

Opinion **Middle Eastern politics & society**

## Virus scare tactics are the wrong approach in war

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In Iraq and Syria, citizens have been hard to persuade of the need to stay inside

**CHLOE CORNISH**

Soldiers erect a barrier during the coronavirus curfew in Baghdad, where 'the rhetoric about, "We are not afraid of death", is strong'  
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**Chloe Cornish** APRIL 8 2020

Eventually, after a [curfew](#) imposed last month failed to clear Baghdad's bustling streets, Iraqi authorities resorted to tough tactics. The capital's Operations Command boasts that security personnel have now enforced the closure of precisely 1,303 coffee shops, 1,260 restaurants, 73 malls and scores of exercise facilities, including 25 swimming pools.

Syrian authorities had similar problems convincing citizens to stay inside. On the first day of a curfew in late March, 153 people were arrested for being out after hours, official media reported. It wasn't enough. An entire [town was isolated](#) last week, after a resident diagnosed with Covid-19 died. According to Syria's health minister, the victim had continued working in her family's shop.

Both countries have badly corroded healthcare systems; coronavirus contagion would push their hospitals to the brink, experts warn. So why were so many people ignoring official entreaties to "stay in your house"?

Partly it is to do with a yawning trust deficit between the people and the authorities. Iraq's corrupt political classes were the target of [mass protests](#) last year; President Bashar al-Assad's regime is autocratic, and the low number of recorded coronavirus cases in Syria prompts whispers of a cover-up.

Then uncomfortably cramped housing holds several generations of family and, in the precarious informal economy, few among street vendors to barbers can afford a day without work. More than 80 per cent of Syrians live below the poverty line.

Beneath all this, a drumbeat of disaster, from terrorist attacks to state persecution to [freak flooding](#), has fostered a resigned stoicism, and a desensitisation to risk. Many have developed

an immunity to danger.

“The rhetoric about, ‘We are not afraid of death’, is strong,” remarked a friend in Baghdad last week, before regaling me with Iraq’s latest coronavirus jokes (heard the one about the housebound husband, who spent so much time talking to his wife that he confessed his love and asked her to marry him again?).

## Editor’s note



The Financial Times is making key coronavirus coverage free to read to help everyone stay informed.

[Find the latest here.](#)

For many western countries, Covid-19 is the biggest challenge since the second world war. But if you’ve survived some 17 years of waxing and waning chaos in Iraq, or nearly a decade of fratricidal fighting in Syria, this virus may not feel like the biggest problem. “You know our people have been through difficult conditions,” a contact in Damascus remarked drily, when I asked if signs of panic were appearing in the city. “The threshold of fear has risen, unfortunately.”

There are upsides — less inclination to stockpile, for example. But it seems especially hard to motivate people to stay inside when, for the first time in months, a [ceasefire is holding](#) over rebel-held idlib province.

Fear tactics do not work in this context, said [Marco Bardus](#), assistant professor at the American University of Beirut’s health promotion and community health department. People are “resilient to death threats”.

Appeals to protect loved ones or the community, rather than scare tactics, are probably more effective, added Mr Bardus, saying trusted local and religious leaders could help to spread health messages. In Iraq, after worshippers continued flocking to shrines, supreme Shia jurist Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani called on his millions of followers to [strictly observe](#) medical advice about public gatherings.

Across the Middle East, appeals for intergenerational solidarity helped turn the tide, reckons [Mona Elswah](#), a researcher at the computational propaganda project at the Oxford Internet Institute. “At the very beginning . . . the narrative was all about yourself,” she said from her family’s home in Cairo. “Now it is protect your family, protect others.”

Slowly, many have started heeding that advice. But it’s hard to forget that losing freedom of movement mostly affects men. For so many women in these patriarchal societies, being confined is not much of a change.

The global crisis leaves some Iraqis and Syrians feeling, for once, less alone in facing doom. A friend in the Iraqi city of Mosul, governed by Isis from 2014 to 2017, said the lockdown reminded her of being trapped at home while the jihadis ruled.

But this is different. Now, “we can’t go anywhere to be safe”, she said, cheerily. “Because the whole planet is infected!”

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