

The economic slowdown disadvantages women inside and outside the workforce. Peaking unemployment rates among women cause financial hardship on families and the economy, but could also lead to gender stratification and disrupt the global economy. In a region where women already comprise a minor percentage of the workforce, any sizable loss of the female workforce could reverse years of progress.

Men and women face different occupational exposures to COVID-19: men have greater exposure outside of the home, while women have greater exposure through caregiver roles in the workplace and at home. Public sectors in the region, particularly health and social services, are heavily powered by women; in Egypt, for instance, female nurses outnumber male nurses by 10:1.<sup>2</sup>

In these front-line health occupations, women are at a higher risk of infection and face harsh working conditions. This has been witnessed in Lebanon, where the pandemic has aggravated already long working hours and reduced salaries for nursing staff.<sup>1</sup> At a time when female participation in the job market was on the rise, this is a significant step back in advancing women's roles in the economy.

The Middle East is home to the second-largest gender gap in unpaid care and domestic work, with women working in unpaid domestic jobs 4.7 times more often than men, a figure that the pandemic is likely to exacerbate.<sup>2</sup> The closure of schools and childcare facilities further compels women to engage in unpaid work, such as homeschooling, performing routine household chores, and caring for the sick and elderly.<sup>1</sup> The increase in unpaid work and the simultaneous decrease in female participation in the labor force restricts women's financial independence and strengthens the homogeneity of labor divisions between men and women.

However, the increased burden on women does not end at physical labor—taking care of the ill can also have high costs on women's mental health. In the Middle East, where discussions of mental health are highly stigmatized, the pandemic only further barricades access to mental health resources.

The emotional and mental fatigue that women face by caring for the sick at home can affect their physiology by compromising their immune systems, thereby increasing their risk of infection.<sup>2</sup> Paradoxically, historically enforced gender roles, which are traditionally justified on the presumption that they protect women, harm them in this pandemic.

The heightened effect of infectious disease on women is not unique to COVID-19 and has been corroborated by past data. For example, the Ebola outbreak in West Africa in 2013 hindered improvement in closing the educational gender

gap. Girls with infected mothers often inherited domestic responsibilities, like caregiving and household chores.<sup>1</sup> Their increased domestic responsibilities came at the expense of their education, risking their ability to return to school and jeopardizing their future financial independence.

### Social and Mental Consequences for Women

COVID-19's economic effects on the family, such as financial pressure or food insecurity, cause psychosocial stress and maladaptive coping mechanisms. Women often suffer the consequences of conflict by becoming victims of violent outbreaks, which are only magnified in current situations of confinement. Since the start of lockdown, governments throughout the MENA region have reported a rise in hotline calls for domestic violence. In just the first month of lockdown, the Family Protection Department in Jordan reported a 33 percent increase in domestic violence cases.<sup>1</sup>

At the same time, gender-based violence in the Middle East is gaining exposure in the media, particularly in Turkey. With soaring rates of domestic violence and the horrific murder of 27-year old Pinar Gültekin, women have made "Women Supporting Women" a viral trend by challenging each other to post a black-and-white selfie.

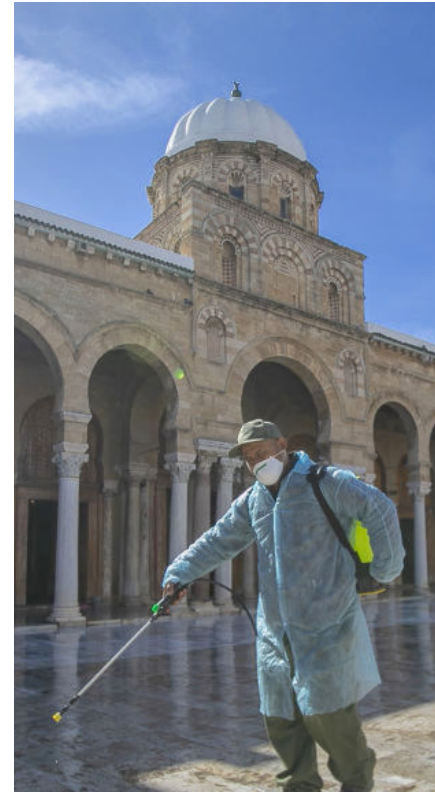
Although the media may highlight stories of domestic violence, the current overload on the healthcare system in the Middle East jeopardizes women's access to reproductive and sexual health resources, leaving survivors of abuse to cope with health concerns alone.<sup>2</sup> Services including safe spaces, shelters, and medical care, which are already limited in the MENA region, are likely to be suspended or reduced.<sup>3</sup>

Even as online services and hotlines continue to operate, women's ability to seek help is limited—nearly half of the women in the Arab region do not have access to a mobile phone or Internet connection.<sup>2</sup> Inaction on behalf of the police, government, and state officials not only permits men to control and abuse women, but also normalizes treating women as second-class citizens.

