizations like Hamas and the Muslim Brotherhood.

This hazardous deviation in the human rights discourse came from the fact that the international community, in the last two decades, especially after the 9/11 attacks in the United States, gave a priority to promoting civil and political rights on the expense of prioritizing social and economic rights. The gigantic political fluctuations, all over the world, that have been happening since then, limited peoples' understanding of human rights to civil and political rights, and made the social and economic rights more of a domestic issue that local governments should decide about without proper observation or evaluation from the international institutions responsible for protecting human rights.

However, due to the horrific shock that Coronavirus pandemic has caused in the fields of health care and economic prosperity, it seems that the human rights rhetoric prioritizing civil and political rights will be put on a years-long pause, until governments fix the social and economic consequences of the pandemic. Some governments that are more committed to the concepts of individual freedom, open society, and free market, have already started to refrain from exercising these values, while prioritizing the needs of the public society to economic security. In other words, it is expected that in the near future, the interest of the society will be given a priority to the freedom of the individual. This will definitely influence how the world system should perceive and handle the basic principles of human rights.

We have already started to see a change to the traditional human rights rhetoric to keep up with the consequences of the pandemic crisis. In her statement on the COVID-19 pandemic informal briefing to the UN Human



Rights Council, Michelle Bachelet, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, adopted a balanced, but rare, vision to how the UN and similar bodies should handle the pandemic crisis. She noted that “the pandemic is exposing the damaging impact of inequalities, in every society. In developed countries, fault-lines in access to health care; in labor rights and social protections; in living-space; and in dignity are suddenly very visible.” Then she emphasized the respect for civil and political rights during this crisis, as “difficult decisions are facing many governments. Emergency measures may well be needed to respond to this public health emergency. But an emergency situation is not a blank check to disregard human rights obligations.”

The Coronavirus crisis may not cause huge alterations in the conventional relationships between nations or amongst world powers. But it would, inevitably, affect the relationship between governments and citizens, in terms with the extent of the state’s intervention in micro-managing the lives of individuals. Each country’s respect to human rights and individual freedoms would be highly affected by this change. Therefore, we should prepare for this change by restructuring the internal systems, goals, and visions of the international bodies commissioned with the task to promote and protect human rights values and principles, on the global level, and monitoring their application, on the domestic level.



(3) Terrorism Thrives on COVID-19 Crisis

Terrorism thrives in chaos, and there is no bigger chaos than the global humanitarian, political, and socio-economic crises caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. While governments, worldwide, are strained by fighting the Coronavirus and containing its damaging effects on peoples' lives, jihadists are seizing the opportunity to revive their activities by amplifying peoples' sufferings; especially in the areas where poverty, civil wars, and loose governance is prevalent.

Last month, the United Nations warned, in a statement, that "the threat of terrorism remains alive. Terrorist groups may see a window of opportunity to strike while the attention of most governments is turned towards the pandemic." In late March, Islamic State (ISIS) and Al-Qaeda terrorist organizations issued guiding bulletins inciting their followers to use the Coronavirus crisis to rebuild their arsenals, and expand the scope of their operations, while most local and international security forces are disrupted from resuming counter-terrorism operations. On March 19, for example, most countries withdrew their forces from the Middle East as NATO and Coalition Forces announced that they would freeze field operations for two months because of the pandemic.

On the internet, ISIS terrorists are particularly active on social media platforms, since the beginning of the international crisis. They are using trending hashtags, in Arabic, as a bait to hunt the attention of Arab youth and recruit new supporters. They publish attractive media and footage to polish their image and promote the hostile claim that the Coronavirus pandemic is a manifestation of "Allah's wrath" on the "infidels" (i.e. non-Muslims) in the



west. Sadly, the terrorists' endeavors to recruit new supporters could be much easier than before; given this difficult time of unbearable uncertainty and despair stirred by unemployment, economic paralysis, and state shutdown.

