Coronavirus Pandemic: The Blame Game in Middle East Geopolitics

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Abstract
The Middle East is notorious for its deep-rooted state rivalries based on ethnic and sectarian divisions. Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Turkey are the three major powers in the region that seek hegemony, impelling the smaller states to choose their allies. At the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic, these major powers engaged in a blame game about the spread of the virus in the region, further straining their diplomatic relations. In this article, I map out this blame game among the major powers as well as other political groups and nonstate actors in the Middle East. This highlights how the pandemic has entrenched state rivalries and intensified regional geopolitics.

The coronavirus reached Iran sometime in early February 2020. The exact date and the path it adopted remain unknown. The government kept overlooking or denying the existence of the virus in the country. Whether it did so deliberately or due to a lack of medical expertise, testing kits, and the high-tech laboratories necessary to confirm it remains a matter of another debate. However, some voices were already being raised on social media about people getting sick and presenting symptoms similar to those people suffering from coronavirus. On February 19, when two persons with those symptoms died in a local hospital, the government could not overlook or deny the evidence any further. It pronounced the dead to have been infected by the virus. Later some high-ranking officials fell ill, making it difficult for the government to avoid looking into the gravity of the developing situation. In the next few weeks, the number of deaths continued to rise, causing Iran to be termed “the second epicenter” of the epidemic.

Soon after, the rest of the Middle Eastern states also began to see their first cases. Lebanon announced its first coronavirus-positive case: a woman who had traveled to and from Iran on February 21, 2020. Iraq declared its first case on February 24: a person who had also returned from Iran. On February 26, Pakistan announced its first two cases: Shiite zaireen (shrine visitors), or pilgrims, returning from Iran. Saudi Arabia announced its first case on March 2: a Saudi national who had also returned from Iran. Turkey and Syria announced their first cases on March 17 and...
23, respectively. However, they didn’t relate their cases directly to Iran. It is interesting to note that the UAE announced its first four cases much earlier, on January 29: Chinese citizens who had returned from Wuhan in mid-January. Nevertheless, most of the states in the region claimed their cases to have arrived from Iran.

The arrival of the virus in the region, especially with Iran becoming its “second epicenter,” has sparked a blame game among states as well as intrastate political opposition fronts, nonstate armed actors, and ethnic and sectarian groups. Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, for instance, clearly blame Iran for spreading the virus through its so-called policy of Shiite pilgrimage. Inside their own countries, the two blame their Shiite communities and have further heightened their surveillance. They also introduced strict measures for controlling their international travel. In Lebanon, Iraq, and Syria, certain armed Sunni organizations and political parties exchanged blame with their Shiite counterparts over the Iranian connection to the virus. However, the blame game between the Sunni Arabs and non-Arab Shiite Iran doesn’t stop here. It extends to other states in the region that have different types of regional rivalries. Qatar, an Arab state estranged from the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, especially Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and the UAE, becomes the target of the blame game. On social media, a hashtag “Qatar is corona” becomes viral in the Arabian Gulf. Similarly, Turkey gets caught up in the game as well, exchanging blame with Saudi Arabia for spreading the virus, exacerbating their already strained relationship in the aftermath of the Jamal Khashoggi murder. Meanwhile, we also see certain healthy exceptions to the blame game. The UAE does not get involved; it treads the careful path of its humanitarian-aid-based foreign policy and steps up efforts to reach out to all the suffering states in the region, including Iran.

In this article, I map the initial responses of states in the Middle East, including Pakistan, as well as those of nonstate actors and other political groups. This not only creates a record of their reactions but also reflects on how these states further entrenched their rivalries and intensified regional geopolitics.

GEOPOLITICS OF A PANDEMIC

We well know that a pandemic tends to be a geopolitical phenomenon, inasmuch as it spreads over a vast area and transcends cartographic territorial divisions, challenges, and border-control regimes, highlighting porosity and interconnection. Given the nature of modern, high-tech transportation systems, a pandemic has high chances of spreading extensively geographically and intensively demographically. Moreover, just as disease preys on the human body, especially its weak sinews, a pandemic also preys on the weaker relations of the international body politic. It intensifies rivalries at inter- and intrastate levels, and tests international loyalties and commitments to humanitarian policies. It throws people apart through social and political distancing, but we should also notice that it gives us an opportunity to reach out and come close together.

Acting as a catalyst, a pandemic tends to intensify geopolitics by creating the need for an urgent coping response from governments and international bodies. But because governments are not prepared to manage a massive crisis, they fail. Then, just as public criticism mounts, their political leaders, to save face, respond by blaming others for causing the crisis.

When the coronavirus epidemic broke out, the Trump administration did not take action despite the warnings from China about its deadly nature. But when the crisis started to build, American officials blamed China for spreading the virus to the rest of the world. President Donald Trump often called Covid-19 the “China virus.” Further back in history, in the late 1980s, when AIDS was spreading across the United States and causing the highest number of fatalities in the
world, the US administration tried to stigmatize Africa as the origin of the disease. The CDC termed it a disease of the “4-Hs”: homosexuals, heroin addicts, hemophiliacs, and Haitians.\(^1\) Historically speaking, different ethnic and religious groups in Europe have blamed each other for spreading disease. Vinay Lal, in his recent book on the Covid pandemic, has given a detailed description of this blame game in the West. He writes that in the 16th century, the various ethno-national groups in Europe blamed each other for spreading syphilis: “Every national group in Europe defined syphilis as a disease of other nations. For the Germans it was the French disease, for the French the Italian disease.” In the 18th century, the study adds: “The Japanese called it the disease of the Portuguese, the Persians called it a disease of the Turks, and the Poles the disease of the Russians.”\(^2\) However, Lal concludes that all these peoples remained in denial of, or oblivious to, the scientific fact that viral diseases possess “indifference to nations, ethnicities, and religions.”\(^3\)

