

# Coronavirus outbreak compounds Iraq's perfect storm of crises

Sun, 2020-03-29 20:54

ERBIL, Iraqi Kurdistan: As Iraq faces several severe crises simultaneously, some see the makings of a perfect storm that could prove too much for Iraq's dysfunctional government to handle.

An unchecked outbreak of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) could prove the proverbial last straw for a country grappling with political turmoil, dwindling oil revenues, deteriorating government services and geopolitical skirmishing.

"Iraq is on the cusp of melting down," Nicholas Heras, the Middle East Portfolio Manager at The Institute for the Study of War, told Arab News.

"The Iraqi state institutions were already collapsing before the fall in oil prices, and Iraq's health infrastructure is too much in shambles to handle a big surge in COVID-19 cases."

The country had reported 506 confirmed cases and 42 deaths as of March 29.

Heras attributes Iraq's particular vulnerability to these crises to the rampant corruption that has prevailed in the country's post-2003 political establishment.

"Iraq is on the verge of being a failed state," he said.

The fall in the international price of oil will hit the Iraqi economy hard. Iraq depends on its oil revenues to fund its bloated public sector payroll, which many Iraqis rely upon for their livelihood.

The steep decline in the price of oil means it will not be able to do that.

## **FASTFACT**

### **In Numbers**

13 Iraq's Fragile States Index rank (out of 178)

5.5% Health expenditure as fraction of GDP

27 Probability of dying under 5 years (per 1,000 births)

68 Life expectancy at birth (Male)

72 Life expectancy at birth (Female)

This closely coincided with another series of crises that have afflicted this country in the first three months of this decade alone.

Iraqis mounted an unprecedented six-month-long protest campaign that began last October against government corruption that has been endemic in the post-2003 political order.

Furthermore, political disputes have left the country without a prime minister since Adil Abdul-Mahdi resigned four months ago amid pressure from protesters.

Three weeks ago, Mohammed Tawfiq Allawi was nominated but failed to secure approval from parliament and was rejected by the protest movement.

Adnan al-Zurfi, former governor of Najaf, is the present prime minister-designate but faces stiff opposition from Iran-backed factions in the Iraqi parliament.

Joel Wing, an Iraq analyst and author of the Musings on Iraq blog, also believes that Iraq is facing a very severe set of crises which he believes spell disaster for the troubled country.

"On the political front, the ruling parties have been unable to agree upon a new prime minister which leaves the government completely in limbo," he said.

"There is no leadership when that is exactly what the nation needs."

The collapse in oil prices not only means that the Iraqi government will be unable to pay public sector salaries but is also incapable of meeting other basic costs.

"Because of the government crisis, there is no planning going on for this situation," Wing said.

"Instead, you get people like the Central Bank chief saying everything is fine, and parliament is sitting on the draft 2020 budget."

On top of this, Iraq also has to deal with the COVID-19 global pandemic.

Wing echoed Heras when he pointed out that Baghdad lacks any way of dealing with it, given the present political and economic situation.

Even if it does have a plan, he added, it might well lack the money to implement it.

"This is a perfect storm which the country will find it very hard to pull itself out of, especially because all three issues are interconnected," he said.

Aside from Daesh remnants still operating on its soil and continuing to pose a security threat, Iraq would likely become a major battlefield if war breaks out between the US and Iran.

The US-Iran standoff in Iraq has shown worrying signs of boiling over into open conflict in recent months.

After the Iran-backed Kataib Hezbollah Iraqi militia killed a US contractor in a rocket attack in late December, the US retaliated, killing several members of the group's militia in airstrikes.

Then, on Jan. 8, the US assassinated both Qassem Soleimani, the head of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' extraterritorial Quds Force, and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, Kataib Hezbollah's commander, in a drone strike near Baghdad International Airport.

Iran responded with missile strikes on two US bases, one in Anbar and the other in Iraqi Kurdistan, a few days later, leaving several US troops with brain injuries.

The US did not respond.

Calls for the expulsion of US troops from Iraq intensified by Iran-backed factions in Iraq's parliament and other Iraqis who fear their country becoming a bloody battlefield in the US-Iran proxy war.

On March 11, Iraqi militia rocket attacks again struck a base with US personnel – killing two American troops and one British troop – and the US once again retaliated by bombing a Kataib Hezbollah target.

However, that airstrike did not seem to inflict any casualties or significant damage against the group.

More tit-for-tat exchanges could occur in the near future, which would likely make the situation in Iraq even more volatile.

