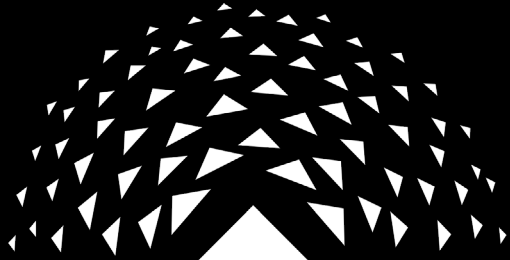


# KKI

## 4:1



How does the Coronavirus outbreak affect Middle Eastern and North African conflicts?

# KKI 4:1

Series of the Institute for Foreign Affairs and Trade

Publisher:

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Typesetting:

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Cover photo:

<https://www.dobbins.afrc.af.mil/News/Article-Display/Article/2162357/more-than-770-af-reservists-called-up-providing-medical-support/>

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*In the 4:1 series of the Institute for Foreign Affairs and Trade, four researchers give a short answer to the same question concerning international politics and economics. Our aim is to launch the scientific debates in and beyond Hungary and to promote dialogue among experts. In this issue, our topic is: "How does the Coronavirus outbreak affect Middle Eastern and North African conflicts?"*

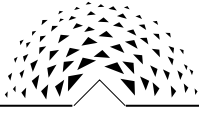
## ÁDÁM ÉVA

The countries of the Middle East region have been affected by many crises since at least 2001. The global economic crisis, wars, protests, regime changes, and civil wars have caused some sort of economic and social suffering in almost all of them. Devastation has been the greatest for low and middle-income countries.

However, the wealthiest Gulf Arab states have also had to endure the domestic effects of the regional problems. The monarchies have spent hundreds of billions of dollars to increase salaries, provide state subsidies, and create new jobs. Beyond their domestic policies, they have used their reserves to pursue their [foreign policy goals](#) in the region. Economists at the International Monetary Fund (IMF) [forecasted](#) a huge economic crisis for Saudi Arabia by 2020. And still, by 2020 the Saudi state had invested billions of dollars abroad, spent trillions on domestic development projects, and it had [spent](#) at least a billion dollars on its ongoing war in Yemen. In spite of the temporal ceasefire agreement between Saudi Arabia and the Houthis, concluded due to the novel coronavirus crisis, the fighting has [continued](#) between the warring parties.

As for the Gulf states' other interests in the region, the political outcomes from Libya to Iraq are not really favourable to Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and their allies (independent of and unaffected by the novel coronavirus outbreak). The coronavirus outbreak only multiplies the economic and social crises that have been the result of bad governance and corruption in many states. The Gulf monarchies are ill-suited to provide serious financial assistance to their neighbours due to their own economic problems caused by the novel coronavirus outbreak. Thus, one of the most serious consequences of the current crisis could be that the Saudi-led coalition of states will have a limited say in the outcomes of the political crises, and it will be forced to proceed with the war in Yemen. The question is how far the other states of the coalition will be willing to go in a war that could only be won by a political solution.

On the other side of the ongoing major Middle Eastern proxy conflict we find the revolutionary state of Iran, which has been the most resilient state of the Middle East in the last forty years (beside Israel). Since 1979, the Persian state has been progressively pressured economically by U.S. political administrations in the hope of a regime change or a limited détente. The U.S. built permanent military bases in the Gulf in the 1990s, conducted ever-lasting wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and it appeared with its military in Syria. The military encirclement



persuaded the Iranian regime to spend a lot on passive and active defence both at home and abroad, to the further detriment of its economy. Nevertheless, none of the democratically elected governments of Iran have failed to end its term, and the Persian state was able to raise its spending on defence, foreign military missions, and foreign financial support.

In 2019, Iran waged successful asymmetric warfare in the Persian Gulf while Iranian proxies conducted successful military strikes on Saudi infrastructural facilities. The supreme leader of the Iranian regime, Ali Khamenei has found it of highest importance to [stress](#) even during the novel coronavirus crisis that the war between ideologies (that of the Islamic state of Iran vs. the failed individualistic democratic order of the West) shall be fought until the former inevitably prevails. But for now, Iran will need to spend an enormous amount of its annual GDP on the fight against the coronavirus, its economic relations with China and other Asian countries have suffered due to the pandemic, and President Rouhani is desperately craving the [financial help](#) provided by the IMF for developing countries.