When the level of political tension in the existing matrix of international relations among states and international bodies increases, diplomacy becomes subservient to national and religious identity. Fear of the “other” intensifies. Rumors, misinformation, and conspiracy theories become ubiquitous. Border regimes and territorial controls become more rigid. And the pandemic stirs up fear, which arrives even ahead of the virus itself. Countries begin to fear each other. Hidden or suppressed social tensions come to the surface again in the society. Some communities, and even countries, are at once portrayed as susceptible, vulnerable, suspect, and dangerous. They are conflated with the virus itself—hence the hashtag “Qatar is corona.” They are termed epicenters and super-spreaders. Their culture and beliefs are thought to be backward, uncivilized, and unhygienic. In the United States and Europe, it was the Chinese who faced such labeling and xenophobic hatred; in India, the Muslims; and in the Middle East, the Shiites.

The irony of the scientific fact relating to this viral blaming and smearing of individuals, communities, and countries, especially on social media, is that it is based on a priori frames of thought and parochial political interests. We know well that, despite all the advances of scientific knowledge, it is almost impossible to stop a new viral disease from spreading. It is also difficult to trace its origin, path, and scale for many years. Although researchers develop timelines, draw paths, measure the scale, and project the probable end of a viral disease, all their models are theoretical and remain susceptible to errors and limitations, particularly as the data on which they rely come from national governments and international organizations. In their compiling, organizing, and presenting data, these governments and organizations keep in mind their political and corporate interests. It should also be noted that the collection and compilation of data, especially at the early stages of a spreading pandemic, also depend on the individual country’s technological knowhow and the availability of resources, which in most cases remain wanting.

Thus, in the case of the present pandemic, there is a debate about its origin, path, and scale. The enormous amount of data collected and stored by Johns Hopkins University is based on the data provided by individual governments and the UN. How far it corresponds to the original spread and scale of the virus remains a matter of debate. For instance, it has been difficult to tell when exactly coronavirus broke out and spread in China or arrived in the United States or Europe. We know that, initially, all these countries tried to cover up the arrival of the virus, its severity, and the

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\(^1\) Vinay Lal, *The Fury of Covid-19: The Politics, Histories and Unrequited Love of the Coronavirus* (New Delhi: Pan Macmillan, 2020), 125.

\(^2\) Ibid., 126; Sander L. Gilman and Dorothy Nelkin, “Placing Blame for Devastating Disease,” *Social Research* 55, no. 3 (1988): 361-78.

\(^3\) Lal, *Fury of Covid-19*, 129.
potential threat to their public-health programs. In the case of China itself, for instance, a report published by Harvard Medical School claimed that the virus might have hit Wuhan as early as August 2019, months before China officially reported it. The report is based on satellite images of increased hospital traffic and search-engine trends relating to coughing and diarrhea in Wuhan. The study also found that there was “no direct connection to the (wet) market for 14 individuals, including the first known case of Covid-19, leaving open the possibility of alternate points of origin and infection.”4 Similarly, when exactly the virus arrived and began to spread in the United States and Europe is also contested. While many reports claim it had appeared in the United States by mid-January, some suspect it might have arrived a month earlier.5

OUTBREAK IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Regional Rivalries

Broadly speaking, there are three major powerhouses aspiring to political leadership and/or hegemony in the Middle East: Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Iran. While Saudi Arabia and Iran have a long history of rivalry, Turkey’s regional ambitions under President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan have also set it at loggerheads with Saudi Arabia. The rest of the states in the region often align themselves with one of these major powers, forming at least three adversarial constellations: one led by Saudi Arabia, with Arab states like the UAE, Bahrain, Oman, and Egypt; the second by Turkey, including Qatar and non-Arab states like Malaysia, Pakistan, and Iran; and the third by Iran, featuring Iraq, Lebanon, and Syria. The political hallmarks of these constellations can also be readily identified. The first bloc’s hallmark is Arab nationalism with a hint of Wahhabi religious ideology. The second bloc’s is non-Arab internationalism and Islamic revivalism, and the third bloc’s is Shiite brotherhood.

Saudi Arabia-Iran

Saudi Arabia and Iran are the archrivals in the region, their connection reaching as far back as the 1979 Iranian revolution and the beginning of the Iran-Iraq War in 1980. Recently, the rivalry has taken on a more regional-hegemonic dimension, as both countries strive to increase their sphere of influence in the region. Internationally, they look to different superpowers for support—Saudi Arabia to the United States and Iran to China and Russia. Both states also try to out-do each other in championing the Palestinian cause. Lately, they have exercised their rivalry in Syria and Yemen: Saudi Arabia has been fighting against the rebelling Houthis in Yemen, while Iran has been supporting them. In Syria, Iran has been supporting President Bashar al-Assad’s government, with Saudi Arabia backing the armed rebels.

