

The Political Effect of the Corona Crisis on the Arab Gulf States

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The world is currently experiencing an unprecedented crisis in the shape of a disease, known as the Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19), which has hit the entire globe. This pandemic's effects have not been confined to the health and epidemiological sectors, but have also affected economic, social, political and even psychological conditions in societies and countries.

Observers believe that the new world order that emerged following the collapse of the former Soviet Union in the early Nineties of the previous century and was linked to the globalisation system has been subject in recent times to challenges and basic changes that have weakened it significantly. Such challenges (or unconventional threats) have transcended national borders and include terrorism, waves of illegal immigration, the problem of refugees, global environmental pollution, organised crime that transcends national borders, piracy and pandemics. All these challenges have effectively contributed to increasing public acceptance of populist political discourse that calls for isolation, shutting borders, expelling immigrants and foreigners, emphasising the principle of national sovereignty and strengthening the central state's authority. There is no doubt that such changes contradict the essence of globalisation, which calls for the removal of barriers and borders between states and for encouraging international cooperation in all fields.

There are those who believe that the Corona crisis will deepen such changes to the international order, because they will result in a strengthening of the central state's authority and give governments the freedom to introduce new security policies that might also be repressive on the pretext of protecting health and national security in their countries. The pandemic may also lead to a deepening of racism and xenophobia in various societies.

As a matter of fact, no state can isolate itself from those changes, which transcend borders. The effects of this global crisis have affected the Arab Gulf states, among others in the world. The pandemic prompted the Arab Gulf states to adopt several precautionary measures, mainly the imposition of partial and full curfews, closing schools, government departments, places of worship, airports and border crossing points. The Arab countries were amongst the first states to adopt such precautionary measures after they experienced the first few cases. Such a strict government manner of dealing with the health crisis contributed to increasing the confidence of the peoples of the Gulf in their governments in terms of their crisis management abilities.

For example, in Kuwait, which provides relative freedom, political participation and an elected parliament, the crisis helped bolster the Kuwaiti people's confidence in the government's crisis managing abilities. Parliament's role became secondary during the crisis, and calls for marginalising it and giving the government wider powers re-emerged strongly as a result of this crisis. This allowed the government to take the lead role in managing it without needing to resort to parliament, which saw most of its sessions suspended. Hence this crisis contributed to weakening popular confidence in the importance of the legislative power's role, and to strengthening the cabinet's public popularity. The same applies to other Arab Gulf countries, whose governments were able to deal with the pandemic with considerable efficacy, without the need for creating more venues of public participation. According to Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben, extraordinary circumstances give governments the necessary justification to rule without being accountable to their constituencies.

As a matter of fact, one of the global political effects of the Corona crisis is that it led to questions based on a comparison between the way undemocratic systems (as in China) and democratic systems (as in Italy, France and even the US) handled the pandemic. Some believe that centralised totalitarian regimes are more capable of dealing with non-traditional threats to their national security, such as the Corona pandemic, because the decision-making and adoption process in such centralised regimes is more rapid and not subject to popular and bureaucratic monitoring.

There are two main trends in the political sphere in the Arab Gulf countries and in other Arab countries. The first demands political reform including political participation. The second trend is conservative and calls for preserving the status quo as it is. During the past decade, the first trend that calls for more political participation has experienced two dislocations that have weakened it considerably. The first stemmed from the negative results of the Arab protests, particularly in Syria and Libya. The second dislocation has resulted from the Corona virus, which has contributed to strengthening the legitimacy of the ruling governments in the Arab Gulf countries, highlighting the efficacy of their crisis-management abilities.

The political effects of the Corona crisis in the Arab Gulf states include the enactment of "emergency policies" by governments to deal with the pandemic, such as the imposition of curfews, or electronically monitoring individuals who have contracted the virus. The success of the security services in the Gulf states at implementing such measures, which are new and unprecedented, will doubtless encourage them to implement emergency policies in future situations that their governments deem as threats to national security.

The Corona crisis has allowed governments to restrict individual freedoms, limit privacy and liberty, impose a policy of physical distancing and prevent gatherings on the pretext of protecting people from contracting the virus. Political psychologists argue that if societies undergo such restrictions of their freedoms for a prolonged period, they become more willing to submit to absolute government authority in the future. This long-term outcome could apply to Gulf societies, whose governments have long depended on economic wealth and rentier fiscal policies to shape societies that were mostly less receptive to regional popular political mobilisation for change.

