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Planning for the World After COVID-19: Assessing the Domestic and International Drivers of Conflict

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Introduction

The implications of the global coronavirus (or COVID-19) pandemic have already been far reaching; impacting not just our health but how we live our lives, interact with each other and conduct international affairs. However, while Western countries are consumed by the crisis in their own countries, numerous experts are warning that the pandemic will be much more destructive if it takes hold of weak and conflict-affected states.

Within these states, the response to COVID-19 could facilitate more violence against civilians if security forces aggressively implement restrictions or predatory states use the crisis to extend their own power. In fact, there are already examples of this happening in some parts of Africa and the Middle East. Internationally, the crisis requires more concerted international action. However, states appear to be moving apart, compelled by concern for their own people and domestic crises but also by the isolationist policies of countries like the US. This risks a breakdown of international cooperation at a time when we need it more than ever.

This article will examine how COVID-19 contributes to domestic and international drivers of instability. It will argue that the best way to address these challenges is through improved dialogue at the international and local level.

Domestic drivers

There is a danger that states violate citizens' rights or endanger their lives in the implementation of new COVID-19 measures. In the immediate term, there is evidence of state security forces being overly aggressive in their implementation of these measures. For instance, there have been "reports of the brutality of South Africa's and Kenya's police, [and] Rwanda's decision to arrest anyone found flouting the curfew, making them sit for a day in the hot sun in an open stadium."

There is also a danger that these crisis responses start to undermine democratic controls. Andreas Krieg (of King's College London) and Anas Gomati (of the Sadeq Institute) warn that: "The panic offers authoritarians a real pretext to employ modern technology and new tools for mass surveillance and detention under the guise of forced quarantine to save lives." And, in fact, during the 2014 Ebola outbreak in West Africa, many states introduced more "restrictive measures" such as "bans on large public gatherings" which were necessary during the outbreak but were then extended "in the hope of quashing dissent once the disease decline[d]."

Unfortunately, there is evidence that this is already happening. Egypt has "censured Western reporters for their coverage of the disease inside the country." While in Saudi Arabia, Mohammed bin Salman has allegedly been "'cleansing' the kingdom's religious elite, as well as … detaining political opponents" under the auspices of preparing the country for COVID-19. Again, in Syria, some have accused the Assad regime of "seeking to exploit" COVID-19 to get international sanctions lifted and to openly criticise opposition-held areas, while failing to put in place sufficient measures to address the spread of the virus.

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In the short term these actions could have huge implications for stopping COVID-19 from spreading, when populations with little trust in government are asked to follow public health directives. Mais S., a journalist from Damascus interviewed in a piece by Mazen Gharibah and Zaki Mehchy for LSE said:

> **" Since people do not trust government reports, and given the deliberate delay to announce cases of coronavirus in Syria, people are continuing their daily lives in a regular manner, which raises the risk of infection and outbreak. "**

This has a similar ring to responses to the Ebola outbreak in Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone, where the "the virus initially spread unchecked not only because of the weakness of epidemiological monitoring and inadequate health system capacity and response, but also because people were sceptical of what their governments were saying or asking them to do".

In the longer-term this could aggravate the relationship between the state and its people and lead to more violence after the worst of the virus has passed. The implications of this can already be seen in many countries, where predatory states have further alienated the civilian population and pushed them more towards extremist groups. In Somalia, Oxford Research Group (ORG) were told that the abuses of the Somali National Army are "a big recruitment tool for Al Shabab." Similarly, an International Alert study on young

Fulani people in the regions of Mopti (Mali), Sahel (Burkina Faso) and Tillabéri (Niger) found "real or perceived state abuse is the number one factor behind young people's decision to join violent extremist groups."

In fact, there has already been some evidence of violent non-state groups attempting to exploit disorder. ISIS, for example, has told its membership that their "globe-spanning war is to go on" and even "call[ed] for strikes against the west as it reel[s] from the pandemic". Similarly, Marie Sandnes, of PRIO, argues that extremist groups in Mali may use COVID-19 in their propaganda, and blame "foreigners ..., pointing especially to MINUSMA, EU missions and Barkhane, for having brought COVID-19 to the country." To address these problems, the international community needs more than ever to come together.

International drivers

In response to the global pandemic, we have seen the emergence of two competing narratives. One is "that countries ought to come together to better defeat COVID-19", and the other "that countries need to stand apart in order to better protect themselves from it".

