

# The Middle East's Future of Perpetual Pandemics

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**If outbreaks like the coronavirus shift from ‘black swan’ events to regular occurrences, globalization trends in the region may reverse, with sobering consequences.**

**A**s the coronavirus outbreak has spread internationally, the world’s attention has focused on China, the country where it originated. But as a Middle East watcher for the past two decades, I really got interested when it popped up in Iran, a Chinese trading partner and an equally authoritarian and deceptive regime. Financial markets and political leaders are fixated on the virus’ arrival in Europe and the United States, but what is happening in Iran, the geographic keystone that connects Asia, Eurasia, the Arabian Peninsula and the Levant, should be just as worrying.

The challenges of combating the spread of the virus in a country that is not known for its transparency became obvious on Monday when Iran’s deputy health minister showed signs of infection at [his own press conference \(https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-51628484\)](https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-51628484). Just hours earlier, Iran’s President Hassan Rouhani had characterized the outbreak as [“a conspiracy by the enemies” of Iran \(https://en.radiofarda.com/a/coronavirus-reaches-the-political-elite-in-iran-and-rouhani-talks-about-enemy-plots/30453730.html\)](https://en.radiofarda.com/a/coronavirus-reaches-the-political-elite-in-iran-and-rouhani-talks-about-enemy-plots/30453730.html). Even after acknowledging later that he had tested positive for the virus, the health minister minimized the extent of the emergency, insisting that a widely publicized death toll of 50 people in the city of Qom was inflated and that there was no need for a quarantine.

Undervaluing the impact of pandemics is not limited to Iranian government officials. It’s actually a widespread phenomenon among Middle East experts who tend to focus more on war and terrorism risks when doing their forecasts. But the spread of coronavirus to the seat of many of the world’s oldest and greatest civilizations is a

dramatic development with long-term consequences for the region and the world. Pandemics will soon be both commonplace and a key driver of the future of society.

One idea emerging from future-gazers—and I pay attention to novelists as well as economists, sociologists and technologists—is the idea that pandemics will roll back aspects of globalization or even bring it to a screeching halt. In Paolo Bacigalupi's *The Windup Girl*, a novel set in a futuristic Thailand, today's globalization is a past period remembered as “the expansion.” In the face of pandemics and resource wars, global trade has collapsed into a new reality known as “the contraction.”

These concepts are already beginning to show themselves in the Middle East, which is why I have increasingly placed pandemics at the center of my forecasts for the region. In addition to being tightly connected to so many places, at the literal center of global aviation, energy and shipping hubs, the Middle East is weakened by wars, corruption, failing health services and deceptive regimes that may try to cover up the extent of future pandemics, as the Iranian government is **trying to do today ([https://www.memri.org/reports/iranian-majlis-representative-qom-10-deaths-every-day-coronavirus-city-regime-concealing#\\_edn1](https://www.memri.org/reports/iranian-majlis-representative-qom-10-deaths-every-day-coronavirus-city-regime-concealing#_edn1))**.

Displaced person camps (such as the 80,000-person Zaatari refugee camp in Jordan) are particularly vulnerable. Refugees and other migrants flowing undetected to Europe are further risk factors for the spread of pandemics via the Middle East.

The civil wars and refugee crises of the present day give us some insights into how pandemics could shape the future world. In my work, I have seen how terrorism, refugees and resource constraints combine to test the cohesion of societies.

The scourges of al-Qaida—and later the Islamic State—brought out mixed reactions in the populations of weak states like Iraq, Syria and Yemen. Sometimes more stable areas tried to cut themselves off, restrict freedom of movement to countrymen of different sects, or even hoard their ample resources (such as electricity) from dysfunctional parts of civil war states.

More often, I was shocked by how open and welcoming the “haves” were to the “have-nots” from less fortunate communities “infected” by war. Tight social connections, a generally merciful outlook and loosely controlled societies will unfortunately be wide open to future pandemics like the coronavirus.