So, where do we go from here? Can we use COVID-19 to dismantle gender norms in the Middle East?

Women's financial empowerment should be at the forefront of the pandemic response. Financial independence allows women to leave toxic relationships, to say "no" in potentially harmful situations, and to advocate for their own health. Investing in women will make systematic change more likely and strengthen economic growth. This would also require legislative action in recovery measures—from including women in the governmental decision-making body to designating sexual and reproductive health services as essential and granting working women paid leave.<sup>3</sup>

By tackling economic disparities between men and women, the Middle East will be much closer to achieving gender equity.



P.C. Yassine Gaidi via Getty Images

### The Syrian Conflict: International Nuance and Regaining Hopes of Peace

On March 5, Turkey and Russia agreed to stop hostilities in Idlib after escalating violence displaced nearly one million people.<sup>4</sup> Peace agreements such as the Russian-Turkish ceasefire in Idlib have led to decreased violence compared to previous years.<sup>5</sup>

The withdrawal of Russia and Turkey in northern Syria has also allowed other nations to halt their hostilities around the rest of the country, which has in turn allowed international actors in Syria to focus on the pandemic. For example, instead of supporting the Assad regime within Syria, Shia Islamist political and militant groups, more commonly known as Hezbollah, have shifted their resources to help Lebanese civilians.

Similarly, Iranian attention has shifted to battling its massive outbreak, focusing on procuring medical supplies from China instead of sending weapons to Syria.<sup>6</sup> The pandemic is diverting international attention from

## The Pandemic in Syria and Yemen: How Coronavirus is Rewriting the Violence

By Maryanne Koussa

Across the world, the coronavirus pandemic has proven that the only solution is collective action; however, in Syria and Yemen, the rampant spread of the virus only further reveals the fragility of their governments.

Currently, only .014 percent of confirmed global coronavirus cases come from Syria and Yemen, but the external actors involved in these civil conflicts, including the United States, Russia, and Iran, lead the world in the number of cases.<sup>1</sup> The pandemic is playing a role in removing international intervening powers who face domestic battles against COVID-19, thus re-centering these civil wars to address internal issues and reduce violence created by external proxies.

Millions of Syrians remain internally displaced by the actions of a brutal government and non-state offensives. In Yemen, hundreds of thousands of civilians have been killed and millions are starving.<sup>2</sup> Medical facilities in both countries are not equipped for COVID-19 testing or prepared to treat infected patients.<sup>3</sup> The spread of the pandemic would prove disastrous.

To curb the spread of the novel coronavirus, intervening nations such as Russia and Turkey in Syria, and Saudi Arabia in Yemen, have called for ceasefires. Although these are temporary agreements to stop the violence, these ceasefires can potentially mark the beginning of long-term peace processes. By removing international actors from these regions, these countries can focus on rebuilding their nations and working towards achieving peace without external intervention.

Syria, allowing the country to focus on rebuilding its internal stability, which has taken a drastic hit as a result of the Assad regime, political alienation of non-Alawite sects, and severe economic inequality. Without the full military support of Iran, Hezbollah, and Russia, the Ba'athist regime is more vulnerable to change and could be forced into concessions with other political parties.

In the case of the Syrian civil war, the role of external actors places too much power and influence in the hands of the US, Russia, and Iran, ignoring the vital interests of domestic actors. Because Syrian medical facilities are not equipped for COVID-19 testing, the full impact of the virus remains unknown, though it is suspected to be low.<sup>7</sup> Although coronavirus has not spread as rampantly in Syria as it has in other nations, the pandemic's long-term effects may deter global superpowers from exacerbating this nearly decade-long conflict.



P.C. Amr Nabil via Associated Press

### The Yemeni Conflict: Proxy War and the Start of Saudi Withdrawal

On April 9, Yemen witnessed the first cessation of hostilities since 2016, establishing a de-escalation period that could end the five-year war between the Saudi-backed Hadi government and the southern separatist forces.<sup>8</sup> The original ceasefire, a unilateral decision made by the Saudi government, was due to the possible spread of coronavirus across Yemen.<sup>9</sup> The global pandemic has created an opportunity for the Saudis to end their costly involvement.

