



APRIL 2020

## Pandemic or pandemonium? Covid-19 and conflict in the Middle East

An examination of weak states without money, strong states without money and strong states with money in the Middle East can help to identify the different impacts of Covid-19 across the region. Weak states without money will see a surge in activity on the part of (armed) substate actors and increased foreign interference in the conflicts that plague them under the banner of Covid-19 assistance. Strong states without money become more vulnerable to unrest, political crises and conflict as revenues from tourism, trade, remittances and external sources decrease. Strong states with money have an opportunity to increase their regional influence but also face trouble due to their oil dependency and slow economic diversification. Finally, the Covid-19 pandemic offers several opportunities for the European Union (EU) to engage in and encourage positive conflict resolution:

- It could massively support Iran's 'post-Covid-19 recovery' using INSTEX
- It could advocate strongly for better rights to residency and work for refugees
- It could encourage the region's strong states with money to enact a regional 'Marshall Plan' that encourages cooperation and keep a healthy distance from US policies
- It could nudge Turkey westwards by offering economic stimuli in exchange for greater respect for human rights and political dissidence.

### Introduction

The Middle East was already plagued by war, famine and death in the form of the Syrian and Yemeni civil wars, the Israeli occupation of Palestine, the conflict between Iran and Saudi Arabia as well as the US, radical extremism, the Kurdish question and Iraq's many travails – in large part a result of decades of autocracy, corruption and repression. The outbreak of Covid-19 added pestilence to this trio and makes for a harmful long-term mix.

With this in mind, the purpose of the brief is twofold: first, to examine the longer-term impact of the virus on political tensions and conflict in the region; and second, to explore opportunities for innovative conflict resolution that might be seized in the wake

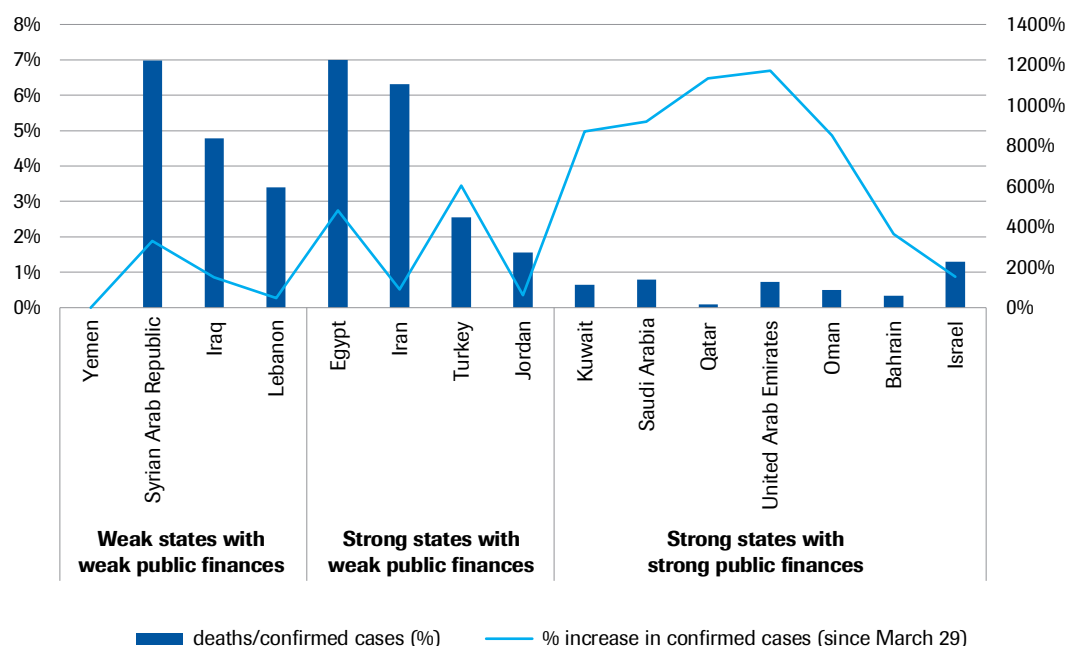
of Covid-19. In this way, we hope to stimulate something good coming out of this trying period yet.<sup>1</sup>

### The spread of Covid-19 so far

The fact that nearly half the Middle East's population is under the age of 24<sup>2</sup> is likely

1 We thank Joseph Bahout (Carnegie Middle East) and Jalel Harchaoui (Clingendael) for their feedback. The brief naturally remains the responsibility of its authors.  
2 See: <https://data.unicef.org/resources/middle-east-north-africa-generation-2030/> (accessed 18 April 2020).