A common ode to globalization is that we live in a world that is getting smaller all the time, meaning that travel and the ordering of goods are easier, faster and cheaper. But what if the future is more like Bacigalupi's “contraction”?

Thinking about my own area of focus, the Middle East region, I can imagine that some things might not be affected. Commodities will continue to flow as long as hydrocarbons are needed, because it is possible to run an oil and gas sector with a minimal number of well-protected people, and energy exports pose almost no risk of infection.

In contrast, the movement of people would be entirely changed, with profound societal and economic impacts on some parts of the region. Imagine the constriction of pilgrim flows to Mecca, the exodus of expatriate technocrats from Dubai, or the end of imported Asian guest workers in the Gulf.

Many societies are built on travel, including many Western states. (When trapped in the United Kingdom due to ash clouds from the 2010 eruption of Iceland's Eyjafjallajokull volcano, I had the time and inclination to imagine how a U.K. under a permanent no-fly zone might evolve.)

Under a contraction scenario, when people wanted to work in a country, they might have to commit to stay there for a very long time, if not forever. In the near-future movie “Code 46,” all cross-border movement is a complex bureaucratic endeavor, carrying the risk of permanent exclusion. States—including the exclusive Gulf monarchies—might have to reconsider their citizenship rules to incentivize targeted immigration.

One upside for Middle Easterners, after a harsh period of adjustment, might be the localization of their economies. This development may be coming in any case, with the maturation of 3D printing, additive manufacturing and nanotechnology making it less necessary to ship items from long distances away. Pandemic-driven contraction could accelerate this trend. For countries bypassed by the 19th-century industrial revolution, including most of the Middle East, there could be a new driver away from import dependence and toward job creation.

The globalized spread of ideas and culture might not be directly affected by pandemic-driven contraction, but there might nonetheless be an upsurge in the nationalism, nativism and protectionism that is already rearing its head in reaction to the economics and social diversification effects of globalization. Many Middle Easterners might be quite happy to see a tempering of the imposition of what Henry Kissinger aide David Young once called “the peril of the dominant culture (<https://atlanticpartnership.org/2003/02/the-peril-of-the-dominant-culture-and-the-idea-of-america/>)”—the risk that globalization might make everywhere the same, wiping away the differences that delight and surprise.

In a pandemic-ridden future, nation states might become stronger, because they clearly define who can come and who must go based on nationality, and because they have potentially well-policed borders. But states will gain in legitimacy only if they prove effective when tested by pandemics and other threats.

Inefficient states with long land borders and poor public health systems—such as Russia, Iran and perhaps China—may prove the most susceptible in the new ecosystem of regularly recurring pandemics. In those kinds of vulnerable states, a breakdown into smaller, more cohesive, perhaps more authoritarian subsystems might be the natural effect of pandemic-driven contraction.

Where today the world is getting smaller, there is a good case for thinking through how we (collectively and individually) would cope with living in a bigger world again, where everywhere is further apart and where local actors become the uncontested masters of their fate once more. As pandemics become a dominant feature of the global system, the short-lived “expansion” may risk coming to an end. Some more isolationist voices in America might see pandemics as yet another reason to view the world as a dangerous place that should be avoided at all costs. On the other hand, if the United States still stands for a global order and global markets, then it needs to lead a collective defense against the threat of pandemic, the coming global earthquake of which the coronavirus may merely be an early and gentle tremor.

*Michael Knights is a senior fellow with The Washington Institute. This article was originally published on the Politico website (<https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2020/02/26/middle-east-coronavirus-pandemics-public-health-117770>). ❖*

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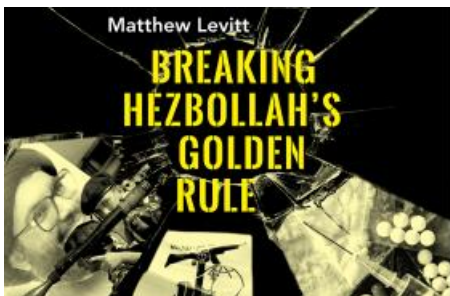
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