As I have [concluded](#) in my latest analysis, the aggregate effect of the economic and financial sanctions, the pandemic, and the loss of Asian connections is larger than what Iran has ever had to endure. Although usually more resilient, Iran is now more vulnerable to the effects of the coronavirus crisis than the Arab states of the Middle East. Hopefully, the positive outcome of the adverse economic impact of the crisis on each side of the Saudi-Iranian proxy conflict might be the increased willingness of the parties to tone down their hostile actions and find a political solution for the ongoing crises. However, my prognosis is that the outcome of this year's U.S. presidential elections will have a larger impact on the Middle Eastern conflicts than what a virus could ever have.

## **PÉTER MARTON**

People who are severely ill, are slow to recover, or fear infection generally have a reduced inclination to fight. Having said that, for some, real or perceived opportunities may be tempting to take, even under otherwise adverse circumstances. The spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus, and the COVID-19 disease that it is responsible for, will probably lead to a temporary freezing of conflict processes, in ways unrelated to the timely call by United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres for a global ceasefire with a view to the pandemic. However, as this unfolds, local imbalances and vulnerabilities may result, which might induce conflict behaviour at least occasionally and on a smaller scale.

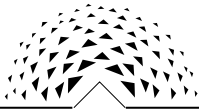
A particularly interesting risk factor in this respect is how the United States' ability to quickly and decisively project power to the Gulf Region via its naval Carrier Strike Groups is affected. The novel coronavirus epidemic has reached four U.S. aircraft carriers thus far. These include the *USS Theodore Roosevelt* in Guam,

the *USS Ronald Reagan* in Japan, the *USS Carl Vinson* at base in Puget Sound in Washington State, and the *USS Nimitz* (preparing for deployment at the time of writing). At present, these ships primarily matter in the larger Pacific arena, mostly with a view to the People's Republic of China and North Korea. Any protracted contingency involving them can, nonetheless, impact on the readiness of the U.S. forces and the U.S. ability to surge forces in the Gulf.

The U.S. Navy currently views the situation as permissive enough to reduce its presence back to a single Carrier Strike Group in the Gulf Region. The *USS Harry Truman* recently departed the area, leaving the *USS Dwight Eisenhower* behind. U.S. Secretary of Defense Mark Esper has commented on this at the beginning of April, expressing the view that "foreign adversaries" do not seem intent on exploiting the situation. In his assessment, "what we're finding right now is that a lot of countries have turned inward and are focusing inward", while adding "that doesn't mean we should be less vigilant". As these words may signal, the risk of escalation in U.S.-Iranian relations has decreased somewhat from the levels reached during the months of January and February. The epidemic is exerting a paralysing effect on the parties, even in the wake of the March incident, which saw the Iranian-sponsored Iraqi militant group Kataib Hezbollah carry out an attack causing U.S. casualties, drawing a series of retaliatory strikes from U.S. forces.

Both Iran and the United States are, meanwhile, facing serious challenges related to the novel coronavirus epidemic. In Iran, the number of newly identified cases of infections has been decreasing since the end of March, but it is still close to 2,000 per day. Due to the nature of the course of the COVID-19 disease, being long drawn-out, with the deterioration of a patient's condition coming often a week or more after the onset of symptoms, the burden of the peak level of infections is currently being felt in the Iranian health system. It also needs to be kept in mind that the Iranian regime is, in all likelihood, not providing precise data regarding the epidemic, and the presently indicated case numbers may in reality be considerably higher, even as the data may at least reflect the trends accurately. The inward focus implied by Secretary Esper may thus persist in the coming weeks or months. The United States is also somewhat affected, given the dynamics of its own domestic epidemic situation. In the meantime, the level of tension in the U.S.-Iranian relationship may be affected by the IMF support sought by Iran partly related to the coronavirus crisis – financial help that the United States may be less than willing to support and quite possibly willing to decisively obstruct, in line with its policy of "maximum pressure" on Iran.