**Figure 1 Covid-19 deaths (% of total confirmed cases); % increase of Covid-19 confirmed cases in the Middle East between 29 March and 26 April 2020**



Source: Authors' calculations based on World Bank data

to make it somewhat easier to manage the acute health crisis the pandemic has caused in both the United States and China. The region's fatality rate is indeed lower than that of European countries for the time being. Even so, the WHO registered 269,484 cases and 9,418 deaths in the region per 26 April 2020.<sup>3</sup> The real number is likely to be higher, as there is no reliable reporting from Syria, Yemen, Egypt or Iran because of conflict, official denial or both.<sup>4</sup>

Analysis of available data on the spread of Covid-19 through the region indicates that the outbreak was consecutive. Some countries in the Levant, such as Iran and Iraq, registered deaths ahead of the Gulf, which lags a few weeks behind. Wisely, 'weak states' such as Lebanon, Syria

(regime-held areas) and Iraq took more stringent containment measures like curfews, lockdowns and isolations early, in recognition of the more limited capacity of their healthcare systems to deal with a massive outbreak. In contrast, 'strong states with money' such as the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Saudi Arabia took such measures somewhat later since they relied more on largescale testing and better healthcare.

Nevertheless, such strong states continue to record a faster increase of their caseload, but so far this has led to fewer deaths. All countries in the region are still recording increases and most have not yet flattened the curve. Numbers are expected to increase over the next few weeks as many countries relaxed measures because of Ramadan, which will further strain capacities and possibly produce unexpected vectors of contagion (see Figure 1).<sup>5</sup>

3 See: <https://datanalytics.worldbank.org/covid-dashboard/> (accessed 27 April 2020).

4 For example, the Assad regime has continuously downplayed the extent of Covid-19 in Syria despite having put two entire quarters of Damascus – Sayyeda Zainab and Mneen – under lockdown early. These quarters are linked with Iran-linked Shi'a militia that have been an important vector of contagion.

5 This section is based on analysis using data from the [World Bank's Covid-19 dashboard](https://datanalytics.worldbank.org/covid-dashboard/). The various graphs thus produced are in the possession of the authors and available on request.

**Table 1** Government effectiveness (Govn't effect.) scores and credit ratings for key Middle East countries

Group A: Weak states with weak public finances			Group B: Strong states with weak public finances			Group C: Strong states with strong public finances		
	Govn't effect. (1)	Credit rating (2)		Govn't effect.	Credit rating		Govn't effect.	Credit rating
<b>Yemen</b>	0.5	Not rated	<b>Egypt</b>	31	B+	<b>Kuwait</b>	50	AA
<b>Syria</b>	3	Not rated	<b>Iran</b>	38	B+	<b>Saudi Arabia</b>	65	A
<b>Iraq</b>	9	B-	<b>Turkey</b>	54	BB-	<b>Qatar</b>	75	AA-
<b>Palestine</b>	21	Not rated	<b>Jordan</b>	57	BB-	<b>Israel</b>	86	A+
<b>Lebanon</b>	26	RD (default)				<b>UAE</b>	90	AA

Sources: World Bank, *Worldwide governance indicators (2018)*, [online](#); Fitch ratings, [online](#) (both consulted 18 April 2020). (1) = percentile rank (0-100); (2) = AA+ to AA- is high grade; A+ to A- is upper medium grade; BB+ to BB- is non-investment grade speculative; B+ to B- is highly speculative.

For an initial assessment of the primary (health) and secondary (economic) impact of Covid-19 across the Middle East, we take a brief look at country scores for the World Bank governance indicator for 'government effectiveness' and at country sovereign credit ratings (see Table 1). The first is a useful proxy indicator of how well a government is likely to weather the health crisis that Covid-19 may cause, whereas the second is a workable indicator of the fiscal ability of a country to recover from the economic damage the virus is certain to cause.

Based on the data in Table 1, it seems likely that both primary and secondary impacts of Covid-19 will vary significantly across the region. The governments of Group A countries will largely need to let the virus run its course because they are not able to intervene effectively in terms of administrative skills, health care capabilities and public confidence. Substate actors will play a bigger role in the Covid-19 response and recovery than elsewhere – not by design, but out of necessity. Consider Hezbollah in Lebanon or the Popular Mobilization Forces in Iraq. The secondary impact in Group A countries will be large and include growing

poverty,<sup>6</sup> further regression of state authority and a growing influence of foreign sponsors. Given that Iran has a substantial presence in many Group A countries, the chance of conflict with Israel and the US might increase in the medium term if Iran manages to mobilise and strengthen its affiliates effectively. The retreat of the state could also trigger further protests of the kind we have seen in Lebanon, Iraq and Algeria in the medium term.<sup>7</sup>

The governments of Group B countries can mobilise an effective response to Covid-19 and can protect their populations from the worst effects. This is not a given though, as authoritarian regimes are conceptually not attuned to dealing with health hazards or may not care. The late responses and denials of both China and Iran illustrate this well.<sup>8</sup>

6 UN ESCWA, *Mitigating the impact of COVID-19*, Policy brief 2, 2020, [online](#). The WFP warns of famine in both Syria and Yemen. See: FSIN, *Global report on food crises 2020*, FSIN and GNFC, 2020, [online](#).