On the ground, the life-threatening pandemic did not deter terrorist groups from resuming their activities, especially in Africa and the Middle East. Boko Haram is wreaking havoc in west Africa, since February. ISIS resumed operations in Iraq and Syria, especially in the northern cities. In March, some ISIS terrorists escaped prison in Haska, northeastern Syria, but were quickly recaptured. In Egypt, Associated Press reported that two Egyptian military officials, on condition of anonymity, noted a spike in ISIS attacks in northern Sinai, during March, and that security forces blocked, at least, three other major attacks. Even the Muslim Brotherhood, who indulge into fooling the world by claiming that they are a political rather than a jihadist organization, attempted to stir trouble in Egypt's capital city of Cairo, in mid-April.

During the Coptic Christian Holy Week, in mid-April, Egypt's police forces attacked a terrorist cell in Al-Amiriya, a populous neighborhood in east Cairo. The seven terrorists, killed after four hours of armed clash with police forces, were planning for kidnappings and theft of citizens and senior officials. Although the security forces did not announce the identity of the killed terrorists, there are three strong indicators that they were members of the Muslim Brotherhood.

First; unlike former ISIS operations in Egypt, which mostly relied on young lone wolves, this terrorist cell was composed of seven middle-age men, who lived in or round this neighborhood for more than ten years. Second; the location of the hideout of the terrorist cell is very close to Al-Matariya neighborhood, which was one of the hot areas for Muslim Brotherhood violent



operations, between 2012 and 2015. Third; Aljazeera TV of Qatar and leading members of the Muslim Brotherhood, living in and sponsored by Turkey and Qatar, were strongly defending the terrorists and calling them “innocent civilians” while blaming the police forces for attacking them.

This particular response by Al-Jazeera and Brotherhood leaders raises suspicions, not only about Muslim Brotherhood relationship to the terrorist cell, but also on Qatar’s involvement in sponsoring and empowering this terrorist cell. According to Qatari-Leaks, Egyptian security found out that the terrorist cell in Al-Amirya had received weapons and money, transferred by a Muslim Brotherhood member in Doha, with the purpose to attack churches during the Coptic Christian holidays and kidnap some citizens to use them, later, for bargaining with the state on releasing the imprisoned members of the group.

Terrorist organizations, of all shades and stripes, are attacking the blind side of the globe, as brutal as the Coronavirus is doing. Being weak and distracted is the favor we are offering to terrorist organizations and their state sponsors to destroy world system. The best response to these ruthless attacks should be accelerating the process of economic recovery and allowing daily life routines to go back to normal, as soon as possible.

There must be a way for the efforts to fight the pandemic to succeed, without forcing prolonged periods of lockdown with no clear ending date. This strategy is not helping with containing the pandemic, as much as it is providing the perfect conditions, of socio-economic defeat, for terrorism to thrive on.



(4) Military and Political Power in Face of COVID-19

The infinite number of local crises instigated by the COVID-19 pandemic renewed the old debate on the political and economic role of the armed forces, within the civil state. This ongoing debate has been exploring the sweet spot of balance between the two political principles of “the democratic control of armed forces” versus “the untraditional roles of armed forces.” That is the question on the legitimacy of Armed Forces’ involvement in political and economic activities, without upsetting the quality of the civil government work in public sector, and without hurting market economy and competitiveness among private sector businesses.

The current dynamics of the unique relationship between the military institution and civil government in Egypt is an excellent arena to explore this debate. The vast scope of political power and economic autonomy enjoyed by the military institution did not delay state’s quest to democratic development, as much as it contributed to enhancing the mission of the civil government to provide citizens with basic goods and services, while crushing threats to state’s security and welfare. Armed forces’ state of autonomy, at least in Egypt’s case, has proven to be a safety valve in the times of crises and a parallel vein for economic growth in the times of affluence.

Since the beginning of the Coronavirus crisis, in Egypt, in late February, the government has spared no endeavor to contain the biological crisis and reduce its economic and political consequences on the lives of ordinary citizens. In contrast, the private sector businesses failed to aid the government in managing the crisis. They deliberately abused the state of panic among the people to increase their profits by practicing monopoly over basic



medical and food commodities. Even worse, some famous businesspersons blamed the government for forcing a lockdown to preserve peoples' lives. One Egyptian business tycoon said in a recent press interview that he would rather "see some people die than seeing the country going through bankruptcy as a result of the economic paralysis."