The last few months have seen moving acts of international cooperation. Several adversaries have provided support to one another and some warring parties have agreed to put down arms to tackle the virus. Allies, such as EU countries, have re-emphasised their commitment to addressing the crisis together. The UN also launched an unprecedented global appeal, calling for $2 billion in new funds to tackle the spread of the virus in countries with critical humanitarian needs. The British Queen's speech on COVID-19 said: "[W]e join with all nations across the globe in a common endeavour... We will succeed - and that success will belong to every one of us."

Yet, the opposite narrative is also evident among other nations and international organisations. In a recent Foreign Policy roundtable, many experts expressed concern that COVID-19 could "lead most governments to turn inward." Some of this is understandable; for instance, travel restrictions, staff downsizing, and worries over duty of care for international and local staff have led to many nations bringing international personnel home. For example, France has committed to staying in the Sahel, but it is bringing forces back from Iraq while the UK has "reduced all … international travel to the absolute minimum."

International leaders, focused on dramatic domestic issues, have also had little time to devote to conflicts or peace processes. For instance, Kenyan President, Uhuru Kenyatta, has now cancelled "two high-profile diplomatic events – a border security cooperation meeting in Mombasa Sunday and a trip to the Vatican" because of the virus. A summit between leaders of the EU and the "G5 Sahel countries" (Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger) has also been cancelled. More generally, there continues to be concern over how continuing peace talks in places like Yemen, Libya and Afghanistan will be impacted in the shift in international attention caused by the spread of the disease.

Some have also pointed the finger at international organisations for facilitating this isolationism by failing to rise to the challenge of COVID-19. Alan Boswell of the International Crisis Group said the virus endangers "not just our lives but the multilateral organisations designed to address these challenges." For instance, many have criticised the World Health Organisation's handling of the initial outbreak; while some say the UN and the EU have been withdrawing from

international engagement at a time when they could play an important leadership role.

Some of this inwardness also comes from nationalist policies which prioritise narrowly defined national security above international cooperation. For example, Kori Schake of American Enterprise Institute said the US can no longer be considered "an international leader" because their approach focused on "narrow self-interest" at the expense of cooperation. American political scientist, Joseph S. Nye Jnr also criticised the Trump administration's "America First" approach to the virus which appears to focus more on competition with China than addressing the spread of the disease.

Reduced international cooperation and dialogue will not help the international community in addressing the spread of COVID-19. Far from it. Poor coordination could make matters worse and lead COVID-19 to spread further. In a recent roundtable of humanitarian experts, each recognised the importance of the international community coming together to draw on each other's political and scientific lessons learned, agree good guidelines and help each other to stop the spread of the virus. Krieg and Gomati note: "As the crisis is global, international coordination is critical, and open access to information by states, scientists, and statisticians help us better understand and prepare as the virus spreads."

Conclusion: The need for dialogue

Above all, the COVID-19 crisis has shown the need for governments to facilitate frank and open debate. This has already been demonstrated in the domestic policies of many Western countries. For instance, in the UK the government was initially heavily criticised for poorly communicating its COVID-19 strategy;

however, after the daily press briefings started there was a more open debate on what the government was doing and why. This has arguably increased support from across the political spectrum and reduced confusion.

This is no less true with discussion beyond national borders. Internationally, leaders must recognise that nationalist policies will do more harm than good. Instead, leaders need to work even harder to overcome the barriers to effective diplomacy in a time of COVID-19 to share lessons and come together to find solutions. As the UN Secretary-General António Guterres noted: "It is time to put armed conflict on lockdown and focus together on the true fight of our lives – the #COVID19 pandemic."

These conversations must also take place among those most impacted by the spread of the disease: people in weak and conflict affected states. For many of these people COVID-19 risks creating more problems in potentially unpredicted ways – especially if leaders do not have a population-centric response. The OECD's *Security System Reform and Governance* report notes that "[g]iven the weakness of state capacity in many countries,'' civil society groups are essential in helping not just to denounce bad policies but also to "make practical suggestions" for improvement. Engaging with these groups when responding to the outbreak of COVID-19 will not be easy, but is essential to stop the disease and mitigate against the risk of more conflict in the future.

However difficult, COVID-19 necessitates more not less dialogue at the international and local level; not only is this essential to stop the spread of the disease but also to build a more peaceful world after the worst of COVID-19 is over.

Image credit: Michale Swan/Flickr.

About the author

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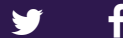
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