7 Wehrey, F., 'Will the Virus Trigger a Second Arab Spring?', *New York Times*, 6 April 2020, [online](#).

8 Feldwisch-Drentrup, H., 'How WHO became China's Covid-19 virus accomplice', *Foreign Policy*, 2 April 2020, [online](#).

But once such governments shift into action, they can concentrate resources fast.<sup>9</sup> Their bigger problem is the secondary (economic) impact of the virus. Trade flows, remittances, tourism revenues and investment will remain suppressed for a long time, given the probability of repeat outbreaks. This means that Turkey, Egypt and Jordan will hardly be able to alleviate economically lean times via the public purse. Low oil prices will provide some solace, yet largescale international support will be needed. But IMF support might come with conditions that are unattractive to autocracies.<sup>10</sup> Economic malaise could tip Group B countries into crisis if it reinforces challenges to autocratic rule – such as deterioration of the AKP’s electoral fortunes in Turkey or Jordan’s Hashemite monarchy coming under greater domestic pressure to democratise.

The governments of Group C countries are capable and have strong public finances. They can reduce the impact of Covid-19 on public health and support economic recovery. After having put their domestic affairs in order, they could step up in the region. For example, Saudi Arabia is already trying to use Covid-19 as a face-saving way to extract itself from its Yemeni morass by declaring a ceasefire. By offering aid to Iran, the UAE seeks to improve ties with that country. At the same time, however, the Gulf countries face a financial crunch in the form of lower oil prices and reduced foreign investment that threatens their public finances and economic diversification plans, such as Saudi Vision 2030. This will put more pressure on their sovereign wealth funds and limit their ability to finance an expansive regional policy.

## Weak states without money in times of Covid-19

Syria and Yemen remain in the throes of civil wars that have included the deliberate targeting of health facilities by Russian and Saudi air forces respectively. They have almost no ability to deal with the virus and its aftermath. Syria is even likely to spread Covid-19 further, as Iran-linked militia are important transnational vectors of contagion.<sup>11</sup> The Palestinian Authority appears to be working in a newfound spirit of very temporary brotherhood with Israel because of the tight links between their economies, notwithstanding the fact that these links are grounded in discrimination and subservience. But this may save the West Bank from the worst of the Covid-19 scourge, although the same does not apply to Gaza, which could yet face a catastrophic outbreak of Covid-19 due to the Israeli blockade and Tel Aviv refusing to test samples coming from Gaza.<sup>12</sup> Which brings us to the more interesting countries in this category, namely Iraq and Lebanon, because of the surprising contrast they offer.

In Iraq, political parties, religious organisations and armed groups compete to provide humanitarian and economic assistance to their constituents while the country’s political elites continue to negotiate the formation of a new government. The Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF)<sup>13</sup> have led much of the relief effort so far through public awareness-raising workshops in universities and schools, disinfecting streets and public buildings, and guarding cities and neighbourhoods – supported by a rebranding campaign that showcases their rapid switch from the provision of security to the provision

9 Fukuyama, F., ‘The thing that determines a country’s resistance to the Covid-19 virus’, *The Atlantic*, 30 March 2020, [online](#).

10 The jury is out on this for now. Where President Erdogan rejected the use of an IMF Covid-19 emergency package (focusing instead on a Memorandum of Understanding worth USD 5 billion of bilateral trade with Beijing), Egypt just asked the IMF for a bailout loan. See: *Financial Times*, [online](#), 12 April 2020; AP News, [online](#) (both accessed 24 April 2020).

11 See for example: <https://twitter.com/OALD24/status/1240024546339684355> (accessed 21 April 2020).

12 Middle East Monitor, [online](#) (accessed 28 April 2020).

13 Our extensive work on the PMF is accessible here: <https://www.clingendael.org/research-program/levant>.

of relief.<sup>14</sup> In addition to making their field hospitals accessible to the public, the PMF have joined forces with the Shrine authorities in Karbala to build a civil hospital with the capacity to accommodate over 90 patients in intensive care stations.<sup>15</sup> But in the main, much of this is more spin than substance, leaving Iraq with little choice but to lock down and deal with the virus as it spreads.

