



Shifting Dynamics: The International Order in a Post-Pandemic World

— 1st - 2nd of December | 2020 —

War and Disease: Living with COVID-19 in Syria and Yemen

EXPERT ROUNDTABLES

TRT
world
forum

2020



Shifting Dynamics: The International Order in a Post-Pandemic World

— 1st - 2nd of December | 2020 —

www.trtworldforum.com

TRT
world
forum

© TRT WORLD FORUM

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

PUBLISHER

TRT WORLD FORUM
2021

EDITED BY

MUHAMMED LUTFİ TÜRKCAN
MICHAEL ARNOLD
ANNA MURPHY
HATİCE NUR KESKİN

CONTRIBUTORS

ABDINOR HASSAN DAHIR
ANNA MURPHY
ARUKE URANKYZYN
EDEBALİ MURAT AKCA
ELİF ZAİM
FATİH ŞEMSETTİN IŞIK
FERHAT POLAT
HATİCE NUR KESKİN
LAMIS CHEIKH
MAMOON ALABBASI
MICHAEL ARNOLD
MUHAMMED LUTFİ TÜRKCAN
MUSTAFA METİN BAŞBAY
RAVALE MOHYDIN
SERKAN BİRGEL
TURAN GAFARLI

DESIGN BY

ERHAN AĞIRGÖL

TRT WORLD İSTANBUL

AHMET ADNAN SAYGUN STREET NO:83 34347
ULUS, BEŞİKTAŞ
İSTANBUL / TURKEY

TRT WORLD LONDON

200 GRAYS INN ROAD, WC1X 8XZ
LONDON / UNITED KINGDOM

TRT WORLD WASHINGTON D.C.

1275 PENNSYLVANIA AVENUE NW, SUITE 320
WASHINGTON, DC 20004

www.trtworld.com

www.trtworldforum.com

Disclaimer: The views expressed in this document are the sole responsibility of the speaker(s) and participants or writer(s), and do not necessarily reflect the views of TRT World Forum, its staff, associates or council. This document is issued on the understanding that if any extract is used, TRT World Forum should be credited, preferably with the date of the publication or details of the event. Where this document refers to or reports statements made by speakers, every effort has been made to provide a fair representation of their views and opinions. The published text of speeches and presentations may differ from delivery.

War and Disease: Living with COVID-19 in Syria and Yemen



- COVID-19 has been utilised by the governments in Syria and Yemen as leverage over both their citizens and international institutions, including the United Nations.
- COVID-19 has highlighted the severe lack of public health infrastructure in both Yemen and Syria and placed further economic burdens on some of the most vulnerable populations.
- International institutions, most notably the UN, have largely failed to deliver effective assistance to Syria or Yemen in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic.
- The continued failure of international institutions in conflict zones like Syria and Yemen raises the question of whether bodies such as the UN can be reformed, or whether there is a need to rethink our current institutions and approaches to humanitarian assistance.
- The most pressing question in both Syria and Yemen is how to protect and prioritise civilians in situations where an end to war is currently unlikely.

Summary of the Session

The session “War and Disease: Living with COVID-19 in Syria and Yemen” welcomed esteemed speakers and discussants to a dynamic discussion on how the global pandemic has impacted two of the most vulnerable countries in the world.

Speaker Nadwa Al Dawsari outlined the devastating impact COVID-19 has had on the already struggling health and economic infrastructure in Yemen. She described the extent to which Yemen is unprepared to deal with the pandemic and expressed the urgent need for international awareness and support. Al Dawsari highlighted how Yemenis have been unable to quarantine or isolate due to the dire state of the economy, and therefore may have developed a degree of immunity that may provide some protection if the country is hit by a second wave of the pandemic.

Dr. Nasr Al-Hariri also painted a grim picture for Syria and drew parallels between the failing health infrastructures in both countries. Dr. Al-Hariri

argued that the tragedy of the pandemic in Syria has been leveraged by the Assad regime, and the ongoing conflict has compounded the fallout from the pandemic, especially with regards to the pressure of mass displacement, a struggling economy, and physical vulnerability. Abdulghani Al-Iryani expanded upon Al Dawsari’s remarks about Yemen and explained how the pandemic has been utilised by the regime to separate and remove portions of populations. He described the lack of reliability of all data on COVID-19 in Yemen, as well as the almost non-existent supply of medical equipment.

