Iran admits to under-reporting coronavirus figures as it faces biggest crisis since 1979

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Pandemic disruptions spark fears of food shortages in Arab world

Mona Alami

Washington

COVID-19 has triggered fears of food shortages across the Arab region. Distributors and experts now warn that the pandemic is creating significant disruptions in global food networks and inflation in food prices. A slowdown in shipping, movement restrictions and border closures are impeding the production and transport of food products at the global level. Thousands of containers are now left stranded across ports and airports, as ships and airplanes remain grounded because of strict lockdowns and confinement measures imposed by governments. Fewer ships and fewer flights make food exports more expensive and complicated, warns Hara Bouchah, president of the Syndicate of Importers of Foodstuffs, Consumer Products and Drinks, which represents around 50 importers in Lebanon.

"Confinement measures are leading to labour shortage in the food industry," says Michel Maalouf, a fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG) consultant based in Saudi Arabia. Restrictions on movement and borders closure could also have repercussions on crop harvests as fruits and vegetables are now left to rot.

Food concerns. Employees of the Tunisian Social Solidarity Union (UTSS) prepare food packages for the elderly and low-income families in Tunisia during the coronavirus pandemic. (AP)

The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) warned in a report released late in March that a protracted pandemic could quickly put a strain on food supply chains. "Food is a matter of national security and countries are now making sure they have sufficient reserves," says Maalouf.

Levant countries are particularly vulnerable as they are prone to collapsing economies, conflict and corruption. Countries in the Arab world are unusually prepared to face food shortages. The United Arab Emirates has approved a 650 million food security programme in response to the coronavirus crisis. It will support domestic farmers and food processors and help stabilize the national economy. The United Nations World Food Programme has also allocated 70 million to address food needs in Jordan, Lebanon and Syria.

In this issue: Extensive coverage of pandemic fallout

The Arab Weekly staff

London

Despite previous denials, Iranian officials are starting to admit that their government has been under-reporting the country’s toll from the pandemic, amid signs that Iran is facing the biggest economic crisis since the 1979 revolution. The pandemic is already deadly for those who can afford to travel at home could fuel adventurism abroad. The United States said on April 16 that speed boats of Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) harassed US warships in the Gulf.

Iranian Deputy Health Minister Alireza Rast was quoted on April 15 as saying that, because of limited testing capabilities, the real number of COVID-19 infection cases and deaths in Iran cannot be ascertained. But “the real numbers are much higher than the official figures,” he said. The admissions could betray internal dissent over President Hassan Rohani’s plan to gradually reopen the economy over fears that prolonged confinement measures could drive social unrest. On Rohani’s orders, “low-risk businesses” in the capital Tehran were allowed to re-open on April 18, a week after some companies in other parts of the country. Authorities used a parade marking Army Day on April 17 to exhibit disinfection and protective equipment and highlighted the latest measures to help control the spread of the virus.

Rohani is taking a rebound of the virus. Iran could end up with an economic crisis and a health crisis at the same time,” Fathollah-Nejad said by phone. A parliamentary report reviewed by the Associated Press said the death toll in Iran from the coronavirus pandemic is likely to be nearly double that of officially reported figures.

It attributed the inaccurate count to under-counting and because not everyone with breathing problems has been tested for the virus. Iran, on April 18, put the death toll at more than 5,000, out of over 80,000 confirmed cases — still making it the Middle East’s worst outbreak by far. But the report’s worst-case figures would put Iran’s potential death toll as high as over 8,500, with some 790,000 total cases, as of April 15. That would catapult Iran to the position of the country with the highest number of infections in the world.

International experts have long doubted Iran’s numbers, as its mortality rate has been higher than other nations.

The economic impact of the coronavirus on Iran is likely to be devastating, said Amin Mohseni-Cheraghloo, an economist at the American University in Washington. “The Iranian labour market was already suffering from high unemployment rates before the pandemic, especially among college-educated youth,” Mohseni-Cheraghloo wrote in an analysis for the Middle East Institute in Washington. “In the best-case scenario, the estimated economic contraction in 2020 will put 3-4 million jobs at risk, potentially pushing the actual (not official) unemployment rates from around 25% now to more than 35% in just a few months.”