4 “Coronavirus Outbreak in Wuhan May Have Started in August: Study,” Al Jazeera, June 9, 2020, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/6/9/coronavirus-outbreak-in-wuhan-may-have-started-in-august-study.
5 Julie Bosman, Thomas Fuller, and Amy Harmon, “Amid Signs Coronavirus Came Earlier, Americans Ask: Did I Already Have It?” The New York Times, April 30, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/23/us/coronavirus-early-cases.html; Mike Baker, “When Did the Coronavirus Arrive in the U.S.? Here’s a Review of the Evidence,” The New York Times, June 1, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/15/us/coronavirus-first-case-snohomish-antibodies.html.
Saudi Arabia-Turkey

Saudi Arabia and Turkey have a lukewarm diplomatic relationship. The tension started a decade ago, at the dawn of the Arab Spring. While Turkey saw the revolutionary movements against dictatorial regimes as a fresh hope for democracy in the region, Saudi Arabia and the UAE saw them as destabilizing and a potential threat to their monarchies. In 2016, Turkey accused the UAE of supporting an armed coup against the elected government in Turkey. On the other hand, on the issue of the devastating civil war in Syria, which split the country into political fragments, Saudi Arabia and Turkey diverged in their policies and took sides with different groups. Their relationship deteriorated further when the city of Raqqa fell to the Kurds, who have been fighting against Turkey for a very long time. When the Saudi minister for Gulf affairs, Thamer Al-Sabhan, visited the area and met with the Kurdish cadres, Turkey felt offended. More recently, in October 2018, the Khashoggi murder led to an estrangement between them. Khashoggi, the renowned Saudi journalist, was hacked to death in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul. The Turkish people were appalled by the incident and protested in the streets. The government accused Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman of responsibility. Saudi Arabia responded by blocking Turkish news outlets like TRT Arabi and the Anadolu Agency.

Turkey-Iran

The relationship between Turkey and Iran has not been more than lukewarm since the Iranian revolution. Because Iran remains caught up in redefining its Islamic political ideology, and Turkey sought to expand its secular ideology to suit its European dream, the relationship could not advance. However, lately, with the rise to power of an Islamic political party led by Erdoğan, the government in Turkey has started to look toward the Muslim world to expand its regional leadership potential. Erdoğan’s interest in Ottoman history and Islamic revivalism explains Turkey’s attempts to expand relations in the Muslim world.

A case in point was the Kuala Lumpur Summit of December 2019. Taking the leading role, Turkey, along with Malaysia, Iran, and Pakistan, proposed forming a regional alliance of Muslim countries for expanding economic cooperation alongside the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, a political and ideological forum. But because it was proposed and dominated by non-Arab countries, Saudi Arabia did not warm to the initiative and influenced Pakistan and Indonesia to back out. Nevertheless, the summit was held, and the initiative for economic cooperation was proposed. Interestingly, Qatar, an Arab state, also joined the summit and expressed an interest in expanding economic cooperation with non-Arab regional states.

OUTBREAK AND COVER-UP

As mentioned above, the coronavirus pandemic broke out when the interstate relations in the Middle East were at a low ebb and produced further estrangement of these relations. This happened in two broad steps: first, the rival states tried to hide information from one another; then, they engaged in a blame game over the spread of the virus. One state, for instance, went to the extent of accusing a rival of “biological aggression.” Covering up information and blaming others were the preemptive responses of states faced with an unimaginable calamity.

The UAE was the first state in the region to discover cases of the coronavirus. However, the infected were four Chinese family members who had arrived from Wuhan on January 16. The
government claimed that they didn’t present themselves for a coronavirus test until January 23, and it did not announce this information until January 29. This raises a question: what if the patients hadn’t presented themselves for the test at all? And how many such cases might have refused to volunteer? These questions become all the more crucial, given the fact that the government did not disclose how many Chinese families had arrived from Wuhan and other nearby airports in China after the outbreak there. The government also did not make public the data about the fleeing Chinese who took connecting flights through its airports and airlines to other parts of the world. This aspect is also important; the Dubai and Abu Dhabi airports are among the world’s busiest, and Emirati airlines regularly fly to and from Wuhan and a number of other nearby airports. Although the government did acknowledge the danger of the spread of the virus from its airports as early as January 22, it did not stop flights to and from Wuhan until China locked the city down.

Iran was the second country in the Middle East to confirm a coronavirus case—the first two on February 19, the day both patients died. Given the life cycle of the virus, it can be easily inferred that these two would have been infected 15 to 20 days earlier. If they were cases of local transmission, a week or two can be further added to calculate the arrival of the virus in the country, perhaps as early as mid-January. It should also be noted that by the time these first cases were confirmed by the government, some local people were already claiming that the number of deaths was higher than officially claimed. A local lawmaker alleged that the count might even be 50 or above. However, the health minister tried to downplay the figures, asserting that it was not even half that number. As he was making these claims in a press conference, however, he was sweating heavily. The next day, he sent a message in a video recording from a quarantine center saying that he had contracted the virus. A few days later, he died, a setback to the policy of downplaying statistics. Soon it became known that a number of members of the Parliament and the cabinet had also contracted the virus. These high-profile infections and deaths made it almost impossible for Iran to further cover up the growing crisis. Nowhere else in the region had such prominent persons fallen victim to it the virus. In Saudi Arabia, for instance, members of the royal family also had contracted the virus by mid-April, but had recovered.

On February 26, Pakistan announced its first two cases: two Shiite pilgrims who had just returned from Iran. The government closed down its land border with Iran and put returning pilgrims in a quarantine center there. However, many had already returned to various parts of the country. It should also be noted that seaports remained open, and hundreds of people arrived every day through airports from all over the world. Pilgrims and expatriates from Saudi Arabia, zaireen (shrine visitors) from Iran, and others from Europe and America also kept traveling through the UAE. Thus, while much attention was being paid to the zaireen quarantined on the border, hardly any concerned the air traffic from abroad. The government only suspended it on March 16, by which time, according to the aviation authority, around 200,00 people had already arrived.