Although Lebanon shares structures similar to Iraq's sectarian quasi-democracy, features a weak and inefficient central state and recently saw its public finances tumble into disarray, it offers a modest contrast. It has so far been more successful in containing the spread of Covid-19. This is the result of efficient government containment measures (lockdown, strict curfew, confinement protocol for returnees from abroad), the mobilisation of efficient sectarian structures and harnessing the country's excellent private healthcare sector to the fight against Covid-19 by ministerial decree.<sup>16</sup> A recent public opinion survey shows that 82% of Lebanese view the government's performance in recent weeks as adequate.

It is worth noting that at present the Lebanese government consists only of the 'March 8' political camp, i.e. Hezbollah and its allies. As a result, Covid-19 offers Hezbollah a major test case – and opportunity – to prove itself. It has so far used Covid-19 to increase popular support for the government it leads, after having

faced protracted protests.<sup>17</sup> For example, Hezbollah's chief Hassan Nasrallah ordered his party to deploy over 20,000 of its 'Islamic Resistance medics' across a Beirut hospital it owns, four disused hospitals it newly rented, 32 medical centres and three field hospitals that it set up seemingly overnight.<sup>18</sup> Such a move is part of a wider trend in which political parties mobilise their charity organisations to assist constituents. For example, the Lebanese Forces (a political party) created 'crisis cells' to help coordinate the return of Lebanese from abroad and provide financial aid.<sup>19</sup>

In brief, the Covid-19 crisis has provided political elites and substate actors in both Iraq and Lebanon with an opportunity to reassert their roles in relation to the very citizens who were protesting against them only weeks ago – and in some cases still are. But these citizens have now become dependent on their services once again. In times of need, protesting may come to risk being cut off from essential substate sources of support and recovery.

## Vulnerable humans in vulnerable states...

According to 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.<sup>20</sup> Among many refugee

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14 See: <https://twitter.com/teamsmediawar/status/1248659291415904258> (accessed 19 April 2020).

15 See: <https://twitter.com/teamsmediawar/status/1244325436282241024> (accessed 19 April 2020).

16 The decree can be accessed here: <https://www.moph.gov.lb/en/laws#/Laws/view/21>

17 See: LBC Group, [online](#). The crisis has also provided Hezbollah and the PMF with an opportunity to take party political credit for government interventions through clever propaganda such as distribution of publicly financed face masks with party logos, politically sponsored meals to citizens under government quarantine and follow-up with returnees and infected citizens by Hezbollah representatives. See: <https://twitter.com/abirsasso/status/1248674161918128130>; The National, [online](#) (both accessed 20 April 2020).

18 See: Reuters [online](#) (accessed 20 April 2020).

19 See: <http://lcps-lebanon.org/featuredArticle.php?id=286> (accessed 20 April 2020).

20 Global Focus UNHCR Operations Worldwide, Middle East and Turkey, [online](#) (accessed 8 April 2020).

populations, basic services are poor, facilities overcrowded and income losses due to Covid-19 already severe.<sup>21</sup> In camps, hygiene is limited.<sup>22</sup> For example, there is a dearth of hospitals, health facilities and intensive care units in both the Idlib and Aleppo governorates in Syria.<sup>23</sup> Many refugees also have lower resilience due to previous trauma and social distancing might not be feasible in large refugee camps. While some of these factors could be alleviated by the UN Global Humanitarian Response Plan for Covid-19, the effectiveness of the UN's work and its partners is also deeply affected by the virus outbreak.<sup>24</sup>

Moreover, in countries such as Lebanon, only 22% of refugees have legal residence. Many are undocumented and will be reluctant to turn to international organisations for treatment because of the risk of deportation. To make matters worse, the Covid-19-induced surge in unemployment has already led at least 21 Lebanese municipalities to introduce discriminatory restrictions against Syrian refugees that do not apply to Lebanese residents – ostentatiously to fight Covid-19.<sup>25</sup> Further north, the Turkish public has severely criticised its government for supporting Syrian refugees financially and medically, which is seen as short-changing Turkish citizens affected by Covid-19.<sup>26</sup> In sum, large refugee populations that are already vulnerable are likely to face the brunt of the Covid-19 crisis alone. A vicious cycle of new outbreaks among such groups and, in response, further discriminatory measures

by host governments may well ensue without strong international intervention.