Nader Hashemi, director of the Centre for Middle East Studies at the University of Denver in the United States, said the global collapse of oil prices was “another big problem for Iran.” “Even if US sanctions were lifted now, the drop in value of the oil that Iran would be able to sell would still mean that the country would still be economically vulnerable,” Hashemi said by phone.

Mohseni-Cheraghloo said the crisis could trigger fresh unrest in Iran. “The Iranian government now faces one of the worst crises — if not the worst — since the 1979 revolution, and there is very little it can do to address the economic fallout,” Mohseni-Cheraghloo wrote.

All Fathollah-Nejad

Iran is risking a rebound of the virus. Iran could end up with an economic crisis and a health crisis at the same time. Efforts by the US to increase pressure on Iran by sharpening sanctions or blocking Rohani’s request for a $5 billion loan from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) could end up strengthening domestic support for the regime, he added. “If history provides any guide, Iranians tend to unite during times of exogenous shocks and crises, especially if such crises are exacerbated and exploited by hostile outside forces,” he wrote. “This may explain why, despite the growing unpopularity of Rohani’s government, its widespread mismanagement of the economy and the pandemic and the resulting economic and public health crises, there is as yet no sign of social unrest.”

But experts believe that the presence of all such factors means that it is just a matter of time before discontent comes into the open.

UAE’s humanitarian outreach

Arab, African doctors saving French lives

The struggles of Iraq’s informal economy

On the PR front. Iranian Army soldiers wearing protective masks take part in the army day parade in Tehran, April 17.

(AFP)
A year after US sanctions stopped Iran's exports, tensions are on the rise again

Iranian President Hassan Rohani (L) chairing a cabinet session in the capital Tehran, April 15. (AFP)

Cairo shootout stokes fears of terrorist attacks ahead of Ramadan

Amr Emam
Cairo

Recent clashes in the densely populated Amiriya district in southern Cairo have raised fears of possible attacks on Muslim and Christian minorities in the city.

Egyptian Coptic Christians celebrate Easter on April 19, marking the end of the period of Lent or Great Fast.

A police officer was killed and another critically injured, along with two security personnel, during clashes between Egyptian police and militants hiding in an apartment on the eve of Egypt's celebration of Easter.

Seven militants were killed in the clashes, according to a two-year period of calm in the Egyptian capital after police successfully stamped out militant affiliates with the Muslim Brotherhood and ISIS failed to strike them.

The shootout occurred as the country awaited the start of the fasting month of Ramadan expected to start April 24. The holy month is often used by jihadist groups to ratchet up terrorist activities.

An government agency received a tip on April 14 incident about the presence of a group of militants in Amiriya that were preparing for attacks against security posts and churches.

The militants had also stockpiled arms and explosives in southern Cairo in order to stage attacks against churches, it said.

Despite COVID-19 fears, Egypt's Christians hold limited Easter celebrations.

On April 12, Pope Francis addressed a limited group of priests.

Hundreds of Christians watched the event being broadcast on the Coptic Orthodox Church's website from home.

Egypt had closed down its churches and mosques on March 23 to narrow the scope of the COVID-19 pandemic.

On April 19, the night-time curfew was among a series of measures taken by Egyptian authorities to prevent the new disease from further spreading.

"These terrorists wanted to strike while everybody was looking somewhere else," said retired police general Fouad Adam.

Egypt's majority Muslim population is also preparing for the fasting month of Ramadan, which is set to begin on April 24. Security forces are on alert during Ramadan for any terrorist attacks by extremists.

Egyptian Muslims are stocking up on dried fruit, nuts and other Ramadan foods, even as restrictions due to the COVID-19 crisis are taking a toll on their finances.

There has been no claim of responsibility for the clashes yet. Egypt has been battling ISIS in Sinai and militia affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood in a number of its provinces, including Cairo, for several years now.

Egypt has seen numerous terror attacks against army troops, police and its Coptic minority, which comprises about 10% of the population of 100 million.

In November 2018, ISIS killed seven Christians and wounded several others in an attack on a carrying Christian pilgrims in southern Egypt.

In May of the same year, the terrorist group killed 28 Christians and wounded several others in an attack on another bus in almost the same area.