Air traffic from China was suspended for only a couple of days in early February. Before this, many flights had already come from Wuhan and other cities. It is also interesting that the government had claimed in early February that at least one coronavirus patient, who had arrived from China, was admitted to a local hospital in Karachi. His blood sample was sent to the National Institute of Health in Islamabad for testing. But Pakistan hadn’t had testing kits for the coronavirus at the time; they arrived from China on February 12. On the other hand, it is important to

6 Aya Batrawy, “Iran Says 12 Dead from New Virus, Rejects Higher Death Toll,” AP News, February 24, 2020, https://apnews.com/article/united-nations-health-ap-top-news-international-news-virus-outbreak-32540d09ec101aac057660ef1b0aa970.
note that, around the same time, India had confirmed at least one student returning from Wuhan University to have tested positive for Covid-19.

Apart from the lack of capacity to control the spread of the coronavirus, the Pakistani government also tried to downplay the health threat it could pose. Prime Minister Imran Khan, in a televised speech, claimed that the virus was only a minor flu and nothing to worry about. When it started to spread and deaths occurred, the official narrative began to change and the government placed the country under a complete lockdown. Later, the prime minister changed his stance, saying the people were not taking it seriously but treating it as an ordinary flu. Soon the government called in the armed forces. The National Command and Control Centre was set up and provided with funds and donations. Apart from crowd management, the government assumed control over the statistics on the pandemic, making it unlawful for the press and social media to publish any unofficial reports.

Saudi Arabia announced its first cases in March, more than a month after the UAE. This seems surprising, given the fact that these two countries alone account for much of the air travel in the Middle East. Moreover, in the ensuing few weeks, Saudi Arabia showed fewer coronavirus cases than its smaller neighbors, Kuwait and Bahrain, which reported 56 and 49 cases, respectively. While most of the media reports originating in the Middle East praised Saudi Arabia for its strict measures, such as fines and travel checkups, a few pointed to the other side, highlighting the government’s taking full control of information and making it mandatory for the media to publish only the official figures. The government also made it a crime to publish disinformation so as not to cause panic. Additionally, the government adopted a policy of selective testing. One study pointed out that the initial focus of testing was migrants living in slums:

The statistics reported in the early days of the pandemic were taken by the media at face value, circulated uncritically for public consumption and used to implicate migrant workers. 8

Turkey announced its first death from the coronavirus on March 17. However, data compiled by The New York Times suggested that the number of deaths by then was “considerably higher than historical averages, an indication that the virus had arrived several weeks earlier.” 9 The Times interviewed Dr. Sinan Adiyaman, head of the Turkish Medical Association, who also suspected an early arrival of the virus: “In February they did nothing although it was known the disease was there.” Dr. Adiyaman also said that the advisory science board set up by the government for the management of the pandemic “does not make its decisions public, and the government does not share data with his association.” Like other countries in the Middle East, Turkey also imposed strict control over statistics on the pandemic. According to the Times report,

The presidential palace rolled out a carefully orchestrated propaganda campaign, ensuring reports from hospitals, grave sites and mourning relatives remained

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7 Summer Said, “Saudi Arabia Confirms First Case of Coronavirus Infection,” The Wall Street Journal, March 2, 2020, https://www.wsj.com/articles/saudi-arabia-confirms-first-case-of-coronavirus-infection-11583173976.
8 Annas Shaker, “The Truth That Saudi’s Statistics Hide,” Migrant-Rights, August 28, 2020, https://www.migrant-rights.org/2020/08/the-truth-that-saudis-statistics-hide/.
9 Carlotta Gall, “Istanbul Death TollHints Turkey Is Hiding a Wider Coronavirus Calamity,” The New York Times, April 20, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/20/world/middleeast/coronavirus-turkey-deaths.html.
virtually absent. Doctors who spoke out on social media were reprimanded, and 410 people were detained in March for “provocative and abusive” posts.\(^\text{10}\)

THE BLAME GAME

Saudi Arabia vs. Iran

As Tehran began to report its coronavirus cases and deaths, the reaction from neighboring states was mixed. While some closed down their borders and criticized Iran for bringing the virus into the region, others sympathized and reached out to it over the growing health crisis. Kuwait, Qatar, and the UAE, despite their strained relations with Iran, provided medical aid. Saudi Arabia, however, not only hesitated to reach out but came down hard, criticizing Iran for spreading the virus through its Shiite pilgrimage.\(^\text{11}\) In early March, when Saudi Arabia confirmed its first coronavirus case, a member of the Shiite minority living in Qatif (in Eastern Province), the government blamed Iran for exporting the virus.

Iran is home to some of the most sacred Shiite shrines. Pilgrims from around the region visit these shrines as a sacred duty. The pilgrimage goes on all year. Apart from that, Iran is home to a number of Shiite seminaries for students of theology and jurisprudence that attract thousands of students and scholars every year from around the region. As these pilgrims and students returned home, they brought the virus with them. For its part, Saudi Arabia not only disapproves of this kind of shrine pilgrimage, it also suspects the loyalty of its Shiite citizens. Thus, in order to avoid trouble, the minority Shiites of Qatif use indirect routes into Iran via a third country or use ID cards and driver’s licenses that need not be stamped. The use of such travel documents is not uncommon in the Gulf countries.