In the second half of the session, discussants focused heavily on the failure of international institutions, especially the UN, to provide reliable aid to either Syria or Yemen. Discussants emphasised how both governments and international institutions have politicised the pandemic. While some used the failures of the UN as a call for a new international humanitarian system, others argued that it would be better to ignore the system in pursuit of immediate relief for those in Syria and Yemen.

Nadwa Al Dawsari's Highlights



Non-resident Fellow, Middle East Institute

Nadwa Al-Dawsari is a non-resident fellow at the Middle East Institute. She was the Yemen Country Director for the Center for Civilians in Conflict, a Senior Non-resident Fellow at the Project on Middle East Democracy, and a founding Director of Partners Yemen. Earlier in her career, she worked as a senior program manager at the National Democratic Institute in Yemen. She has 20 years of field experience in Yemen where she worked with tribes, civil society, security actors, and non-state armed groups. She has conducted extensive research providing deeper insights into the internal dynamics of the conflict in the country.

” “One indicator that is relevant to humanitarian aid [with regards] to COVID-19 is that the water infrastructure operates with less than 5% efficiency. 70% of the population does not have access to drinking water, let alone [the ability] to wash their hands for 20 seconds.”

” “65% of the population has no access to health care, and 50% of the health facilities operate with a serious shortage in medicine, equipment and staff. The entire Yemeni health sector is not equipped to deal with COVID-19.”

” “In fact, the MSF, Doctors Without Borders, started clinics back in April throughout Yemen specifically to try to address this gap [in health care], and they have trained health workers throughout the country. But MSF itself was bombed four times in airstrikes. So [while] not specifically related to COVID-19, health facilities continue to be vulnerable during the war [and] COVID-19 added insult to injury.”

” “Now, the most devastating impact of COVID-19 is economic. Remittances declined by 80% during the first four months of 2020 as many Yemenis living abroad lost their jobs as a result of COVID-19. Now, remittances in Yemen are important because they are the main source of income for most Yemenis. Official figures say that Yemeni remittances reached 3.8 billion dollars in 2019, but informal sources say it actually reached 10 billion dollars during that same year. So, without that, many families have found themselves without income and vulnerable.”

” “Many Yemenis live in an informal economy, so they cannot afford lower incomes. They cannot afford to quarantine. And many Yemenis take comfort from the horrors of the war by socialising. So, they continue to socialise.”

” “The point is that in Yemen, it is not about COVID-19. It is not about the deaths that the virus causes. It is more about the conditions that [COVID-19] exacerbates and that leads to much more suffering than just the deaths, as tragic as it is to say that.”

Now, the most devastating impact of COVID-19 is economic. Remittances declined by 80% during the first four months of 2020 as many Yemenis living abroad lost their jobs as a result of COVID-19.

Nasr Al-Hariri's Highlights



President of the National Coalition of Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces

Dr. Nasr Al-Hariri is the President of the Syrian National Coalition of the Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces. He has a degree in medicine from the University of Damascus, a MA in internal and cardiac diseases, and an Arabic BOARD degree in internal diseases. Dr. Al-Hariri's was previously head physician at Assad University Hospital and Dara'a National Hospital; Medical Director of Saudi clinics in Al-Zaatari refugee camp; and Director of the Regional Office of the Syrian Medical Commission.

Dr. Al-Hariri has also worked in a political capacity. He was head of the Syrian Negotiations Commission; head of the consultative delegation of the Syrian Negotiations Commission; and the SOC's Secretary-General. Dr. Al-Hariri is the Co-founder of the National Forum for Democratic Dialogue in Jordan, the Syrian Medical Committee in Jordan, and the Local Committees in Dara'a city. He was also the Head of the Free Association of Doctors and Pharmacists and Founder of the Free Doctors Syndicate.

” “Instead of being prepared to tackle the COVID-19 pandemic, Syria now lies in ruins with massive destruction of infrastructure and health care facilities. Mass forced displacement and demographic change have also forced thousands of doctors and medical personnel to leave Syria in order to escape the bombing, crackdown and execution.”