In December 2007, ISIS claimed responsibility for an attack on a church in southern Cairo that left ten people dead and several others injured.

In December 2016, ISIS attacked the chapel of a major church in central Egypt, killing 28 people and injuring dozens of others.

The Arab Weekly.
UAE-WHO initiative dispatches aid to Somalia

The Arab Weekly staff

Abu Dhabi

T he United Arab Emirates, in cooperation with the World Health Organisation (WHO), sends a special plane carrying 27 tonnes of medical supplies and protective gear to Somalia, including 7 tonnes provided by the UAE and 20 tonnes by the WHO, all earmarked to help about 37,000 medical workers in Somalia deal with the coronavirus pandemic.

The UAE Ambassador to Somalia Mohammed Ahmed Othman Alhamadi said that his country “is sparing no effort to contribute to global efforts to curb the spread of COVID-19.”

The ambassador also pointed out that “since the beginning of the coronavirus crisis, the UAE has sent urgent medical aid shipments to a number of countries and has supported relevant international organisations and their specialised bodies, especially the World Health Organisation, to deliver medical aid to a large number of countries in need.”

International aid. Tonnes of medical equipment and coronavirus testing kits provided in conjunction with the World Health Organisation at the Al Maktoum International Airport in Dubai are prepared for shipment by the United Arab Emirates.

UAE-WHO initiative dispatches aid to Somalia

The Arab Weekly staff

Abu Dhabi

A sbu Dhabi has set up a relief fund to help struggling families overcome the fall-out of coronavirus crisis exacerbated by the coronavirus pandemic.

The Abu Dhabi government’s multi-million-dirham public fund seeks to help Emiratis and residents who have lost their jobs, had their salaries slashed or been put on unpaid leave because of the economic fallout of the virus.

“The fund is aimed at parents with children attending private schools in Abu Dhabi who are affected by the current economic challenges, by paying school fees or providing devices for distance learning,” said the government in a statement.

The relief fund will also help cover food expenses and rent for those in need as part of Abu Dhabi’s humanitarian actions.

The fund is part of the “Together We Are Good” scheme that was launched by the MIRAN Authority for Social Contribution to involve the community in supporting the Abu Dhabi government’s efforts to combat the COVID-19 pandemic.

Social unrest starts to boil over a month after lockdown in Lebanon

Samar Kadi

Beirut

W hile Lebanon’s financial crisis has been aggravated by lockdown measures imposed to help stem the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, Prime Minister Hassan Diab assured that bank deposits will not be jeopardised by a financial collapse.

Police in the northern city of Tripoli used force to disperse angry crowds who took to the streets April 17 chanting slogans and denouncing poor living conditions that have further deteriorated since Lebanon imposed a curfew more than a month ago.

More than half of Tripoli’s population live at or below the poverty line and more than a quarter live in extreme poverty, according to the United Nations.

Lebanon is already hit by economic collapse and is now grappling with an outbreak of the deadly virus - the latest in a long list of crises.

In a public address April 16, Diab said that “at least 90%” of bank deposits will not be affected by any financial measures that might be taken in the near future to deal with the crisis.

“ar government is facing difficulties in reacting to the coronavirus and we are being financed from abroad, it is necessary to address the same problem with the IMF, CEDRE (international conference in support of Lebanon) and other international organisations and their specialised bodies to try to get the necessary financial support to alleviate the situation,” Diab said.

Diab added that the country “is not true that we intend to ease the lockdown and general mobilisation measures. We might rather harden them so that the need arise in order to prevent the spread of coronavirus and we might request a two-week extension on April 26,” Diab added.

The Prime Minister also said that the pandemic has so far been contained in Lebanon. But we are still in the middle of the pandemic spread phase. “At this moment, the situation is not on the domestic situation in order to immunisation. Lebanon is still in the middle of the pandemic spread phase,” Diab added.

As part of international assistance to help it confront the outbreak of coronavirus, Lebanon received medical equipment, including PCR kits and thermometers from China.

“We are going to conduct more PCR tests in various Lebanese regions,” said Health Minister Hamad Hassan. “We would like to assure everyone that the random test samples we have taken last week were a positive indicator.”

