



Coronavirus in the Middle East – Waiting for Armageddon

[Marek Czajkowski](#)

It is a challenging task to predict the spread of the novel coronavirus, as most of the experts underscore that its characteristics are, to a great extent new. Specifically, it is believed that this pathogen is substantially more infectious than a 'normal' flu strain. However, judging from the current information regarding the course of the pandemic in various countries, we may try to predict its trajectory in areas which have so far been less severely affected. In the Middle East, according to the official data [available](#), the spread of Covid-19 is relatively low. Other than a high rate of infections in Iran and Turkey, the worst-hit country seems to be Saudi Arabia with only 5,862 people infected as of April 15th, 2020. But this is probably just the beginning of the outbreak in the region, and we may expect to see a catastrophic epidemic which will likely erupt in the region. It will also have severe ramifications for regional security.

This commentary explores some of the worst-case scenarios. For this purpose, we assume that Covid-19 will spread rapidly in the Middle East and affect millions of people. Of course, this assumption may be incorrect.

The Middle Eastern Pandemic on the Rise

According to the official statistics, as of April 15th 2020 Iran has become a significant hotbed of the pandemic; There are almost 75,000 SARS-CoV-2 infections in the country, and the death toll from Covid-19 has reached 4,600. The epidemic in Turkey is currently on a steeply rising trajectory (65,000 affected, over 1,400 dead), but most MENA countries, from Morocco to the Persian Gulf

have not been greatly affected yet. It is mostly due to the limited exposure to the original sources of the epidemic in China and the secondary ones in Western Europe. On the other hand, there is a strong possibility that the number of coronavirus cases have been significantly [underreported](#) in some of the weak and dysfunctional countries of the region, which has inevitably affected the official statistics, however it is impossible to assess to what extent.

Despite severe measures undertaken by many countries in the region, which emulate Asian and Western efforts, and sometimes exceeding them, the epidemic will likely spread swiftly across the Middle East. Turkey, Syria, Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, Libya and Yemen will be among the most affected countries. This assumption is based on the political, cultural and economic characteristics of the region which work to a great extent in favour of the coronavirus. Therefore, we may also assume that efforts made by the state authorities to contain the disease will most likely be overwhelmed by the epidemic.

The Political Dimension

All of the countries listed above have experienced powerful internal tensions. From the political struggle in Turkey and Lebanon, through divisions in Egypt and Iraq to wars in Libya, Yemen and Syria. This makes the fight with the virus very difficult, and not only because many people do not trust the authorities, fearing that they will use the threat posed by the epidemic to suppress its opponents. The societies are also, at least to some extent, out of reach of the governments which do not necessarily execute full control over their respective territories. Moreover, the governments are weak, poorly organized, and lack the necessary infrastructure to combat the epidemic. They can also easily be corrupted and are prone to the loss of morale under pressure. All in all, political regimes and the political situation in the region greatly help the pandemic to spread.

Culture

The Middle Eastern peoples are used to living in communities with permanently shared common spaces. Much of life is being lived on the streets within local societies, which also have their own informal leaders. It is extremely difficult to persuade these people stay off the streets, especially in the early phases of the epidemic when they see no obvious reasons to stay indoors. This may be especially so if what the untrustworthy central authorities tell them to do is contrary to conventional local wisdom. Religion also poses a significant danger, because even if higher religious authorities tell people to stay at home and view services via television or the Internet, local clergy may not be so co-operative and may instead urge people to attend in person. These cultural patterns certainly help the disease to gain traction in the critical early phases of its development.

The Economic Dimension

The poor state of the economy is reflected in several issues which are essential for the spread of SARS-CoV-2. First of all, the countries which we have listed above are not only populous, but their populations live mostly in very dense neighbourhoods, such as overcrowded residential zones in big cities and densely populated rural areas squeezed between barren deserts and mountains.

Furthermore, there are vast refugee camps in the region where people are tightly packed in huge numbers within relatively small areas. For example, [5.5 million](#) Syrian refugees are spread throughout the region, most of them, 3.6 million, living in Turkey. In Libya, there are [700,000](#) internally displaced people and refugees. [1.5 million](#) Palestinians live in camps, most notably in Lebanon and Jordan, but [800,000](#) of them are located in the West Bank territory. Apart from Turkey, the countries in the region [most affected](#) by an influx of migrants are Lebanon, which host total 1.4 million refugees and Jordan with almost 3 million. It is [extremely difficult](#) to implement any sanitary preventive measures in these circumstances, with social distancing almost impossible. The relief effort offered by international organizations [will probably not be enough](#) to contain the pandemic once it strikes refugee camps. Secondly, the countries in the region have limited funds to provide their societies with necessary care. Therefore, should the number of infections rise significantly, the health care systems would likely be overwhelmed. And, finally, people in the region are relatively poor, so they will have problems providing themselves with the necessary means for prevention and sustenance.