### ... in a region facing economic headwinds

Many states in the Middle East were already struggling with severe domestic economic challenges before Covid-19. The pandemic will only aggravate these by throwing existing structural weaknesses into starker relief (see Table 2 below). At the most extreme end, Syria has lost about 65% of its GDP compared with pre-war levels.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, the slump in global demand has sent the oil price through the floor, which has made Iraq's budget untenable once it runs out of reserves – about 95% of its 2019 budget relied on oil revenue.<sup>28</sup> Import-dependent and undiversified economies like Lebanon, Jordan and Palestine are being served another shock, although the low oil price will soften the blow a little. But a low oil price also means that Gulf economic activity will contract, suggesting a steep drop in the flow of remittances, investment and development funding towards Jordan, Yemen, Palestine and Lebanon.<sup>29</sup>

21 See for instance: Al-Monitor, [online](#) (accessed 28 April 2020).

22 Allinson, T., Hussein, M., 'Covid-19 virus: How are Middle East refugee camps prepared?', *DW*, 11 March 2020.

23 Dost, P., 'Covid-19 virus is exacerbating the precarious situation of Syrian refugees and IDPs', *Atlantic Council*, 27 March 2020.

24 United Nations, *Global Humanitarian Response Plan Covid-19*, 2020, [online](#).

25 Human Rights Watch, *Lebanon: Refugees at Risk in Covid-19 Response*, 2 April 2020, [online](#).

26 Cetingulec, M., 'Syrian Refugees villainized as Turkey faces costs of Covid-19 virus', *Al-Monitor*, 5 April 2020.

27 Mehchy, Z., *The Syrian Pound Signals Economic Deterioration*, London: Chatham House, 2019.

28 OEC World Data on Iraq at <https://oec.world/en/profile/country/irq/> (accessed 21 April 2020).

29 Powers, C., *The Covid-19 Pandemic and the Arab World: Impact, Politics, and Mitigation*, Arab Center Washington DC, 2020; IMF Data. 'Central Government Debt, Percent of GDP'; Jalilvand, D., *Game of Chicken: How the Oil Price War threatens the Gulf*, European Council on Foreign Relations, 2020.

**Table 2 Economic vulnerabilities in selected Middle Eastern countries before Covid-19**

Countries	Economic vulnerability	Main factors
<b>Group A: Weak states with no money</b>		
<b>Syria</b>	Very high	Currency crisis, large economic contraction, no foreign investment, no productive sectors, US and EU sanctions, extreme poverty, high inflation
<b>Iraq</b>	Very high	High dependency on oil exports for revenues, high dependency on imports for goods and commodities, currency crisis, political deadlock, social crisis
<b>Lebanon</b>	Very high	Financial, currency and social crises, undiversified and import-dependent economy
<b>Palestine</b>	Very high	Risk of rising unemployment and poverty levels, low capacity for state interventions, humanitarian emergency in Gaza
<b>Group B: Strong states with no money</b>		
<b>Turkey</b>	Medium-high	Low investor confidence, high public debt, currency crisis
<b>Iran</b>	Medium-high	US sanctions, high poverty rate, weak private sector, food insecurity due to import-dependency, economic contraction
<b>Jordan</b>	Very high	Sluggish growth, high level of dependency on tourism for revenue, high unemployment rate, high percentage of workforce in the informal sector, high levels of government debt
<b>Egypt</b>	Very high	Heavy reliance on external funding, high level of dependency on tourism revenue and oil/gas extraction, rising inflation, high levels of unemployment, significant social inequality

Sources: World Bank Group, 2020. *Global Economic Prospects: Slow Growth, Policy Challenges*, 112; Jalilvand (2020), *op.cit.*; Erdemir, A., Lechner, J., 'The Covid-19 virus will destroy Turkey's Economy', *Foreign Policy*, 8 April 2020; Knecht, E., 'No dollars today: exchanges resist Lebanon's push to steady currency', *Reuters*, 22 January 2020; FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP and WHO, *The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2019*, Rome: FAO, 2019; World Bank and IMF Iraq data (both accessed 21 April 2020); Rubin, A.J., 'Oil prices crash, virus hits, commerce stops: Iraq is in trouble', *The New York Times*, 29 March 2020; Najib, M. Halbfinger, D., 'Palestinians fear a coming Covid-19 virus storm', *The New York Times*; World bank country overview Jordan; Sanchez, V., 'Covid-19 virus: Jordan's ailing economy rocked by spread of virus', *Middle East Eye*, 2020; Al Sharif, O., 'Under nationwide curfew, Jordanians now ponder economic cost of Covid-19 virus', *Al-Monitor*, 2020; Öztaş, T., *Novel Covid-19virus: stress test for Egypt's fragile economy*, AA, 31 March 2020; Ismail, A. et al., *Covid-19 virus crisis spells trouble for many Egyptian breadwinners*, *Reuters*, 7 April 2020; World Bank data on Iran: <https://data.worldbank.org/country/iran-islamic-rep> (accessed 21 April 2020).