It did not take long for the armed forces to intervene to settle this clash between public and private sectors and reassure the panicked citizens. On the first week of April, President El-Sisi met with senior leaders of the armed forces, and the meeting was broadcast live on national television. The purpose of the meeting was to showcase the measures taken by the Armed Forces' National Service Projects Organization (NSPO) to assist the civil government throughout this crisis, while halting private sector monopoly over food and medical commodities. At the end of the meeting, President El-Sisi, addressing his speech to the public citizens, stated that the purpose of this review is to "explore the readiness of the armed forces to assist the civil government in this crisis, and to assure the Egyptians that there is a 'parallel arrangement' ready to satisfy people's needs."

This is not the first time for the armed forces to intervene to save Egyptians in times of economic or political crises. Some examples, to list a few, are the military bias to people's political will in 2013 revolution against the Muslim Brotherhood regime, and in 2011 revolution against Mubarak regime. Even before that, under the long decades of Mubarak's rule, the military played a tremendous role in keeping strong ties with international allies outside the diplomacy of the dictator regime, and in providing economic relief for the people, in compensation to the failure of the corrupt government; as for example, in the 1992 crisis of a rare earthquake and the 2008 crisis of the lack of bread.



Also, this is not the first time for the private sector businesses to abuse national crises in manipulating the market for their profit. In the early days of applying the economic reform plan, in 2016, the private sector doubled and tripled the prices of commodities for no clear reason. As a result, a large number of middle class families were threatened to lose their purchase power and fall into poverty. However, the armed forces' NSPO intervened, just on the right time, to provide basic commodities to the public for fair prices, saving the majority of citizens from an ill fate caused by private sector greediness.

Rather than appreciating the role of the military institution in enhancing Egypt's economy, the private sector tycoons and some academic experts indulge into blaming the military institution for the incompetency of the private sector. They claim that military's NSPO providing products to the market is putting private businesses' products in a situation of unfair competition. That is due to the cheaper prices that give NSPO's commodities a competitive advantage over the private sector's over-priced commodities. In response, President El-Sisi announced, in November, that the armed forces' NSPO is willing to offer shares of its affiliated companies, through the Egyptian Exchange Market, for interested investors from the private sector. Instead of seizing the opportunity to refresh their businesses and boost the market, many business-owners marked the president's initiative as an attempt to shed the military umbrella over the private sector.

This ongoing academic, and mostly-theoretical, debate on the feasibility and legitimacy of armed forces' political and economic autonomy does not appear to come to a clear conclusion soon. Likewise, Egypt's economic conflict of interests between the military institution and civil government, on one side, versus the private sector businesses, on the other side, does not seem to be settled in the near future. However, most of the citizens, in most countries,



highly appreciate, through practical experience, the significance of the untraditional roles of the armed forces, alongside the civil government, in times of crises as much as in times of abundance.

(5) The American Quest to Close the Gulf Rift

The volcanic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic are reshaping world affairs on various levels. Whether the current shifts in international relations are temporary or permanent is a question that only time and practice can answer. One dynamic of a shifting relationship to observe, during this global tragedy, is the relationship between the United States and Arab Gulf countries. It may not only redefine United States' foreign policy toward the Middle East, but it could also decide for the economic future of the entire globe.

On April 23rd, the American President Trump had a phone call with H.H. Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed, the Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi, and the de facto leader of the United Arab Emirates. Among other issues discussed on the phone call, Trump asked Bin Zayed to "take steps toward resolving the Gulf rift in order to work together to defeat the Coronavirus, minimize its economic impact, and focus on critical regional issues." One day before that, on April 22nd, President Trump had a separate phone conversation with Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani, the Emir of Qatar. According to the White House spokesperson, the President encouraged the Emir to take steps to resolve his country's ongoing dispute with neighboring Gulf countries.