Elsewhere, the spread of the novel coronavirus may be limited somewhat by the lines of control and the lines of combat engagement fragmenting the region. The epidemic can freeze conflicts if, over the coming weeks and months, it affects combatants in large numbers, rendering them incapable of combat, leading to losses in their ranks, for example, in Syria. Under these circumstances, indirect methods of harming others may be favoured by certain parties. For instance,



groups supported by Turkey have, in March, cut the water supply to the town of Hasakah and its environs in Syria, in an area hosting a considerable displaced population, many of them staying in camps. Supplying the area with water via land routes is complicated and inadequate, with a very negative impact on epidemic response in a place where test kits, antiviral and other medications, as well as basic medical equipment are lacking, making both the detection of cases and the treatment of patients difficult. This highlights the importance of focusing on displaced populations across the region. Their circumstances stand to be very negatively affected over the coming months. If the epidemic spreads among them, it can easily spill over into the wider population.

## **JÚLIA PALIK**

On 10 April Yemen confirmed its first COVID-19 case in the southern province of Hadramout. The news came one day after the Saudi coalition [declared](#) a two-week unilateral ceasefire prompted by UN Secretary-General António Guterres' [call for a global ceasefire](#) to allow all actors to fight the pandemic and to facilitate the delivery of humanitarian aid to vulnerable populations. Despite the coalition's decision and UN Special Envoy Martin Griffith's subsequent [initiative to end the war](#), the Houthis [rejected](#) the ceasefire. Since then the Houthis allegedly violated the ceasefire [95 times](#) within 24-hours and have [fired ballistic missiles](#) over the Marib governorate. Saudi Arabia has [closed its borders](#) with Yemen, and flights between the northern and southern part of the country have stopped. How will COVID-19 impact the war in Yemen? The country's response is severely limited by at least two factors: the lack of structural capacity and the conflict parties' unwillingness to unite for a single cause.

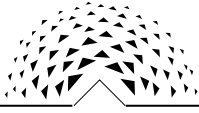
26 March marked the fifth year of war between the internationally recognized government of President Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi, supported by the Saudi Arabia-led military coalition and the Iranian-backed Houthi rebels. Even before the war, Yemen was the poorest country of the Arab world. An estimated 80 per cent of Yemen's population – 24 million people – require some form of humanitarian or protection assistance, [including 14.3 million](#) who are in acute need. Yemen is especially vulnerable to a mass outbreak and is less likely to respond to the virus. [Diseases](#) are well-known to Yemenis: since 2017, the country has been gripped by measles, diphtheria, cholera, and dengue fever. As stable and developed countries struggle to respond effectively to the virus, Yemen prepares for COVID-19 with a virtually non-existent health infrastructure: less than 50% of the healthcare system operates, and only [three testing sites](#) (Sana'a, Aden, and Al Mukalla) are available. Between 2015 and 2018, there were [120 attacks](#) against health workers and hospitals in Yemen. The risk of further infections is uniquely high given the more than [3.3 million](#) internally displaced people, asylum-seekers from Ethiopia and Somalia, the lack of clean water, soap, and credible information, the near impossibility of social distancing, hunger, lockdowns, and widespread travel restrictions.

Prospects for implementing the ceasefire are bleak. This is [not the first](#) ceasefire to be used by the Houthis to regroup and expand territorial control. Most recently, the Stockholm Agreement prompted the group to refocus its military efforts and [expand the territorial control](#) around the last stronghold of the Hadi government, the Marib governorate. Conflict parties are already using the virus for political goals. Mohammed Ali al-Houthi, President of the Houthi Revolutionary Council, [announced](#) that the Houthis will hold the Saudi-led Coalition responsible for any COVID-19 case in the country and [claimed](#) that Saudi Arabia had sent the virus to Yemen. Domestic and external actors' incentives to fight the virus and end the war are, however, different. Even if for selfish reasons, external parties are incentivized to end the war: Saudi Arabia and Iran are both [severely hit](#) by the virus. As both Riyadh and Tehran are fighting the virus – albeit under very different financial circumstances – and due to the resulting economic recession, their resources are likely to be redirected to domestic matters rather than spending them on fighting. From this perspective, yes, this ceasefire can provide an opportunity to [end](#) the war, yet we should exercise caution. First, the Houthis are [not the only military actors](#) who have had to commit to an eventual nationwide ceasefire. Secondly, delivering aid had been a [critical challenge](#) well before the outbreak of the pandemic because conflict parties have repeatedly instrumentalized and obstructed humanitarian aid for economic and political gains, keeping vital resources from locals. Third, as the virus poses a global financial challenge, and countries focus their economic resources on fighting their own battles, there is a serious threat of Yemen not getting the aid it requires, or that aid efforts will be directed towards the virus and away from other humanitarian needs. As for now, Yemenis are waiting. External actors must pressure conflict parties to realize that they are fighting a common enemy, ensure funding for the healthcare system with a special focus on women and girls, and secure the safe and timely delivery of humanitarian assistance.