On the other hand, the Corona virus crisis has demonstrated the urgency of the need in the Arab Gulf countries for a government role in the economic, security and social spheres. This could establish the concept of "big government" in the Gulf countries, where governments play the largest role in the state's political, economic and social systems. As the private sector's role in dealing with the pandemic's developments and repercussions diminished, the confidence of individuals in the private sector's capacity to secure their basic food and medical needs has fell.

For example, state-supported cooperative societies and privately owned shopping centres exist in Kuwait. The Corona virus crisis has clearly demonstrated the ability of government cooperative societies to provide individuals with necessary supplies, further strengthening their confidence in the government's role in securing their daily needs. The same applies to government hospitals, which have borne the brunt of the Corona virus crisis, as opposed to private hospitals, which played a secondary role. As a result, there has been a weakening of popular acceptance in the Gulf states for calls to privatize sectors that directly serve members of society, such as the health, food supply, and services sectors.

The Corona crisis has socioeconomic issues, particularly in relation to their dysfunctional demographic makeup, and the massive increase in the numbers of migrant workers for whom adequate housing is not provided. This has led to the concentration of that workforce in cantons and small residential communities that do not meet basic health requirements, and they have therefore become focal points for Corona virus outbreaks in Gulf societies. The Corona crisis has also raised the issue of migrant workers in the Gulf countries. Members of the

Kuwaiti parliament called on the government to take the measures necessary to tackle the demographic imbalance and build special residential complexes for migrant workers.

In Kuwait, the government imposed full lockdown on residential areas where migrant workers congregate, such as Jleeb al-Shuyoukh, al-Farawaniyah and Hawalli. Moreover, governments in the Gulf states laid off large numbers of expatriates as a result of the economic repercussions of the Corona crisis and lower oil prices. In Kuwait, layoffs of large numbers of Egyptian expatriate workers, who number almost half a million, caused a war of words on social media platforms between some Kuwaitis and Egyptians, and the matter almost turned into a diplomatic crisis between Kuwait and Egypt.

The Corona virus crisis also contributed to the spread of racist discourse in the Gulf states against migrants, blaming them for the spread of the virus. In Kuwait, some Kuwaiti parliaments, such as Member of Parliament Safaa al-Hashem, became famous for adopting a populist political demagoguery calling for the expulsion of foreigners from Kuwait. The Corona crisis contributed to popularising such discourse, which some have described as "racist". However, its supporters believe that it is "patriotic" and aimed at protecting the interests of the state and its social fabric. Some citizens in the Gulf clearly spread "hate speech" on social media, leading to disapproval by many civil society institutions focused on human rights in the Gulf states.

On the other hand, the Arab Gulf states are experiencing the Corona pandemic as the so-called political "Gulf crisis" enters its fourth year without a diplomatic settlement. Moreover, the Corona pandemic coincided with a drop in oil prices, and a severe economic crisis in the Arab Gulf states, forcing some of them, such as Saudi Arabia, to draw on their cash reserves to plug budgetary deficits. Some observers expect that the deteriorating economic conditions that accompanied the Corona crisis could contribute to convincing the Arab Gulf states to resolve the political Gulf crisis and intensify economic cooperation to minimise the negative impacts of the Corona crisis on their national economies.

However, a contrasting viewpoint holds that the Corona crisis is unlikely to impact the political Gulf crisis directly and contribute to resolving it, because of the complexity of the issues relating to it. Ironically, the Gulf crisis led to the closure of the borders between Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain on the one hand and Qatar on the other hand for political reasons, whereas the Corona crisis prompted the Arab Gulf states to close their borders to nationals of all the world's countries for health reasons. This could prompt the Arab Gulf countries to reconsider their thinking in the post Corona phase with regard to preserving the unity and cohesion of the Gulf Cooperation Council and resolving the differences existing between its countries.

To sum up, this article discusses the potential political effects of the Corona crisis on the Arab Gulf states, in terms of their impact on the political system and local communities, the relationship of society to power and social structure, as well as the potential impact of this crisis on the Arab Gulf states' external relations. Although not long has passed since the emergence of the Corona pandemic, it clearly has impacted all sectors. Those impacts are expected to become more apparent within the international order in the long term, particularly in relation to the role of the state. Observers expect that the international order after the global Corona crisis will not be the same as it was before the crisis, with some believing that it might be similar to the major turning points that led to changes in the international order, such as the collapse of the Soviet Union, or the events of September 11.

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