However, the Saudi government was aware of the indirect visits by its Shiite citizens, accusing Iran of “irresponsible actions” in allowing Saudi nationals to enter and exit without having their passports stamped. A Saudi official came down hard on the Islamic Republic: “These actions are a proof of Iran’s direct responsibility in increasing Covid-19 infections and in the virus’s outbreak all around the world.” On its official Twitter account, Saudi Arabia’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs went to the extent of blaming Iran for “creating a health threat which endangers mankind.”\(^\text{12}\) The Saudi government also warned its citizens to immediately report any indirect travel to Iran and threatened them with legal action under the Travel Documents Law for failure to report.\(^\text{13}\)

For the internal spread, the Saudi government placed the blame on two minority communities—the Shiites of Qatif and migrant workers living in slums. Both communities remain hard pressed and suffer discrimination. The former, though having Saudi identity, remain

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\(^{10}\) Ibid.

\(^{11}\) Manjari Singh, “The Influence of Coronavirus on Diplomatic Relations: Iran, China, Gulf Arabs and India,” Washington Institute for Near East Policy, May 21, 2020, https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/influence-coronavirus-diplomatic-relations-iran-china-gulf-arabs-and-india; Elham Fakhr, “COVID and Gulf Foreign Policy,” International Crisis Group, April 20, 2020, https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/covid-and-gulf-foreign-policy.

\(^{12}\) “Saudi Arabia Says Iran’s Actions Have Helped Spread the Coronavirus around the World,” Arab News, March 5, 2020, https://arab.news/6z2q8.

\(^{13}\) “Bahrain Accuses Iran of ‘Biological Aggression’ over COVID-19,” Al Jazeera, March 12, 2020, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/3/12/bahrain-accuses-iran-of-biological-aggression-over-covid-2019.
politically suspect and, therefore, under surveillance. The latter, not having Saudi identity, survive with limited economic privileges. The provision of health services to both communities is also relatively poor.

As the virus began to spread, the state-controlled media directed attention to these communities, portraying them as vulnerable to the virus due to their weak loyalty to the country and unhealthy lifestyle. Qatif was put under lockdown as soon as the first case was confirmed. The Ministry of Health asked people to inform the government if anyone had traveled to Iran in the previous few weeks. When some Saudi Shiites approached the government to inform it about their travel, hatred of the Shiite community increased in response: “Some of their countrymen [took] to Twitter to blast them as traitors and call for their execution.”

Writing about the prejudice and discrimination against Shiites in Saudi Arabia, one observer contended:

Saudi Arabia and Bahrain have cracked down heavily in recent years on political dissent among their Shiite populations, which are often politically marginalized, stigmatized for their religious beliefs and practices, and suspected of loyalty to Iran. The coronavirus crisis now appears to be amplifying anti-Shiite prejudice and discrimination.

Similarly, migrant workers living in big-city slums came under media fire as well. By the third week of April, the government claimed that most (85 percent) cases of coronavirus were migrant workers. Unfortunately, the government did not care that its reporting was fomenting hatred against this already vulnerable community:

Many in traditional and social media accused migrants of spreading the disease, and xenophobic rhetoric quickly developed. Foreignness became synonymous with irresponsibility and the lack of hygiene.

While the state-controlled media reflexively blamed the migrant workers for spreading the coronavirus, it glossed over the fact that “the majority of those working on the frontlines, such as nurses, cleaning crews, grocery store clerks and truck drivers [were these] migrant workers,” who were at a higher level of risk of exposure to the virus.

**Bahrain vs. Iran and Qatar**

Bahrain also blamed Iran for exporting the virus through Shiite pilgrims. It claimed that all of its initial confirmed cases (through March 15) were individuals who had returned from Iran. Bahrain also charged that Iran failed to stamp the passports of its citizens who went on pilgrimage there. Like Saudi Arabia, Bahrain remains suspect of the loyalty of its Shiite population and maintains a high level of surveillance over them. However, unlike Saudi Arabia, Bahrain didn’t make it a

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14 Toby Matthiesen, “The Coronavirus Is Exacerbating Sectarian Tensions in the Middle East,” *Foreign Affairs*, March 23, 2020, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/2020-03-23/coronavirus-exacerbating-sectarian-tensions-middle-east.

15 Ibid.

16 Ibid.

17 Ibid.
crime to travel to Iran. Bahrain is a much smaller country, with a population that is around 60 percent Shiite.

In its official statements, Bahrain went a step further than Saudi Arabia, blaming Iran for “biological aggression.” Bahrain’s interior minister, General Sheikh Rashid bin Abdulla Al Khalifa, thus tweeted: “With this behaviour, Iran has allowed the disease to travel abroad, and in my estimation this constitutes a form of biological aggression that is criminalised by international law, as it has put in danger our safety and health and that of others.”

Bahrain also blamed Qatar for “conspiring” against it. The allegation came from Bahrain’s foreign minister, relating to the evacuation of Bahraini citizens who got stuck in Iran after Bahrain stopped flights in early March. Although Bahrain began to evacuate its citizens from Iran, the process was slow. For the next week, many citizens remained stranded in Iran. On March 27, dozens of these Bahrainis took a Qatari Airlines flight and arrived in Doha. The next day, Qatar’s government told them that they could not fly back home, as their government had rejected Qatar’s offer to “fly Bahraini citizens on a private charter flight to Bahrain at no cost to the individuals or the government of Bahrain.” The Qatari government also announced that it was ready to conduct coronavirus tests for the passengers and provide medical assistance to those who tested positive if that could help bring Bahrainis back to their country. However, Bahrain was suspicious of Qatar’s offer. Foreign Minister Khalid bin Ahmed Al Khalifa, on his official Twitter account, accused Qatar of politicizing the issue: “What Qatar has done is reprehensible and requires a clear international position against it. Doha should stop using a humanitarian issue such as the Covid-19 pandemic in its plans and ongoing conspiracies against countries and peoples.” Moreover, he said that Qatar was not taking care of the health risks involved in such a hasty evacuation.