While several internationally-supported factions are fighting this conflict, including the Saudi-backed government, the Iranian-backed Houthis, and the UAE-backed Southern Transitional Council (STC), the beginning of a ceasefire by the Saudis in the North paves the way for a long-term peace agreement.<sup>10</sup> This is because Saudi Arabia's invasion changed the internal dynamics of the conflict, further exacerbating the violence.

The civil war began as a conflict between the Yemeni government and the Houthis, who received modest support from Iran. To combat Iranian influence in the region, Saudi Arabia launched military campaigns into Yemen, shifting the conflict to a proxy war. The original issues that led to war, including ethnic inequality, severe economic poverty, and oppressive regimes, only worsened.

The global pandemic has given Saudi Arabia a reason to withdraw its forces from Yemen without appearing to concede to Iran. The removal of the Saudi military force, a key aggressor in this civil conflict, allows for increased domestic control and paves the way for other actors, such as the United Nations, to end humanitarian suffering.

### The Fine Line Between Proxy Wars and Civil Conflict

While the spread of COVID-19 in Yemen and Syria remains a critical threat, the pandemic may pave the way for peace by refocusing these conflicts on internal struggles of oppression.

Referring to the Syrian and Yemeni conflicts as proxy wars draws focus away from domestic disputes. Ignoring decades of domestic alienation and discrimination by the authoritarian regimes in power, the Syrian and Yemeni civil wars have forgotten their roots in the Arab Spring. By focusing on the role of external actors, such as Iran and Saudi Arabia in Yemen, and Russia, Turkey, and the US in Syria, these multifaceted conflicts are incorrectly reduced to proxy wars.

Understanding the conflict through external proxies complicates the peace process because the disputes are perceived solely as a war between Shiites and Sunnis in Yemen and as an extension of the US Cold War in Syria. By ignoring the years of oppression marginalized communities have faced in Syria and Yemen in favor of international interests, the prospect of finding long-term peace within these conflicts is lost.

The long-term effects of the coronavirus pandemic in the Middle East are unpredictable; however, the withdrawal of international powers from the region helps bring domestic issues to the forefront. The pandemic may help shift focus to reestablishing peace and protecting vulnerable civilian populations, a silver lining amid chaos.



## Yemen Behind the Headlines

By Nadia Mokhallati and Alex Norris

P.C. Sami Jassar via Save the Children

Amidst the coronavirus pandemic, Yemen continues to suffer from a humanitarian crisis that has been described as the worst in the world.

Twenty-four million Yemenis—almost 80 percent of the population—are in desperate need of humanitarian assistance, with 50 percent of children under the age of five suffering from acute malnutrition. A non-international armed conflict, an acute water shortage, a widespread famine, and other factors indicate that the crisis is far from resolution. In light of the pandemic, the country needs a robust humanitarian response.

### History of the Crisis

While the current conflict began in 2015, tensions in Yemen can be traced back to 1967 when British forces withdrew from the South, leaving the country divided as two separate entities—the Yemeni Arab Republic in the North and the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen in the South. For over 30 years, the country remained divided; even today, the modern republic of Yemen continues to face sectarian divisions that play a role in the current crisis.

After the unification of the two entities in 1990, Ali Abdullah Saleh, the ruler of the Yemeni Arab Republic since 1978, became the first President of Yemen. Shortly after, the Houthi movement formed, a group founded by Zaydi Shiites in Yemen who have continuously challenged Saleh's authority.<sup>1</sup> The past decade has seen a climax in

political unrest between the Houthi movement and the Yemeni government.

During the Arab Spring in 2011, a coalition of opposition groups pressured President Saleh to step down.<sup>2</sup> After failed attempts to appease the protestors, Saleh finally agreed to resign in 2012.

What seemed like a political achievement

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**'Before 2011, the situation was excellent—after 2011, all safety [was] gone.'**<sup>3</sup>

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then only marked the beginning of further conflict in the region—the country broke into civil war in 2015. Today, Yemen remains fractured between the influences of the Saudi-supported Yemeni government, Iranian-backed Houthi forces, and Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula.

As a result of this political turmoil, innocent civilians face devastating conditions, including widespread displacement, a blockade preventing access to food and medicine, and a famine.<sup>1</sup>

As one Yemeni woman from a rural village outside Sana'a reported anonymously, "Before 2011, the situation was excellent—after 2011, all safety [was] gone."<sup>3</sup>