All of the above will contribute not only to the rapid spread of the disease, but also high mortality rates once local epidemics develop.

In summary, we may expect a quick rise in Covid-19 cases in the Middle East. Once this happens, the virus will spread rapidly, possibly affecting millions of people and killing hundreds of thousands. The pandemic will also contribute to the overall breakdown of local economies. The crisis will hit the poorest groups the hardest; specifically, it may be expected that refugees living in overcrowded camps will suffer the most. The areas which have recently been ravaged by wars will also suffer great calamities.

Consequences for the Regional Security

It could be expected that the extreme circumstances created by the pandemic may extinguish existing conflicts, or at least lower their intensity. This assumption is partially correct. During dangerous internal situations, countries tend to turn inward to concentrate on solving their existential problems. Moreover, weakened economies make aggressive attitudes [less sustainable](#), as active external postures are usually rather costly. The public, frightened by the pandemic, will also be less ready to accept external engagements, as they are usually conducted at the expense of other, more pressing needs. Likewise, internal tensions may be diminished due to limited public activity and individual preoccupation with ensuring personal safety. In some cases, internal conflicts may be reconciled by the [need to co-operate](#) in the fight against the common threat. All in all, countries which are confronted with significant internal problems may be considered less aggressive when it comes to foreign relations and less prone to internal tensions. The same more or less refers to non-state actors, as their supporters are mostly anxious about existential issues.

But the situation may also evolve in the opposite direction. It is a well-known political pattern that countries which experience internal problems turn outwards and even intentionally inflame external dangers to distract public attention from domestic issues. The most notable current example is Russian foreign policy. Moscow is escalating its conflict with the West and exaggerates external threats to rally the nation around the strong leaders who otherwise would

not be so popular as they cannot ensure the economic growth of the state and welfare of the nation. In the Middle East, ravaged by wars and full of tensions, it is always easy to point at existing, or invent a new, external threats to divert the public's attention from other problems. It is, however, difficult to predict if a scenario of this kind will play out during the coronavirus pandemic. It is an entirely new danger, one of genuinely existential nature and very stressful because it refers to an invisible enemy, and therefore it is so difficult to combat. Consequently, it is unknown if the governments facing such a dire epidemiological situation at home would dare to risk escalating conflicts to divert public opinion from the health issues. But it is possible, at least as a worst-case scenario, that the spread of the pandemic in the Middle East could eventually contribute to the extension of conflicts which may even escalate into open inter-state wars. Iran and Turkey in the near future could move to intensify current conflicts if pressed by the difficult epidemiological situation at home. Syria, on the other hand, might experience renewed violence or use the opportunity to expand government control over the country.

The situation in Turkey is very volatile, mostly because the autocratic tendencies displayed by President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan have undermined the very foundations of the secular and democratic values still held by a significant part of the society. The president faces stiff opposition, despite harsh measures to suppress it. The most notable setback he experienced was the 2019 local elections in the most populous city of Istanbul, which were won by the opposition. Furthermore, Turkey has been facing a serious economic crisis which [started](#) in 2018. A health crisis will undoubtedly exacerbate these problems. What is more, the wide spread of the coronavirus will put the domestic health care system under pressure, meaning it will probably be overwhelmed by the wave of infections. This will certainly contribute to the popular anger which will be directed against the authorities.

In the case of rising resentment at home, coupled with economic downfall and political pressure, Erdoğan may try to resort to nationalist rhetoric and threaten inflation to rally the nation under his leadership. What is more, he is in a very convenient position in that respect as the arch-enemy of the Turkish state is close at hand. This refers of course to the Kurdish nation, which resides inside Turkey and expresses a strong desire for independence. The Kurds are also present in Syria, and they have created a robust semi-autonomous political structure there, with their own administration and highly capable armed forces. Its presence is considered in Ankara as a direct threat to the very existence of the Turkish state. Therefore, Turkey has conducted several recent military operations which resulted in the occupation of vast parts of northern Syria by the Turkish army and their affiliated Syrian proxy forces. Additionally, Turkey has a strong presence in the Syrian province of Idlib, where it has rendered significant assistance to mostly jihadist rebel groupings in their fight against the government in Damascus.

The situation in Syria is currently stable, with only limited clashes, but nonetheless it offers Ankara many opportunities to escalate the conflict. If Erdoğan decides that it is necessary to draw public attention to external matters, Turkey may easily exploit the existing tensions to induce skirmishes, which would morph into a broader operation. Turkey may even mount a full-blown invasion under the pretext of securing its borders with Syria and gain more space to relocate Syrian refugees from the camps in Turkey. With respect to that, we have to remember that the Turkish army is the second biggest in NATO, and is modern and well-trained. The Kurdish

fighters, even if supported by the Syrian government forces, would be no match for Turks should Ankara decide to use its military capabilities in full.