In mid-March the government ordered residents to stay at home and all non-essential businesses to close to halt the spread of COVID-19, which has infected 668 people and killed 21 nationwide so far.

Samar Kadi is The Arab Weekly Travel and Society section editor.

Boiling point. Lebanese soldiers keep watch as several hundred people protest in the northern city of Tripoli despite the country’s coronavirus lockdown, April 17.
After initial incidents, burial of pandemic victims taking place unevenly

The Arab Weekly staff

From Iraq to Egypt to Tunisia, authorities have endeavored over the burial of coronavirus victims as protests erupted over the body being handled with dignity. A minority of those mourning the deceased turned to violence, including firing tear gas in Egypt and clashes in Tunis. Authorities began freeing prisoners in Tunisia to prevent any risk of the virus spreading. In Egypt, however, there were no such guarantees. The bodies of those deceased from COVID-19 were buried after a pre-burial procedure under the supervision of religious scholars and medical institutions issued fatwas prohibiting any attempt to stir up unrest.

Fear of virus contamination and stigma often at play.

Egypt’s Interior Ministry vowed that it would “resolutely and decisively deal with attempts to stir riots, break the law, or obstruct the burial procedures of victims of the coronavirus infection.”

Despite the fear of infection, some communities have resisted burial of coronavirus victims because of the social stigma attached to the virus, which experts say has made medical treatment a taster process.

“The coronavirus infection is not a sin or a shame that the victim must hide from others to save face,” said Egypt’s Al-Azhar.

The institution also stressed the religious “prohibition against hurting human beings by伧the coronavirus, or harming them, even with a glance, or anything that incites to sadness those who died as a result of it.”

One body of Islamic religious scholarship, referencing a hadith of the Prophet Muhammad, considers victims of epidemics to be “martyrs.”

Contagious fear. A relative (bottom R) attends the burial of a pandemic victim (bottom L) in the cemetery for victims of coronavirus, on the outskirts of Najaf, Iraq.

(Touran Aydogan)
Turkish involvement gives military boost to GNA in Libya's west

Michel Cousins

Tunisia's president says disarmament of militias in Tripoli will be a condition for lifting his government's partial lift of sanctions on Libyan National Army (LNA) forces in a sign that his administration could allow the resumption of arms supplies to the beleaguered government in Tripoli.

The comments by Ghanouchi and Saied, who are competing against one another for power at home and diplomatic influence abroad, also showed the extent to which they are setting the terms for how the UN should proceed with talks to set the course of Tunisian policies especially regarding sensitive issues. It showed also Ghanouchi and Saied's genuine interest in steering such policies, said Saied.

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The city of Sirte, which is near the town of Sabratha, was hit by at least two air strikes on April 15, said Saied. A statement issued by the Libyan National Army (LNA) said that Sirte had been hit by two air strikes on April 17.

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Opinion

Editorial

Tough choices for decision makers

Balancing public health requirements with economic imperatives is pushing many countries to consider the gradual easing of lockdown measures while striving to contain the pandemic. The restrictive measures have not been without results in terms of slowing the virus’s spread. But they have also brought to a halt vital economic sectors and disrupted activities that are crucial to the livelihoods of many.

Lifting some of the restrictions and allowing the limited resumption of human activity is on the agenda of many governments across the globe, including the United States and Europe. The main idea is to ensure a gradual return to economic activities while minimising risks that would be deemed acceptable by public health authorities. As the crisis continues, the “re-opening” would not spin out of control; so some governments are looking for safeguards, including the mass use of testing kits, contact tracing technology and prescribed protective gear such as masks.

In low- and middle-income countries, including those of the Middle East and North Africa, there are specific considerations at play.

In the MENA region, COVID-19 has not, thus far, taken the toll in developed countries such as Italy, Spain and the US. This makes it tempting to ease restrictive measures in the region. Governments are torn between the pressure to ease restrictions that have had a disruptive impact on vulnerable groups of society and the risk that the region’s ill-equipped public health infrastructure may not be able to cope with sudden soaring rates of infection.

As expected, views are divided. Yale scholars Ahmad Moushir Moharak and Zachary Barouti-McCaw argue in the Policy magazine that there is reason to think confinement measures and lockdowns might not be the best course of action for developing countries. While defending such measures in the developed world, they have more reserved about their broad and unrestricted enforcement in developing countries.