## Likely impact on existing conflicts

Historically, the impact of pandemics on the battlefield has been significant. The Spanish flu hit the Allied troops in Europe hard during WW1, causing the hospitalisation of 791,900 soldiers and killing 24,664.<sup>30</sup> During WW2, typhus directly killed about 142,000 combatants.<sup>31</sup> However, the past is a poor

guide to the future, as inter-state warfare with its typical large concentrations of troops is not a particular feature in the Middle East. Instead, the region has its fair share of substate armed groups that most commonly 'act in uncertainty and thrive in chaos'.<sup>32</sup> As the virus temporarily contains state forces in their barracks, forces them to operate more cautiously, sees international troops withdraw and diverts government attention from security to health issues, opportunities arise for substate armed groups – especially

30 Shurkin, Michael, *Pandemics and the U.S. Military: Lessons from 1918*, War on The Rocks, 2020, [online](#).

31 Synder, J.C., 'Typhus fever in the Second World War', *Calif. Med.* 66 (2) 74, 1947, [online](#).

32 Mattis, Jim and Bing West, *Call Sign Chaos: Learning to Lead*, New York: Random House, 2019.

of the radical variety – to accelerate their typical strategy of incremental opportunism.<sup>33</sup> This is particularly the case in the region's weak countries without money (Group A), as the impact of substate armed groups on the region's strong states is likely to be similar to the pre-Covid-19 situation.

Al-Qaida, the Islamic State and Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham have indeed already attempted to capitalise on the virus by variously calling it divine retribution for past sins, using it to further discredit existing authorities and to step up their attacks.<sup>34</sup> For example, the pandemic is helping to revive Islamic State activity in Iraq after the withdrawal of international forces from the northern part of the country. Fifty new attacks were recently recorded.<sup>35</sup> In Syria, the Islamic State similarly seems to have stepped up its sporadic attacks as Syrian security forces have become more cautious.<sup>36</sup>

The virus can also be a boon for the PKK in Iraq/Turkey and the YPG in Syria as it increases their freedom of movement across already porous borders while the Turkish army restricts its movement from Turkey into Syria and postponed its enrolment of new recruits for a month out of concern of facilitating further contagion.<sup>37</sup> The presence of Covid-19-related deaths within the PKK militia network – which has only rudimentary medical capabilities – also potentially creates another long-term vector of contagion, just

like its Iranian counterpart.<sup>38</sup> Iraq's Sinjar area may come to fulfil a similar transmission function as hub for various Kurdish paramilitary groups.

In the same vein, Iran-linked armed groups show no sign of letting up militant activities. Iran initially faced stiff criticism because many of the region's early cases were traced to the holy city of Qom. This risked creating a strain on Iranian operations in the region as these depend on cross-border movement and religiously inspired recruitment. A counternarrative rapidly emerged from none other than Hossein Salami, the commander of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps, who framed Covid-19 as a 'US biological invasion'.<sup>39</sup> But while the Shi'a resistance front is clearly not above some conspiracy theorising, it is also practical. Hassan Nasrallah described a strict protocol for militant travel in one of his recent speeches, including rigorous pre- and post-travel testing, compulsory sanitising procedures and social distancing measures.<sup>40</sup> Moreover, it has been reported that both the US and Kata'ib Hezbollah – an Iran-linked militia – are exploring opportunities for high profile attacks in Iraq to exploit the pandemic.<sup>41</sup>

As to state parties to existing conflicts, their response to the UN's call for a global ceasefire has been mixed.<sup>42</sup>

33 Cavanaugh, M.L., *The Strategist and the Virus Crisis*, The Modern War Institute, 2020, [online](#).

34 Bloom, Mia, *How Terrorist Groups Will Try to Capitalize on the Covid-19 Virus crisis*, Just Security, 2020, [online](#).

35 Satar, Omar, 'Islamic State seeks comeback under cover of Covid-19 virus', *Al-Monitor*, 2020, [online](#); <https://twitter.com/YabbasHarb/status/1254364617532411905/photo/1> (accessed 28 April 2020).

36 See: <http://www.syriahr.com/en/?p=159785> (accessed 10 April 2020).

37 Reuters [online](#); <https://www.msb.gov.tr/SlaytHaber/1942020-36240> (both accessed 10 April 2020).

38 See: Hurriyet [online](#); Milliyet [online](#) (both accessed 15 April 2020).

39 Aarabi, K., 'Iran knows who to blame for the virus: America and Israel', *Foreign Policy*, 19 March 2020, [online](#).