Others vs. Iran

The first positive case in Lebanon, on February 21, 2020, was a woman who had traveled to Iran. Because flights were not stopped to and from Iran until the second week of March, the suspicion that the virus was imported from Iran became strong. Apart from the government, opposing religious groups fiercely criticized Hezbollah for maintaining strong ties with Iran. Even though Hezbollah made its health services immediately available for fighting the virus, it could not escape blame nor could its benefactor, Iran. According to one commentator,

In Lebanon, which was already in a state of deep political and financial crisis, the coronavirus pandemic has also exacerbated political and sectarian tensions. . . . Iran’s support of Hezbollah is fiercely contested, and the rival parties have politicized the virus, using it to criticize Iran’s influence in Lebanon.

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18 Al Jazeera, “Bahrain Accuses Iran of ‘Biological Aggression.’”
19 Fakhr, “COVID and Gulf Foreign Policy.”
20 Andrew Hanna, “What Islamists Are Doing and Saying on COVID-19 Crisis,” Wilson Center, May 14, 2020, https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/what-islamists-are-doing-and-saying-covid-19-crisis. According to Hanna’s report, Hezbollah deployed nearly 25,000 health-care professionals and more than 100 emergency vehicles to handle Covid-19 patients. Hezbollah reserved beds for coronavirus patients at its Beirut hospital, where it once treated wounded fighters. Members of the group’s civil-defense forces sanitized streets in the country’s Shiite-populated south and delivered food to the poor.
21 Matthiesen, “Coronavirus is Exacerbating Sectarian Tensions.”
In Iraq and Syria, although the governments did not adopt a hostile posture toward Iran, the armed opposition groups did. In Iraq, the first case, confirmed on February 24, 2020, was also a person who had traveled from Iran. ISIS at once blamed Iran for exporting the virus, saying that the outbreak was a warning for the Shiites to “abandon polytheism.” Later, as the virus spread to Europe and caused widespread death, ISIS included European countries in its hostile statements, claiming it was a “painful torment” for the “crusader nations.” In Syria, the first case was announced on March 23, 2020, and the armed opposition group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) blamed Shiites and non-believers. On March 24, Abu Mariya al-Qahtani, an HTS commander, called the virus a “temporary epidemic” that paled in comparison to the Shiites, who “have corrupted the religion of the people and their earthly life.”

Saudi Arabia vs. Qatar

Apart from blaming Iran, Saudi Arabia also came down hard on Qatar. While the government did not make explicit statements in media and social media, which are state-controlled, Qatar was severely criticized for the coronavirus crisis in the region. A famous Saudi-based columnist, Noura al-Moteari, pushed the misinformation that Qatar was funding the spread of coronavirus in the region in order to undermine Riyadh’s Vision 2030 and the UAE’s upcoming Expo 2020. She also started two hashtags on social media, one stating that “Qatar is involved in the manufacturing of corona,” and the other that “Qatar is corona.” These hashtags went viral in the region, suggesting that a number of people wanted to spread this misinformation. These sources were not struck down or censored, even though a law had been announced that forbade spreading misinformation.

UAE vs. Iran and Syria

Although the UAE usually synchronizes its regional policy with Saudi Arabia, it did not do so in response to the spread of the pandemic. Because the UAE promotes humanitarian aid as one of the core elements of its foreign policy, the divergence in its stance toward Iran and Syria was expected and makes sense. This principle also applies toward its policy of quiet de-escalation through the diplomacy of humanitarian aid with its neighbors. The spread of the pandemic in Iran was a test of this policy, and the UAE became one of the first countries to provide humanitarian aid to the Islamic Republic. Iran praised the UAE, saying that the pandemic had brought “more reason and logic” to their relationship than otherwise. The two countries also acknowledged the “importance of collective work and efforts to survive such global challenges.”

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22 Hanna, “What Islamists Are Doing.”
23 Ibid.
24 Ibid.
25 Marc Owen Jones, “Myths, Lies, and the Coronavirus: How Middle East Tensions Are Being Stoked,” Middle East Eye, March 6, 2020, https://www.middleeasteye.net/opinion/coronavirus-Middle-east-viral-misinformation-saudi-iran.
26 Fakhro, “COVID and Gulf Foreign Policy.”
27 Diana Galeeva, “The UAE’s Response to the COVID-19 Outbreak in Iran,” LSE Middle East Center Blog, April 5, 2020, https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2020/04/05/the-uaes-response-to-the-covid-19-outbreak-in-iran/.
On March 3, the UAE dispatched a medical-aid package combined with the assistance provided by the World Health Organization (WHO). The aid included 7.5 tons of medical supplies and five WHO experts. The UAE sent more aid the next day, including 32 metric tons of medical supplies, such as thousands of surgical masks, gloves, and protective equipment. By May 12, the country had provided medical aid surpassing 500 metric tons to more than 47 countries worldwide apart from food aid and repatriation flights.

With Syria, the UAE’s relationship has remained at a low point since war broke out in 2011. The two countries severed diplomatic ties, only to partially reintiate them in 2018. However, the pandemic provided an opportunity for Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan to talk to Syrian President Bashar al-Assad for the first time, in March 2020. Mohammed also took to Twitter to assure Assad of “the support of the UAE and its willingness to help the Syrian people” combat the pandemic. Soon the UAE dispatched a contingent of medical aid, sending two more contingents on August 31 and September 14.