They point out that since most low-income countries have younger populations — “wealthy low-fertility nations,” the two scholars say — the risks and benefits from the strategies implemented so far in the world since the coronavirus outbreak are different.

“To put it bluntly, imposing strict lockdowns in poor countries — where people often depend on daily hands-on labour to earn enough to feed their families — could lead to a comparable number of deaths from exacerbation of deprivation and preventable diseases,” they added.

Concerns are sharply different among the poorest populations. Extreme poverty and unemployment — not health and safety — are now the top concern in rural areas. “Poor countries are facing permanently a low level of health and social (£) in rural areas,” they say, basing the observation on research on the ground.

Other experts worry that most of the MENA region and low-income countries elsewhere could be confronted with the medium-term consequences and unavailability of medical supplies.

World Bank Managing Director of the Development Policy and Partnerships Mari Elka Pangestu recently wrote that “the 2020 developing countries with the highest number of COVID-19 cases produce 2% of critical COVID-19 products from just five economies.”

But the first reflex of major producers was to close off borders and prevent exports until they made sure the needs of their own people were satisfied. Others, like Turkey, preferred to use the surplus to flex its soft power.

As the crisis continues, there is likely to be a shortage of food supplies as well. “The poorest countries, which rely heavily on food imports, would be hurt the most. Developing countries on average derive 80% of their food imports from just three exporting countries. For Fragile and conflict-affected countries the proportion is more than 90%, making them even more vulnerable to policy changes by their exporting nations,” warned Pangestu.

As he fastings mark the final weeks leading up next week, the Arab-Muslim world will find itself in an unprecedented and unprecedented predicament: In a time meant for communal gatherings, people will be requested to respect social distancing, instead. During a season that is traditionally dedicated to religious worships and the practice of wealth distribution, it’s a delicate balance and won’t be easy.

Decision makers will have to banish partisan and sectarian considerations and transparently flesh out the arguments that justify the sacrifices to be made. That is not the time for old divisive politics. This is not the time for decisions without risks.

Khairellah Khairellah

Lebanon’s leadership has no understanding of the regional changes taking place, as was the case in the 1970s.

As the crisis continues, there is likely to be a shortage of food supplies as well. “The poorest countries, which rely heavily on food imports, would be hurt the most. Developing countries on average derive 80% of their food imports from just three exporting countries. For Fragile and conflict-affected countries the proportion is more than 90%, making them even more vulnerable to policy changes by their exporting nations,” warned Pangestu.

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Decision makers will have to banish partisan and sectarian considerations and transparently flesh out the arguments that justify the sacrifices to be made. That is not the time for old divisive politics. This is not the time for decisions without risks.
Even a pandemic can’t stop the desperate flow of refugees to Europe

By Rashmeesh Lall

In the circumstances, an EU humanitarian package might serve as a band aid but not much more.

In the weeks since the World Health Organisation declared a pandemic, it’s now quite clear that the outbreak of disease is not a direct threat to national economies but not the flight of migrants across the Mediterranean to appear.

It’s a fact that migrants are still travelling from Libya towards Europe, and the numbers are on the increase, with more than 500 migrants having landed on Libya’s shores for Europe, according to the International Organisation for Migration (IOM). On April 12, the Italian government had, for the tenth time, suspended the right to enter, as a precautionary measure, to quarantine any passengers carrying the virus.

Even a pandemic can’t stop the desperate flow of refugees to Europe, nor Adnan al-Zurfi proved any better as the protests continued. The chosen hero of this year, for the revolution of our people, Mustafa Kadhimi, the head of the Iraqi intelligence services, was sworn in as prime minister by President Barham Salih, whose rhetorical talents unfolded and his not appearing to favour America doesn’t need.

He who expects the upcoming Iraqi elections to be fair, or even half fair, must be not only delusional, but also naive or willingly duped.

In a column for The Arab Weekly, Rashmeesh Lall said that it suspended the right to disembark a safe port for the disembarkation of migrants. “The issue will be discussed at the foreign minister level, continuing the discussion on the Mediterranean in the coming months.”