The "Gulf rift" or "neighbor disputes," mentioned in the two phone calls, refers to the diplomatic and economic boycott applied against Qatar by the



Arab quartet – namely; Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Egypt. The boycott is meant to pressure Qatar to stop supporting Islamic terrorist organizations, that have been wreaking havoc, all over the Middle East, and targeting the stability and security of Gulf monarchies, for decades. The boycott was announced at the conclusion of the “Arab Islamic American Summit” in Saudi Arabia, in 2017, which was held a few months after Trump is seated as US President. At that time, President Trump took the side of the Arab quartet against Qatar and blessed the boycott, despite the resound objection from his Department of State.

Over years, Trump’s policy to tacitly endorse the Gulf rift and take sides served his goal to revive the American economy. On the margin of the Arab Islamic American Summit in May 2017, US President Trump and Saudi Arabia's King Salman bin Abdul Aziz signed a series of letters of intent for the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to purchase arms from the United States totaling \$110 billion immediately, and \$350 billion over 10 years. In addition, the financial investments pumped by Saudi Arabia into the American economy have risen steeply, since then. According to Treasury Department reports, Saudi Arabia increased its ownership of US Treasuries by 83%; i.e. from \$97 billion in 2016 to \$177 billion in 2019.

The two phone calls paid by the American President to UAE and Qatar leaders took place only one day after the shocking historic drop in Texas oil prices, on April 20th, which went as low as (\$-40) per barrel. The fall in demand versus surge in supply of oil products as a result of the lockdown, aimed to control the spread of Coronavirus, is one reason for this drop. Another reason is that the United States still needs Middle East oil; not only because of its quality specifications compared to Texas oil, but also because



its availability in the US market acts as a shock absorbent to market ebbs and flows.

Unlike West Texas Index (WTI) price, the Brent price seems stronger in face of political and economic crises. It has not been affected much with the recent “oil price war” between OPEC+ and Russia, which ended with a historic deal to reduce production by 10 million barrels to survive the economic implications of the pandemic. The United States could not be part of this crucial deal because of complicated US laws and regulations that provide a limited authority to the President to decide on matters related to oil production and distribution.

In January, after Iran threatened to target oil fields of Arab Gulf countries, to disturb US economy, President Trump said in a public speech: “Over the last three years, under my leadership, our economy is stronger than ever before, and America has achieved energy independence... We are independent, and we do not need Middle East oil.” Yet, data proves that President Trump’s claims are not true. According to “US Energy Information Administration,” the United States imported 9.10 million barrels per day of petroleum from 90 countries, in 2019. Total of 18% of those imports came from OPEC+, led by Saudi Arabia, while 11% came from Arab Gulf countries.

Clearly, the Trump administration has realized that the policy of blessing, or at least ignoring the “Gulf rift,” or taking sides with one Gulf country against the other is not beneficial for the US economy, on the long run. In fact, it may be a dangerous policy, should Gulf countries, at some point, decide to counter-play the cards of oil prices or financial investments to force certain stances or decisions from the US administration. That is particularly possible in light of



the many predicaments pressuring the American economy, since the eruption of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Now, the reconciliation of Arab Gulf countries and the return of a strong Gulf Cooperation Council have become in the best interest for the United States, economically and politically. We expect to see sincere endeavors by the Trump administration to resolve the disputes in the Gulf, in the next months. Yet, it is Gulf countries' final call whether to accept Qatar back, despite Emir Tamim's continuing support to terrorism and working against the wellbeing of his neighbors.

Conclusion:

Economists around the world note that the devastating economic consequences of the COVID-19 crisis will take years to fix. However, at the political level, it seems that nothing big will change. The same old problems suffered by the Middle East and the entire international community, for more than half a century, since the establishment of the new world order, will remain as they are. Despite the harsh lessons that the Corona Virus crisis has taught the people, worldwide, the chronic social diseases that many of our societies, especially in the Middle East region are suffering from, are hardly expected to be treated without a strong political and popular will.