Lawk Ghafuri, a reporter on Iraqi affairs for the Kurdish news agency Rudaw, argues that the US-Iran tensions in Iraq constitute the most serious crisis facing Iraq today.

"US-Iran tensions are here to stay, as we now see new Iranian-backed groups are rising in Iraq," Ghafuri told Arab News.

He noted that the US recently began to reposition its troops in Iraq so they can deal with the increasingly deadly threat of rocket attacks from these groups more adequately.

Meanwhile, the coronavirus outbreak is likely to affect Iraq more seriously in the near future.

"From today onward, the coronavirus will also worsen in Iraq as it did in Iran because people are ignoring the threats of this virus," Ghafuri said.

Turning a blind eye to government restrictions, Shiite pilgrims visited the shrine of Imam Musa Kazim on March 21, sparking fears that the virus will spread more rapidly in the coming days and weeks.

Kyle Orton, an independent Middle East analyst, notes that the multiple crises Iraq face today put the country in a “uniquely precarious position.”

“If the post-2003 Iraqi state is going to give way, now is the moment,” he told Arab News.

That being said, Orton also believes that there is still a chance that “the centre will hold” since the protest movement has been significantly undermined by Iranian-backed paramilitaries and the cleric Muqtada al-Sadr, relieving that primary source of domestic pressure on the Iraqi government.

He also doubts that the US is seriously contesting Iranian power in Iraq despite Soleimani’s assassination, which he said it was “an exception” to US President Donald Trump’s rule of not forcibly combating “Iranian imperialism” in Iraq.

“A US-Iran contest for Baghdad could be messy for the system; unhindered Iranian dominance has a short-term systemic ‘stability’, even as it means greater corruption and repression that will surely re-energize the protest movement at some point in the future,” Orton said.

The inherent failures in Iraq’s post-2003 political system may bring about its downfall as it is failing to meet the most fundamental needs of the Iraqi people.

Wing explained that this system mainly consisted of elites who had a greater interest in enriching themselves through the monopolization of state resources.

These elites were able to retain their hold on power by creating patronage networks that they provided lucrative contracts and government jobs to in return for support and loyalty.

“The oil wealth also allowed the ruling parties not to be responsive to the public because it didn’t need it for taxes even though the country has a democratic system,” he said.

“Instead, the elite felt that the people should be dependent upon them because they controlled the state and jobs.”

This arrangement may well be unraveling since the government can no longer generate enough oil revenue to pay its employees.

Wing also noted that this comes as “it is being called on to deal with the public’s health when it has never shown any real interest in the people’s demands, and the parties have become so divided they can’t even decide who will rule.”

If the post-2003 political order finally does implode it’s unclear what’s in store for Iraq in the not-too-distant future.



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## [Unmanned vehicles used to patrol streets of Tunis during coronavirus lockdown](#)

Sun, 2020-03-29 19:34

TUNIS: Unmanned robots are patrolling the streets of Tunisia's capital as

part of the government's measures to prevent the spread of coronavirus.

The unmanned ground vehicles are called P-Guard and locally developed by Enova Robotics. They are being used by the Ministry of Interior to enforce its lockdown of Tunis.

The city has been on lockdown since March 22.

[#WATCH](#): Man in Tunis confronted by unmanned robot patrolling the streets during [#Coronavirus](#) lockdown...

Gets told to "hurry up" when he says he is "just buying cigarettes"  
[#Tunisia](#) [#COVID19](#)

More on the city's unmanned vehicles here: <https://t.co/UUKxabtsddpic.twitter.com/drM2NzcsoS>

– arabnews (@arabnews) [March 29, 2020](#)

Enova, founded in Tunisia in 2014, describes the P-Guard as a "rugged security robot for multi-terrain applications."

The robot uses several infrared cameras to function, which are arranged to cover the entire surrounding of the robot and it is also fitted with a thermal camera and a sound and light alarm system.

The robot incorporates GPS to locate itself in its environment as well as a laser telemetry system.

Tunisia has 278 confirmed cases of COVID-19 and has had eight mortalities from the virus.



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Tunisia gets 250 mln euros from EU to tackle coronavirus impact  
Brits stranded in Tunisia as national carrier staff fear flying amid coronavirus

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## [Oman reports 15 new coronavirus cases, 23 recoveries](#)

Sun, 2020-03-29 15:16

DUBAI: Oman has recorded 15 new coronavirus cases, bringing the total number of infected patients in the country to 167, the health ministry reported on Sunday.

