

# Coronavirus fears impose calm on Gaza front with Israel

Mon, 2020-03-30 00:38

GAZA CITY: The arrival of the coronavirus in the Palestinian territories and Israel has imposed calm between the two, despite tensions since the beginning of the year.

The High Commission for the Great March of Return announced the cancelation of activities that were scheduled for March 30 along the border between the Gaza Strip and Israel, fearing an outbreak of the virus among demonstrators and in compliance with instructions to prevent gatherings.

"In order to preserve the safety of the masses, it was decided to hold a number of activities on Land Day and the second anniversary of the launch of the March of Return that do not involve gatherings," said Khaled Al-Batsh, a leader in the Islamic Jihad Movement in Palestine and head of the commission. Al-Batsh called on protesters to ring church bells and shout the Takbir from mosques and homes in all Palestinian cities after their Maghrib prayer call on Monday.

Since the beginning of 2020, the Gaza Strip has witnessed repeated instances of military escalation between Palestinian factions and Israel.

The last and most dangerous of these was on Feb. 23, after the Israeli army killed an Islamic Jihad activist and dragged his body by a military bulldozer on the security fence in the town of Khuza'a, southeast of the Strip.

In response to this incident, the Al-Quds Brigades, the military arm of the Islamic Jihad, along with other factions, launched missiles at Israeli towns, which Israel met with raids targeting the Gaza Strip.

After the announcement from the High Commission canceling the activities of March 30, the Gaza Strip witnessed a notable return to incendiary balloons and rocket fire aimed at Israeli towns.

According to multiple Palestinian statements, the objective of launching balloons was to pressure Israel to ease the blockade imposed on the Gaza Strip about 14 years ago.

Israel did not take exceptional measures to ease the siege, however, and the use of balloons and missiles has disappeared since the last round of escalation.

## **Fear of the spread of this virus has made Gaza more cautious**

**Mukhaimer Abu Sa'da**, Professor of political science

Mukhaimer Abu Sa'da, professor of political science at Al-Azhar University in Gaza, said that the pandemic was a major cause of the calm on the Gaza front with Israel.

"Fear of the spread of this virus has made Gaza more cautious," Abu Sa'ada told Arab News.

According to the newspaper Haaretz, Israel understands that "Gaza is more sensitive to the spread of pandemics."

The Gaza Strip recorded nine confirmed cases of COVID-19, which prompted the Hamas-led government to impose the closure of mosques, universities and schools, and place a ban on public gatherings.

The Palestinian Ministry of Health in Gaza has quarantined hundreds of returning Palestinians through the Rafah crossing between the Gaza Strip and Egypt, while calling on residents to stay in their homes and not go out except for necessity.

Political columnist Hani Habib told Arab News: "The outbreak of the virus has meant that it is in the interests of both parties to continue a cease-fire. The burdens that Israel will have to bear as an occupying power is an additional motivator to control the spread of the pandemic in the Gaza Strip."

It is not possible to estimate how Gaza will fare in light of the outbreak, especially as its economic effects could have severe negative repercussions on the already fragile territory.



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Israel to use military to help enforce coronavirus lockdown  
Palestinian groups cancel mass Gaza rallies over coronavirus concerns

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# Lebanese applaud virus-battling health workers from balconies

Author:

AFP

ID:

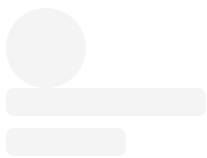
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Sun, 2020-03-29 19:32

BEIRUT: Cheering erupted from balconies and windows in Lebanon on Sunday evening, as the country's citizens celebrated their "heroic" medical workers battling the coronavirus pandemic.

The initiative spread online with the Arabic hashtag "a cheer for the heroes", shared by public figures including journalists, actors and the Arab pop star Ragheb Alama.

In one Beirut neighbourhood, a woman draped in a Lebanese flag sang the national anthem as her neighbours drummed on pots and pans, an AFP journalist said.



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زقفة\_للابطال رينا يحميكم جميعاً @jihanalama

A post shared by [Ragheb Alama](#) (@raghebalama) on Mar 29, 2020 at 10:27am PDT

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Goosebumps !! All the respect to our dedicated medical team Thank you again and again Your dedication given the scarce resources is above and beyond

—————#fashioninfluencer #lifestyleblogger #lebanesestreetstyle  
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#fashionreport #fashiontrends #fashionreport #آخر موضة #weddingtheme  
#fashiontrends #designer #influencer #riyadh #ksa ##arabinfluencer  
#fashiontrends20 #trends2020 #fashiontrends2020☐#corona #coronaviruslebanon

A post shared by [Dania Ghannoum](#) (@lebanesestreetstyle.dania) on Mar 29, 2020  
at 12:41pm PDT

Elsewhere, Lebanese played drums and blew vuvuzelas, sharing videos of the street performances online.

Similar initiatives have gained attention from Italy to France but they have remained rare in the Arab world.

Lebanon has reported 438 COVID-19 cases to date, with 10 deaths.

To try to contain the spread of the virus, Lebanon has imposed isolation measures on its population until April 12, with a nighttime curfew in effect. Schools, universities, restaurants and bars are closed.

Many fear the country's healthcare system could be overwhelmed by cases.







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Lebanon's police clear protest camps in Beirut as coronavirus curfew takes effect

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## [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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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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