Qatar and Iran

Even though a member of the GCC, Qatar has remained estranged from its Arab neighbors. In 2017, when Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Bahrain initiated a land, air, and sea blockade of Qatar, diplomatic relations among these countries came to an end. In March 2020, a virtual meeting of GCC finance ministers was organized in the hope that their relations might improve, but they didn’t. Soon a new phase of estrangement between Bahrain and Qatar began. In Saudi Arabia, both mass and social media turned against Qatar. Against this backdrop, Qatar thought of going outside the GCC to expand its relations with non-Arab neighbors. This resulted in adopting a soft stance on Iran, to which, in mid-March 2020, Qatari Emir Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani dispatched about six tons of medical equipment and supplies. Kuwait then sent $10 million in humanitarian aid to Iran.

Turkey and Saudi Arabia

By mid-March, Turkey blamed Saudi Arabia for keeping the regional countries in the dark regarding the outbreak of the coronavirus among pilgrims. Interior Minister Suleyman Soylu said, “Saudi Arabia did not inform us or the world about any cases” of the deadly virus. He further added that Saudi Arabia left Turkish authorities on their own to take measures, but “the damage had already started.” In March, Turkey quarantined 10,330 pilgrims returning from Saudi Arabia. On the other hand, the influential Saudi-based analyst Zayed al-Amri claimed on a Saudi TV channel

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28 Ibid.
29 “Coronavirus: UAE Assists 47 Countries and 523,000 Medical Professionals,” The National, May 12, 2020, https://www.thenationalnews.com/uae/coronavirus-uae-assists-47-countries-and-523-000-medical-professionals-1.1018591.
30 Fakhro, “COVID and Gulf Foreign Policy.”
31 Serdar Acil and Merve Yildizalp, “Saudi Arabia Kept the World in Dark about Coronavirus,” Anadolu Agency, March 26, 2020, https://www.aa.com.tr/en/latest-on-coronavirus-outbreak/saudi-arabia-kept-the-world-in-dark-about-coronavirus/1781030.
32 “Coronavirus: Turkey Quarantines Thousands of Pilgrims from Saudi Arabia,” Middle East Eye, March 15, 2020, https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/coronavirus-turkey-quarantines-10300-returning-pilgrims.
in early March that, because Turkey was not being transparent about its coronavirus crisis, Arab tourists kept going there and bringing the virus back home.\textsuperscript{33}

**Pakistan Blaming Anyone?**

By mid-February, as one after another country fell victim to the virus, Pakistan faced the immense challenge of preventing it from entering the country. For the geopolitically embattled, economically weak, and socially divided Pakistan, it was unwise to blame another country and disrupt relations. Therefore, Pakistan remained cautious about the timing, origin, and path of the virus. Despite its proximity and increased trade relations with China, Pakistan did not record or announce any early cases to have arrived from China. Similarly, despite continuous air links with Saudi Arabia and the UAE, which brought hundreds of thousands of pilgrims every week, Pakistan did not record or announce any early cases from these countries. However, on February 26, when a number of regional countries closed their borders with Iran and announced their cases to have arrived from there, Pakistan also made a cautious announcement that its first case arrived from Iran. However, Pakistan did not make any statement blaming Iran for spreading the virus.

**No One Blaming China!**

In the early months, when a number of Western states, including the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany, and Australia, criticized China for the outbreak and spread of the virus, the Middle Eastern states did not.\textsuperscript{34} Similarly, as the regional powers in the Middle East started to blame each other, especially the so-called second epicenter of the pandemic, Iran, they did not blame China. Most of the states praised China for taking stringent measures to check the spread of the virus in its early stages and for providing generous medical and economic aid. According to one writer, “China has gained a reputation for having dealt relatively effectively with the virus, and thus the popular perception in parts of the Mideast is that China can help end the pandemic quickly.”\textsuperscript{35}

Let us have a look at what different Gulf states had to say about China at the outbreak. Iran neither claimed that the virus arrived from China, nor stopped its flights to China until early March. As one observer said, the response rather was of “high-level clandestine meetings and a continued strategic partnership with China, along with continued flights to China despite warnings which characterized Iranian officials’ early responses.”\textsuperscript{36} Similarly, Pakistan made high-level

\textsuperscript{33} Jones, “Myths, Lies, and the Coronavirus.”

\textsuperscript{34} “Amid Attack from Trump, WHO Praises China for Handling COVID-19 Pandemic,” Gulf News, May 2, 2020, https://gulfnews.com/world/asia/amid-attack-from-trump-who-praises-china-for-handling-covid-19-pandemic-1.1588411279193.

\textsuperscript{35} Sabena Siddiqui, “China Ramps up COVID-19 Diplomacy in Mideast,” Al-Monitor, May 4, 2020, https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2020/05/china-covid19-diplomacy-saudi-arabia-gcc-wuhan-pompeo-uae.html.