Five of the registered patients have been in contact with coronavirus cases, eight were linked to travel and the remaining two are under investigation. The ministry has also confirmed the recovery of 23 cases and urged everyone to follow its instructions with regards to social distancing.



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Pope backs UN chief's call for global ceasefire to focus on coronavirus

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## [UAE allows FlyDubai to transport Britons to UK](#)

Sat, 2020-03-28 21:32

LONDON: Dozens of British nationals left the Emirates on a FlyDubai flight on Saturday, the UK embassy in the UAE said.

"32 Brits left the UAE on FlyDubai this am," the embassy said in a tweet. "The airports are closed but some airlines are being granted permission for departures. Do not head to the airport without a flight booked. We are working with the UAE Government and airlines to progress all options to get you home," the tweet added.

32 Brits left the UAE on [@flydubai](#) this am. The airports are closed but some airlines are being granted permission for departures. Do not head to the airport without a flight booked. We are working with the UAE Government and airlines to progress all options to get you home.



– UKinUAE (@ukinuae) [March 28, 2020](#)

The flight will land in Croatia's capital Zagreb, which will allow the British citizens to board a transit flight direct to London. On Friday, the embassy tweeted an "urgent message" to British nationals that the FlyDubai flight to Zagreb was open for bookings.

[#URGENT](#) message to British Nationals: Fly Dubai flight FZ1749 to Zagreb \*tomorrow\* is now open for bookings. There is a connecting flight from Zagreb to London Heathrow on flight OU490 later tomorrow afternoon. There is currently availability on both flights.

– UKinUAE (@ukinuae) [March 27, 2020](#)

According to the UK government website's page on UK citizens stranded in the UAE, citizens were urged to contact airlines or tour operators regarding any possible return flights.

"The British Embassy is in constant contact with the local authorities, airlines and other diplomatic missions to explore all possible avenues," it read.

The British Ambassador to the UAE Patrick Moody tweeted a statement echoing the website.

"Many of you are awaiting refunds following the cancellation of flights. My team are speaking to airlines to emphasise how urgent this is."

Many of you are awaiting refunds following the cancellation of flights. My team are speaking to airlines to emphasise how urgent this is. If you are in the UAE longer than expected & experiencing issues as a result. Call us on 02 610 1100 24/7 or click <https://t.co/b70UriUxDJ>

– Patrick Moody (@PatrickMoodyFC0) [March 28, 2020](#)

Dubai Airports and Abu Dhabi Airport suspended all passenger flights last Thursday for two weeks, with the exception of evacuation flights, as part of measures to contain the spread of the coronavirus.

The latest statements from the UAE's main airports came after the government announced early on Monday that all passenger and transit flights to and from the country would be suspended after 48 hours.



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## [Palestinian groups cancel mass Gaza rallies over coronavirus concerns](#)

Author:

Reuters

ID:

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Sat, 2020-03-28 13:20

GAZA: Palestinian groups in Gaza canceled mass rallies planned for next week along the border with Israel amid concerns about the spread of coronavirus in the densely-populated territory, organizers said on Saturday.

The rallies were called for March 30 to mark the second anniversary of the so-called "Great March of Return" which had prompted weekly protests by Palestinians seeking to regain access to land, now in Israel, from which their ancestors were forced to flee during the country's creation in 1948.

“We call upon our people not to go to the Return encampments on March 30 and to stay home in order to maintain the safety of our people in the face of this lethal pandemic,” said Khaled Al-Batsh, a senior member of the Islamic Jihad militant group.

Instead, Batsh called upon Gazans to mark the day by raising Palestinian flags on their rooftops and burning Israeli ones.

According to Gaza medical officials, 215 Palestinians have been killed by Israeli soldiers firing from the other side of the border during the protests, with another 8,000 suffering gunshot wounds. In the past few months, the weekly protests have been smaller.

One Israeli soldier was killed by a Palestinian sniper during the demonstrations. Israel said the protests were often used as cover for militants trying to breach the border and that many protesters had hurled rocks and explosives at its troops.

In 2019 UN Human Rights Council investigators said Israeli forces may have committed war crimes and crimes against humanity, with children and paramedics among the fatalities.

So far, nine out of the 97 coronavirus cases confirmed in the Palestinian territories have been confirmed in the Gaza Strip.

Gaza’s hospitals, which were overwhelmed during the protests by gunshot wounds and amputations, are now gearing up for the challenge of containing the coronavirus in the coastal enclave of two million Palestinians, many living in refugee camps.



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Artist masks spread healthy message in virus-hit Gaza