40 See: <https://video.moqawama.org/details.php?cid=1&linkid=2105> (accessed 21 April 2020).

41 O'Connor, Tom, *US and Iran Prepare for Escalation in Iraq, while Covid-19 virus may make conflict worse*, News Week, 2020, [online](#). See: New York Times, [online](#) (accessed 28 April 2020).

42 International Crisis group, *Global Ceasefire Call Deserves UN Security Council's Full Support*, 2020, [online](#).



**Table 3** Likely impact of Covid-19 on the Middle East's major conflicts

Conflict	Expectation	Short-term developments	Medium-term risks
<b>Syria</b>	Conflict continues at lower intensity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Consolidation of positions to secure pre-Covid-19 gains</li> <li>– Poor Covid-19 responses become part of wartime propaganda to discredit the other side</li> <li>– Increase in Islamic State activity</li> </ul>	Regular Covid-19 outbreaks become another negative externality
<b>Iran-US</b>	Conflict continues full on	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Economic sanctions remain in place</li> <li>– Tit-for-tat retaliation in Iraq continues</li> <li>– Iran may seek to exploit Covid-19 to strike US forces</li> </ul>	Iran's transnational armed groups network remains a vector of Covid-19 contagion
<b>Israel-Palestine</b>	Conflict temporarily on hold	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– No change in underlying contestation</li> <li>– Further annexation likely to happen under new Israeli government</li> <li>– Covid-19 pandemic in Gaza is waiting to happen but Israel has no incentive to prevent or assist</li> </ul>	Israeli dependence on West Bank labour and new Covid-19 outbreaks invite annexation / stepped up controls
<b>Kurdish question</b>	Conflict continues full on	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Increase in attacks against Turkish (proxy) forces in Syria and/or in Turkey itself</li> </ul>	Covid-19 transmission via transnational Kurdish militia network
<b>Yemen</b>	Conflict continues at lower intensity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Continuous Houthi attacks</li> <li>– Increase in Houthi recruitment during lockdown period</li> </ul>	Covid-19 becomes another factor of instability in Yemen and hence, Saudi Arabia

See also: Carnegie Middle East Diwan, [online](#), 2 April 2020; Hawthorne, E., *After the Pandemic: The Middle East Won't Break Out in Peace*, Syndication Bureau, [online](#), 16 April 2020; Reuters, [online](#), 16 April 2020; Lynch, M. (ed.), *The Covid-19 pandemic in the Middle East and North Africa*, POMEPS, 2020, [online](#); Al-Jazeera, [online](#), 20 April 2020.

While Iran continues its militia recruitment<sup>43</sup> and the US views the call as hindrance to its ongoing counter-terrorism operations,<sup>44</sup> the Russian-Turkish ceasefire in Idlib gained another lease on life<sup>45</sup> while Saudi Arabia is trying to exit its Yemeni morass via a unilateral ceasefire.<sup>46</sup> Although the pandemic may cause states to refrain from overt military interventions out of fear of global condemnation, an uptick in deniable proxy warfare, low intensity violence or aerial strikes is equally likely.

Zooming out, Covid-19 assistance is certain to be used for propaganda activities in which poor anti-Covid-19 measures will be used to discredit the actors having undertaken them. The lexicon of delegitimization gains another dimension. Moreover, state parties are bound to use Covid-19 (recovery) assistance as an 'excuse' for supporting their favourite conflict faction(s) under the guise of humanitarian 'neutrality'. A good example is how the UAE is already using Covid-19 to strengthen its ties with the Assad regime, building on its growing number of exchanges of business delegations with Syria and its longstanding hosting of substantial business interests of both the Assads and the Mahkloufs in Dubai's Jebel Ali Free Zone.<sup>47</sup> Table 3 reflects our expectation of the impact of Covid-19 on the Middle East's major conflicts.

43 See: <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20200317-iran-forces-recruit-9000-shia-fighters-in-syria/>. Ayatollah Khomeini dubbed the call for a ceasefire as 'deadlier than drinking from a poisoned chalice'. See: Vakil, Sanam, *Covid-19 and the Iranian Shadows of War*, Chatham House, 2020, [online](#).

44 Guardian [online](#) (accessed 21 April 2020).

45 Guardian [online](#) (accessed 15 April 2020).

46 Al Jazeera [online](#) (accessed 15 April 2020).

47 AP News, [online](#); Almayadeen [online](#) (AR); Reuters Arabic, [online](#); Wolstenholme, F., *The Secret Lives of UAE Shell Companies*, Middle East Research and Information Project, [online](#) (all accessed 24 April 2020).