” “What we have of numbers until this moment, at least 60,000 cases have been reported so far, of which about 8,000 [have] fully recovered, while the number of confirmed deaths reached 166. In the IDP camps, there have been nine deaths out of 935 cases and a total of 55,000 tests have so far been conducted in the northwest, while more than 1,000 tests are being conducted on a daily basis.”

” “However, the situation on the ground is dire as many civilians do not abide by the preventive measures because the majority of these people are in a huge need to work to earn money, to fix their issues, and to spend on their families as they are working on a daily basis if they have the opportunity to get somewhere. There is an urgent need for stepping up support for the health care system in Syria, especially in the IDP camps.”

” “We cannot let our people down wherever they are. Our people are everywhere. And we are the only party seriously and truly responsible for their safety and well-being. In this case, it is imperative to prevent the Assad regime and other parties or militias from controlling the flow of aid or manipulating its distribution. It is imperative also to ensure that medical aid and means of protection

against the coronavirus reach all those in need everywhere in Syria and without any discrimination.”

” “Of paramount importance is also the provision of vaccines as soon as they are available safely and in accordance with international health standards. Meeting these needs will certainly have a lasting economic, social, and humanitarian impact on the displaced communities, cities, and towns across Syria.”

” “In the face of these enormous challenges, we cannot be on the right path before a political transition is put into place. We hope that the humanitarian organisations and bodies, as well as civil society organisations, will support a political transition in Syria in accordance with the U.N. resolutions.”

We hope that the humanitarian organisations and bodies, as well as civil society organisations, will support a political transition in Syria in accordance with the U.N. resolutions.

Abdulghani Al-Iryani's Highlights



Senior Researcher, Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies

Abdul-Ghani Al-Iryani, Senior Researcher at the Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, is a political and development consultant. He has done research on constitutional reform, anti-corruption, governance, government capacity, state building and conflict management and resolution, as well as social and economic development. He consulted a number of international organisations, including UN Agencies, the World Bank, DFID, GIZ, USAID and AUSAID. His most recent work was consulting for the UNDP, OSESGY and the World Bank on issues related to the conflict in Yemen. His volunteer work includes the co-founding of TAWQ, a democracy advocacy group for which he also serves as president. He also serves on the Advisory Board of Human Rights Watch for the MENA Region.

” “First, we have to be very clear that there is no reliable data [in Yemen]. The government and the de facto authority both claim [there are a] very small number of cases. The overall number of deaths that they have recognised maybe accounts for half of what [has been] accounted for by front line workers.”

” “What we can deduce with any credibility is from talking to doctors and front frontline workers on the ground is that they actually portray a very dim and very sad picture. When the first cases of COVID-19 appeared, it was quickly announced in Aden but in Sana'a, the de facto authorities continued to deny the existence of COVID-19 cases for about two months, during which time it spread very quickly.”

” “And then the de facto authorities took measures, very harsh measures of quarantining and closing neighbourhoods and so on, posting armed guards in front of houses of suspected cases, rounding up families and putting them in crowded quarantine facilities, that basically made certain that they will not only catch COVID-19, but also other endemic viral diseases such as dengue or diphtheria.”

” “[Patients] often died shortly after admission [to quarantine facilities], which also triggered panic and fear in the community and society. So, they stopped reporting cases in their homes. People just died in their homes and were never reported. Often the deaths would be attributed to a heart attack or something because they feared that the authorities will round up the family and put them in unsanitary quarantine facilities. So, we really do not know how many died and we do not know how many cases hit these areas or Yemen in general.”

” “Since the beginning, social distancing did not happen really. Masks and sanitisers appeared in Sana'a for a while, then disappeared. People just gave up, but right now, the number of cases has gone down markedly. And very few cases are being reported by my contacts in recent weeks. There is only one explanation for that. The only reasonable explanation is that Yemen has reached herd immunity.”

” “Overall, by now, I think it will have reached the number that was projected [at] the very onset of COVID-19 by UN agencies, which was 80,000 fatalities in Yemen in the course of the pandemic.”

What we can deduce with any credibility is from talking to doctors and front frontline workers on the ground is that they actually portray a very dim and very sad picture.



TRT
world
forum

2020