\textsuperscript{36} Manjari Singh, “The Influence of Coronavirus on Diplomatic Relations: Iran, China, Gulf Arabs and India,” Washington Institute for Near East Policy, https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/influence-coronavirus-diplomatic-relations-iran-china-gulf-arabs-and-india.
visits to China. In March, President Arif Alvi made a trip to China and garnered a promise to build a hospital. On the occasion, a spokesperson of the Chinese Foreign Ministry, Zhao Lijian, said:

Chinaland Pakistan are all-weather strategic cooperative partners and iron-clad friends sharing weal and woe. We will never forget the precious assistance we received from the Pakistani side at the most trying moment of our combat against the pandemic.37

In Saudi Arabia, the official royal view was expressed on several media channels. For instance, Saudi-owned Al Arabiya praised early Chinese efforts: “China is the only country that has performed well in dealing with this crisis.”38 Similarly, Al-Sharq al-Awsat, a newspaper owned by the royal family, praised the strict controls imposed by the Chinese government. Its former editor-in-chief, Salman al Dossary, praised the Chinese lockdown of Wuhan as “laying siege to the disease.”39 The Chinese model of strict social control backed by a threat of force resonated on media outlets across the country. According to one analyst, although the views expressed in media could not be said to be direct expressions of official views, they “do reflect the bounds of acceptable public discourse, and as such, an indirect reflection of official sympathies with the Chinese model of durable ‘upgraded’ authoritarianism.”40 Later, King Salman and Chinese President Xi Jinping spoke three times during the summer to discuss the pandemic as well as other economic topics. In April, China and Saudi Arabia signed an agreement worth $265 million to fight the outbreak. Under this agreement, China would provide Saudi Arabia nine million nucleic-acid tests and set up six laboratories.41 In September, the Chinese ambassador to Saudi Arabia praised the king’s material and “spiritual support” at this “critical time.” He further remarked, “The saying that ‘a friend in need is a friend indeed’ has become the best footnote of the friendship between China and Saudi Arabia.”42

The UAE also praised Chinese efforts to cope with the virus. It should be noted that the UAE is one of the most important trading partners of China, accounting for 28 percent of all the trade that takes place between China and the Gulf states. In early February, the UAE illuminated its tallest building with the Chinese flag to show support for China. Mohamed bin Zayed had tweeted on January 26: “We’re closely following the Chinese government’s efforts to contain the spread of the coronavirus. We are confident in their ability to overcome this crisis. The UAE is ready to provide all support to China and cooperate with the international community to tackle this virus.”43 China’s ruling party acknowledged the UAE’s support: “All sectors of the UAE fully support China’s fight against new coronavirus epidemic.”44

37 “China Reassures Persistent Support to Pakistan against COVID-19,” The National, July 12, 2020, https://nation.com.pk/12-Jul-2020/china-reassures-persistent-support-to-pakistan-against-covid-19.
38 Andrew Leber, “China and COVID-19 in Saudi Media,” War on the Rocks, April 23, 2020, https://warontherocks.com/2020/04/china-and-covid-19-in-saudi-media/.
39 Ibid.
40 Ibid.
41 “Saudi Arabia Inks $265 Million Deal on Test Kits, Labs with China’s BGI,” Global Times, April 27, 2020, https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1186936.shtml.
42 “How COVID-19 Strengthened Relations between China and Saudi Arabia,” Arab News, September 22, 2020, https://www.arabnews.jp/en/saudi-arabia/article_27326/.
43 “Chinese Media Praise UAE’s Support to China Amid Coronavirus Outbreak,” Gulf News, February 4, 2020, https://gulfnews.com/uae/chinese-media-praise-uae-s-support-to-china-amid-coronavirus-outbreak-1.1580841300342.
44 Ibid.
CONCLUSION

Geopolitically, the Middle East is divided along lines of ethnicity, religion/sectarianism, and political systems. In this region, there have lately emerged three major powerhouses—Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Iran—which vie for political leadership and hegemony. Each of them makes appeals to smaller regional states to join their exclusive alliances, based on similarity or difference in ethnicity, sectarianism, and political system. Three major alliances have emerged: one led by Saudi Arabia, with Wahhabism and Arab nationalism as its hallmarks; another led by Turkey, based on Islamic revivalism and non-Arab Muslim brotherhood; a third led by Iran, with Shiite revolutionary brotherhood as its hallmark.

At the outbreak of the coronavirus epidemic in the region, the political divisions among these powerhouses and their allies became quite visible as they engaged in a blame game. It began as the first cases were noticed in the different states, especially as Iran’s situation worsened. Although the virus arrived first in the UAE, it did not make a deadly impact there, but in Iran. The UAE announced its first positive coronavirus cases arriving from Wuhan as early as mid-January. In the ensuing weeks, it didn’t report more cases. Iran announced its first cases by February 19, but the situation was already out of hand. As high-profile political leaders contracted the virus, Iran was unable to overlook, even cover up, its spread. Soon, the international media was calling Iran the second epicenter of the growing epidemic. At this stage, various other regional states not only blamed Iran for covering up the actual figures but also for exporting the virus to them through Shiite pilgrims.

As the infections in regional states began to grow, the blame game intensified. Saudi Arabia blamed Iran for spreading the virus by not stamping the travel documents of shrine visitors. Bahrain also accused Iran, as well as Qatar, of causing “biological aggression” in the region. Saudi Arabia and Turkey exchanged blame for covering up the presence of the virus. Because both countries exchange pilgrims and tourists, they ran the risk of spreading the virus. However, in this blame game, the UAE represents a healthy exception. It reached out to all affected states in the region and provided them with medical supplies and humanitarian aid. On the other hand, it is also worth noting that no regional state blamed the first epicenter of the epidemic, China. They instead praised the authoritarian measures taken by the Chinese government, which they later sought to adopt.

The blame game of the rival states in the Middle East served their domestic political purposes. By pointing the finger at the others, the governments diverted people’s attention from their own unpreparedness for calamities, the lack of scientific knowhow and infrastructure, and low spending on healthcare. The blame game also allowed them to cover up information about the spread of the virus. They took strict control over statistics on infection and deaths. They also made laws punishing so-called disinformation and/or causing panic. Moreover, they scapegoated their minority communities and immigrant workers by laying the blame for the spread of the virus on them, as well as portraying them as more susceptible to it.

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