Of course, any Turkish offensive action in Syria would be dangerous and come with a high price tag both in terms of money and human lives. It would also be a tremendous political gamble on the internal and international political fronts. Furthermore, it would put Turkey on a collision course with Russia, which serves as a guarantor of the cease-fire agreements in Syria and which maintains a limited military presence there. But these obstacles to the execution of a next Turkish operation in northern Syria may not be enough, should Ankara decide it has become necessary to beef up the nationalist mood in the country and distract public attention from internal problems. And so, it could happen if the spread of the epidemic reaches a high enough level to threaten to overwhelm the health care system, resulting in rising public outrage.

Similarly, Iran might step up its confrontation with Israel and the United States. The situation in Iran is very complicated, the economic conditions are dire, and the public is, to a great extent, suffering from financial hardship. Despite its wealth, the oil-rich nation has been suffering from the economic crisis for years. It is caused by the international sanction regime, but also by the mismanagement by the authorities and the heavy burden of armaments and external engagement. The coronavirus outbreak, which has already hit Iran severely, only added to these existing internal problems. The authorities also mishandled the response to the rising epidemic, and the fatality rate is probably significantly underreported. All these factors may contribute to an increase of anti-government sentiments in the coming weeks and months. This, in turn, might nudge Tehran to adopt a more active stance in its foreign policy.

Currently, the Iranian operatives and military units are conducting military operations against the American installations and units in Iraq. Iran maintains a large and constant presence in Syria, where Tehran is creating a staging area for actions against Israel. Correspondingly, both the United States and Israel are conducting military operations against Iran, with such notable examples as the assassination of the Iranian general Qasem Soleimani, or airstrikes which are frequently conducted by the Israeli Defence Forces against Iranian targets in Syria. In fact, a permanent armed conflict between the U.S. and Israel on the one side and Iran on the other is underway, even if it is not publicly acknowledged. This state of affairs makes any escalation easy to implement for Tehran if such a decision is made. And it may occur as a result of huge unrest at home caused by economic hardships and the dreadful epidemiologic situation.

Syria, as a source of possible renewed hostilities caused by the coronavirus pandemic, is a somewhat different case in comparison to those previously mentioned. The country faces probably the most challenging internal situation of the three mentioned. It is emerging from ten years of civil war, its finances are in tatters, the infrastructure is largely destroyed, and whole cities have been turned to ruins. The population is to a great extent restive, anti-government sentiment has not died out after rebel-held enclaves were subjugated. On the contrary, brutal pacification has left huge scars on local societies which blame Damascus for their hardships. Syria is also, like many other Middle Eastern countries, composed of numerous tribes and clans, which adds to the internal divisions. Dread caused by the expanding epidemic may become the decisive impulse which would rock the society, or at least some parts of it. This could reignite the civil war in the country.

But Syria may also deliberately escalate the conflict, not to distract the public from the internal problems but rather to exploit the rising opportunities brought by the epidemic. Currently, there is a heavy Turkish presence in the Idlib province, the last significant rebel-held enclave. Ankara [used its army](#) to prevent the province from being conquered by government forces in February 2020, and it is adamant about remaining there indefinitely. But it is likely that the epidemic's spread in Idlib, where there are densely populated areas and refugee camps, would weaken local jihadist militias and Turkish forces. In these circumstances, the Syrian government may try its luck and launch a new offensive in Idlib, even without Russian permission. Damascus may also try to drag Russia into an escalation of the conflict with Turkey. Of course, all of this would be possible only if Turkish forces were substantially weakened due to the epidemic or internal unrest in Turkey, which would put pressure on Erdoğan and make him unable to respond forcefully.

Conclusion

In this commentary we have presented only the worst-case scenarios which may, or may not, materialize. We reiterate that the situation is so new that it is extremely difficult to predict. Furthermore, we have not mentioned many aspects of the complicated situation in the Middle East, which might also be affected by the pandemic. For example, as Moscow has its [own coronavirus problem](#), it may change Russia's stance in the region. The situation is dynamic and requires a lot of research – our short commentary is only a small and intentionally one-sided contribution. Therefore, we agree that the coronavirus outbreak in the Middle East may actually extinguish some of the conflicts and even bring enhanced stability in the medium to long-term. There are also other possible scenarios regarding the influence of the pandemic on Middle Eastern security, referring to many regional problems and analyzed from various perspectives.

Citation: Marek Czajkowski, 'Coronavirus in the Middle East – Waiting for Armageddon', *KBN Commentary* 2020, no. 12 (67), 15 April.