The chosen hero of this year, for the revolution of our people, Mustafa Kadhimi, the head of the national January 1, before a single coronavirus case was recorded in Hungary, that it suspended the right to claim asylum in the country, claiming there was a link between the disease and illegal migration.

No clear way out. Iraqi soldiers stand at a checkpoint in the Adhamiya district of Baghdad as Iraq imposes a curfew during the coronavirus pandemic.
Global health crisis exposes failure of regional organisations and the Arab League is no exception

Mohamed Abulfadl

The global coronavirus crisis has brought with it clear signs that in the post-pandemic world, certain political walls will fall and others will rise. Some entities were surviving because they were being kept alive artificially, with no convincing results.

Beyond meetings. Arab Foreign Ministers’ annual meeting at the Arab League headquarters, last March. (DPA)

The Arab League, as well, will put to the test. Having lost its lustre years ago, the COVID-19 pandemic has further exposed its weaknesses. The League has failed to solve any of the region’s major crises, resolve any bilateral tensions among its members or even establish a consensus on a central issue. If not for its usual denunciations and angry din in times of crisis, the organisation would effectively be dead.

The League needs to understand that being silent on certain issues is not a virtue. Silence can destroy the organisation’s symbolic value and hasten the end of its remaining functions. The world is witnessing major upheavals that require entities to deal with unpredictable situations. But what to do with a League that has been clinically dead since it fell into a vicious cycle of repeated failures?

The Arab League is not alone in failing to address the region’s issues. It is joined by the African Union and many other fragile regional entities that have also wavered in times of crisis and upheaval. If the largest and strongest organisations of the globe cannot pass the test, it is natural that the weak ones fail, too. It is time to reconsider the usefulness of keeping inefficient regional bodies alive.

We should expect that some organisations will evolve while others will disappear from the regional map. Perhaps this pandemic will turn out to be the opportunity moment to finally get rid of the failing bodies, or at least force them to reconsider their original roles. This pandemic, then, may one day usher in a period where we were surviving because they were kept alive artificially, with no convincing results.

Mohamed Abulfadl is an Egyptian writer.
The role in pandemic could be earning them recognition they deserve.

For example, one can look at the statistics regarding the number of doctors and caregivers holding non-French nationality. One can also check membership data and find that the Arab and African researchers he asked them one by one where they were from. “Burkina Faso, Senegal, Tunisia, Mali, Morocco, Algeria, Lebanon,” the answers came, confirming a reality depicted by the professor in one of his videos: how he praised the seriousness, talent and dedication of the Arab and African researchers he was working with.

“Thank you for participating in the collective effort,” said the French president.

The COVID-19 pandemic in France has paid a dear price in terms of the crucial role medical doctors, caregivers and researchers from Arab and African countries play in the health care system.

As their role gains recognition, it has shattered the claims of xenophobes of all stripes who pejoratively refer to the term “invasion” of French by immigrants and foreigners.

The first doctor to fall in the battle against the virus in France was a doctor of Lebanese origin who was held in the Paris region after the end of February. His death moved all foreigners.

During the period of a massive influx of sub-Saharan African countries, the number of sub-Saharan African physicians and of their contributions to the healthcare system is increasing. The pandemic offers the opportunity to assess the reality of the claims of xenophobes of all stripes.

The list of doctors and caregivers infected with the virus has also resulted in an increase of healthcare professionals in France, in the Paris region alone, no less than 1,200 medical professionals practicing in public hospitals were infected from the start of the pandemic until the end of March. Among these were a high number of doctors, nurses and paramedics from the Maghreb, the Middle East and sub-Saharan Africa.

Ethnic discrimination is illegal in France, but to get an idea of the increasing weight of Arab-African health professionals in France, it is necessary to make approximate cross-checks.

Sabahat Khan writes on strategic issues related to the Gulf and Iran, has a background in African and strategy consulting.

Sabahat Khan
He recent collapse in global oil prices driven by a sharp coronavirus-related drop in global oil demand has prompted agencies to take a closer look at Saudi Arabia’s banks.