## Do not let a good crisis go to waste

Despite the gloomy picture that emerges from the previous pages, we also must wonder what opportunities for creative conflict resolution the current crisis offers. We see at least four major initiatives that could be pursued:

1. *Use the aftermath of Covid-19 to build bridges with Iran.* The European Union could massively increase its engagement with Iran after the Covid-19 peak. By broadly labelling such assistance as ‘post-Covid-19 recovery’ using INSTEX for humanitarian purposes, the EU could enable Tehran to purchase the goods and services it needs for an economic recovery and for strengthening its health sector while avoiding head-on confrontation with US sanctions, at least publicly. France, Germany and the Netherlands could promote such an agenda in Brussels. It requires political courage to commit to long-term reliable support in the face of significant US counter-pressure, but the tempting prize arguably is greater stability in the region.
2. *Make support for refugees in the region more durable.* To prevent further marginalisation and instrumentalisation of the millions of refugees on its doorstep, the EU should also consider significantly increasing its diplomatic advocacy for greater rights to residency and work for these individuals, providing long-term reliable financial support and increasing the number of refugees it welcomes into Europe. While this is politically difficult to put on the agenda, neither are permanent instability and recurrent health crises in Europe’s direct neighbourhood an attractive prospect. Common cause could be made with the IMF to simultaneously chart a way forward to tackle Lebanon’s, Jordan’s and Turkey’s structural economic weaknesses.
3. *Encourage a regional ‘Marshall Plan’.* Covid-19 offers an unprecedented opportunity to heal rifts in the region under the banner of Islamic brotherhood. A coalition of willing EU Member States could encourage and support the region’s strong governments with money (Group C countries) to set up a ‘solidarity mechanism for grants and loans’ to support the region’s weak states without money (Group A) and strong states without money (Group B) with post-Covid-19 economic recovery.<sup>48</sup> If such an effort is organised in a way that is not overly religious, encourages regional cooperation and keeps its distance from US policies in the region, it could become a win-win for all involved. Large-scale assistance to Iraq and Yemen is especially critical to regional stability. By linking greater EU assistance to Iran with Gulf-led assistance for Iraq/Yemen, Tehran can be incentivised to pressure the Houthis to cooperate based on the EU’s expectations.
4. *Nudge Turkey westwards.* The economic impact of the pandemic may lead Ankara to reassess its need for good relations with the EU. Turkey’s recent confrontation with Russia in Idlib was likely also a salutary reminder of the value of its partnership with its Western allies. Covid-19-induced border shutdowns have in any case deprived Turkey of its refugee blackmail card for now. Building on the EU’s allocation of EUR 800 million of its global Covid-19 response package to Turkey and the western Balkans,<sup>49</sup> dialogue could be re-established to encourage Turkey to improve the state of its democracy and human rights in exchange for tangible economic gains and perhaps a restart of accession negotiations. Even if a restart proves a bridge too far, a mutually beneficial

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<sup>48</sup> The irony of a Dutch think tank recommending something that the Dutch government mightily sought to avoid in the Eurozone context is not lost on the authors.

<sup>49</sup> See: [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP\\_20\\_604](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_20_604) (accessed 24 April 2020).

economic scenario is easily envisaged in which European companies move part of their supply chains out of China and into Turkey in the post-Covid-19 period. Ankara could profit handsomely from its low wages and proximity to Europe.

But, to paraphrase Vaclav Havel: ‘...hope is not the same as optimism. It is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out.’<sup>50</sup>

Such initiatives require a kind of rethinking, policy reorientation and resource re-allocation that is scarce in times of crisis.






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50 Ratcliffe, S. (ed.), *Little Oxford Dictionary of Quotations*, 4<sup>th</sup> edition, Oxford: OUP, 2008.

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[www.clingendael.org/cru](http://www.clingendael.org/cru)  
[cru@clingendael.org](mailto:cru@clingendael.org)  
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### About the authors

**Engin Yüksel** is a PhD candidate at Leiden University and a Research Associate who analyses Turkish foreign policy in the Middle East.

**Nancy Ezzeddine** is a Junior Researcher focused on the political economy of protests and paramilitary organisation in Iraq.

**Rena Netjes** is an Arabist, former Egypt and Libya correspondent and Research Associate currently researching northeast Syria

**Beatrice Noun** is a Junior Researcher working on Lebanese and Iraqi protest dynamics.

**Hasim Tekines** is an intern looking at Turkey and the Gulf.

**Erwin van Veen** is a Senior Research Fellow focused on the political economy of conflict in the Middle East.