## MÁTÉ SZALAI

According to general wisdom and the evolving narrative in public discourse, the spread of the novel coronavirus turns down the intensity of armed conflicts. Beside politicians (such as [António Guterres](#), Secretary-General of the United Nations), representatives of academia have expressed their hope (and prediction) that the cessation of hostilities is a plausible alternative in the case of, for example, Syria, Libya, or Yemen. On Foreign Affairs, Barry R. Posen argued that “sickness slows down the march to war”. This “pax epidemica” is mostly due to human and financial resources being depleted by the fight against the virus. All in all, a situation like this is not cause for optimism for any state, which, according to Posen and Geoffrey Blainey, is needed to start and continue armed conflicts.

Despite this narrative, the empirical data shows little evidence to prove this hypothesis. As [Francis Z. Brown points out](#), the novel coronavirus is “much more likely to aggravate and multiply conflicts than reduce or end them”. [Ranj Alaaldin](#)



[observes](#) that COVID-19 is “far from pushing” Middle Eastern conflicts “toward peace” as it “will most likely be a conflict-multiplier”. Their observations are met with reality in the case of Middle Eastern conflicts. In Libya, the conflict [has only been amplified](#) in recent weeks. In Yemen, the quickly announced ceasefire initiative [failed almost instantly](#). In Syria, fights are less intense than in previous months, but that is mostly due to the [agreement reached](#) by Russia and Turkey regarding Idlib in early March. Without it, it is doubtful that the situation would have de-escalated.

To understand the phenomenon, one has to differentiate between the viewpoints of state and non-state actors (NSAs). The behavioural logic of each type of actor is markedly different, especially in conflicts. Moreover, a commonality of Middle Eastern conflicts is the parallel presence of both states and NSAs, enhancing the importance of the question. Nevertheless, in the case of the MENA region, the novel coronavirus does not incentivise strategic changes in the behaviour of either type of actor.

In spite of the incentive to focus on domestic developments, nation states tend to instrumentalize the virus to pursue their interests. In armed conflicts, health facilities [are targets](#) of state and non-state actors alike. Syria (and Iran) want to persuade the international community that it is time for a sanctions relief. Turkey and its allies in Syria have [cut the access](#) of territories ruled by Kurdish militias to water. It is true that their financial and human resources available to conflicts will probably diminish, but the extent of this will not necessarily be enough to push them to be more placated. Long before the current pandemic, state actors tended to outsource the cost of warfare to NSAs or proxies. Moreover, the resources used in wars are not necessarily relocatable to fighting a pandemic, so the dilemma is not as thorny as one might assume.

Last but not least, while coronavirus affects almost all political communities, it is asymmetric in nature, and therefore it does not leave the balance of power untouched (especially if one side comes out of the crisis earlier). It would be an unlikely (though possible) scenario that the appearance of the novel coronavirus would turn the relative power of belligerents to a more equal situation in which they are more ready to compromise.

NSAs and militias have a completely different behavioural logic. For them, the coronavirus can [represent an opportunity](#) as much as a threat. Many of them do not control civilians and are not responsible for their well-being, which is why they would only suffer if the novel coronavirus spread among their ranks. Moreover, armed non-state actors do not have to follow the rules of international law when it comes to [humanitarian norms in conflict](#), e.g. the prohibition of attacking civilian health infrastructure. Without any serious incentive, most militias will probably not back down from fighting.