That renewed attention may have been an added incentive for the kingdom to offer up a $32 bil- lion stimulus package last month aimed, in part, at propping up banks. As Saudi banks maintain smooth opera- tions, the fall in oil prices has reflected economic turbulence. Riyadh is hoping that the groundwork agreement reached between OPEC and independent producers to withdraw as much as 1.5 million barrels a day from the oil market will speed up oil price recovery. But that process will be slow going and the outcomes remain uncertain.

Credit rating agencies are warn- ing that the economic fallout from the coronavirus pandemic and depressed oil prices will severely ham- per the operating environ- ments of Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) banks, most likely leading to rating downgrades. According to Moody’s, its Rating Director for research, it will likely take closer to six months to reassess the rating agencies’ perception of the intrinsic credit-risk profile of a number of Saudi banks, saying: “The ratings agencies’ views that Saudi banks’ support ratings and support ratings floors are sensitive to changes in Saudi Arabia’s sovereign rating.”

The Saudi government had initially forecast the state budget deficit to reach around $190 bil- lion in 2020, or 6.5% of GDP, but on March 28 Saudi Finance Minister Mohammed al-Jadaan said: “I don’t expect the deficit by the end of 2020 to exceed 7% to 9%, and this is our target.” Some industry estimates suggest that if interna- tional oil prices average only $30 a barrel this year, that deficit could expand to approximately $370 bil- lion, or 12% of GDP.

The Saudi government intro- duced two economic stimulus packages worth $60 billion in response to the kingdom’s finan- cial downturn, but much of that billion of stimulus funding is directed at Saudi banks and financial institutions for de- livered payments from small and medium-sized Saudi businesses for six months and to support those banks and institutions in maintaining their operations and helping to cushion the economic downturn.

Saudi Arabia also announced it was cutting approximately $13 bil- lion in government spending this year. Jadaan said that Riyadh has a contingency plan and the flexibility of spending cuts, borrowing and tapping into financial reserves to intervene should the kingdom’s economic conditions require.

The Saudi finance minister stated that King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud has been raising the kingdom’s debt ceiling to 50% of GDP from 35% but that the govern- ment didn’t expect its borrowing to surpass $27 billion in 2020.

Despite the organic economy fore- cast, the rating agencies appear once bullish on other aspects of the kingdom’s fiscal capabilities. Fitch set the kingdom’s long-term credit rating at A with a stable outlook, citing Riyadh’s financial strength despite its high foreign reserves and low public debt ratio. Moody’s upgraded its credit rating for the kingdom at A with a stable outlook, citing the Gulf country’s strength as a low-cost oil producer with significant reserves.

But the measures are proving very costly for the country’s strugg- ling economy, raising questions about whether Egypt can afford to suspend production.

Egypt depleted $5.4 billion in one month, which reduced foreign cur- rency reserves at the Central Bank to $40.1 billion at the end of February from $45.5 billion at the end of February.

“‘No country, anywhere, can tolerate an extended suspension of production,’ said independent economist Fahel Al-Fuji. ‘Egypt suffers huge financial pressures, especially in the light of the paraly- sis of the main sources of income, such as the tourism sector and the Suez Canal.’

Egyptian Prime Minister Musta- fa Madbouly said: “We must ensure the continuity and the sustainabili- ty of this growth.”

Sisi called an army factory that produce face masks to distribute the masks to workers and mem- bers of the public for free. On April 9, he yelled at engi- neers supervising the construction of a bypass in eastern Cairo for al- lowing workers to work without face masks.

Some employers have laid off workers and others have threat- ened to suspend employers’ sala- ries if authorities decide to shut down the country. Sisi appealed to the private sec- tor on April 7 not to sack labourers. The private sector employs over 50% of Egypt’s workforce of 29 million.

“Only ask you to keep your la- bour, for God’s sake and for the sake of your country,” Sisi said, ad- dressing the private sector.
Iraq’s informal labour hardest hit by coronavirus lockdown

Oumayma Omar

Baghdad

A bout Alaa’, a taxi driver, was at his pick-up outside his modest home in a poor Baghdad neighbourhood and sighed: “It has been sitting there for weeks. I cannot operate it under the lockdown.”

Since Iraq imposed a nationwide lockdown on March 19 to contain the spread of the coronavirus, a large number of those who worked on the streets, the government or need calls to stay. Moreover, some of the women are in a situation where they have no steady income and are relying on temporary jobs to make ends meet. Lone Alaa’, 55, a father of seven, said Alaa’ used to make $25-$35 a day, “Even during this trying period, distress calls kept pouring in.”

The organisation said it expected to see an increase in violent acts of physical, moral and sexual abuse, noting that shelters at home were measures to contribute to women, family, friends and support networks, in addition to depriving women of activities and opportunities to relieve anxiety and stress.

The World Health Organisation noted that violence against women soars in times of crises, such as natural disasters, wars and epidemics, and that one out of every three women in the world is subjected to physical or sexual violence.

Pointing to a pamphlet calling on “emergency plans” to assist victims, “We support the government in its efforts to protect itself from the inevitable consequence of domestic violence.”

Alaa’ used to make $25-$35 a day, he added. “I have nothing to spend. I have neither money nor a phone only, which is considered a necessity.”

Alaa’’s case is one of many. According to the organisation, “I do not expect this crisis to last that long. Alaa’ is not the only one, and many of us are going through the same.”

Iraq has a large population of informal workers who are the least likely to receive aid or help. They are the workers who are the least likely to receive aid or healthcare from the government or need calls to stay.

The organisation noted that shelter-at-home orders can increase the risk of violence against women, as they are at risk of isolation and lack of access to support. The organisation called on governments to ensure that women have access to essential services and that they are not left alone in their homes.

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the economic crisis, but Yasseen Ghamet, a barber who was forced to close his shop, faced a way around the lockdown to sustain his income.

“My situation is better than many people because I can deliver my services to clients at home. They book appointments and accordingly I plan my daily rounds,” Ghamet said.

Tagging on a small hand wallet, he said: “I have everything I need in here. In that way I am able to provide for the needs of my family and help as much as possible for needy friends and relatives.”

The country’s systemic weaknesses resulting from decades of conflicts, sanctions and mismanagement place it in an unenviable economic position to fight COVID-19. The government, which is largely reliant on oil revenues, fears it will be hit hard by falling oil prices. Moreover, the southern regions, home for the holiest Shia shrines, are likely to receive aid or healthcare from the government or need calls to stay.

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Algerian author wins top Arab fiction prize for ‘Spartan Court’

The Spartan Court, a historical novel by Algerian author Abdelouahab Aissaoui focusing on the power struggle between Ottoman and French colonial powers in Algeria at the start of the 19th century, has won this year’s prestigious International Prize for Arabic Fiction (IPAF).

Mentored by the UK’s Booker Prize Foundation and financed by Abu Dhabi’s Department of Culture and Tourism, the prize includes a $50,000 award and funds to translate the book into English, the organisers said on their website.

“The Spartan Court invites the reader to gain a greater understanding of life under occupation and the different forms of resistance that grow against it,” said Muhsin al-Musawi, chair of the prize’s five-member judging panel.

“Readers gain a multi-layered insight into the historical occupation of Algeria and, from this, the conflicts of the entire Mediterranean region, with characters embodying different interests and intersecting visions. With its deep, historical narrative structure, the novel does not live in the past, but rather it challenges the reader to question present reality,” Musawi said.

Published by Dar Mim, “The Spartan Court” was chosen from a shortlist of six novels. The five other authors, from Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon and Syria, will each receive $10,000.

In comments he made when his work was shortlisted, Aissaoui said: “In general, historical novels do not reconstruct stories for the sake of the stories themselves. Their main objective is to search for questions and concerns that we face now and have faced before, in the context in which they first appeared.”


Instituted in Abu Dhabi in 2007, the annual International Prize for Arabic Fiction is the most prestigious and important literary prize in the Arab world.

Due to movement restrictions imposed by UAE authorities to stem the spread of the coronavirus pandemic, the winner was announced online.

The prize has achieved great recognition and acclaim in a relatively short history. Jonathan Taylor, chairman of the Booker Prize Foundation, commented on the prize success: “Impact is the essence of a successful literary prize. It needs to be discussed; argued about; criticised; and even sometimes praised! There may be lively disagreement about who is included and who is excluded from the longlist and the shortlist. And the eventual winner may provoke fierce debate as well as great acclaim.”

Algerian author Abdelouahab Aissaoui.

(Algerian Channel 3)