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## Responses to the COVID-19 Pandemic in Syria, Iran and Pakistan

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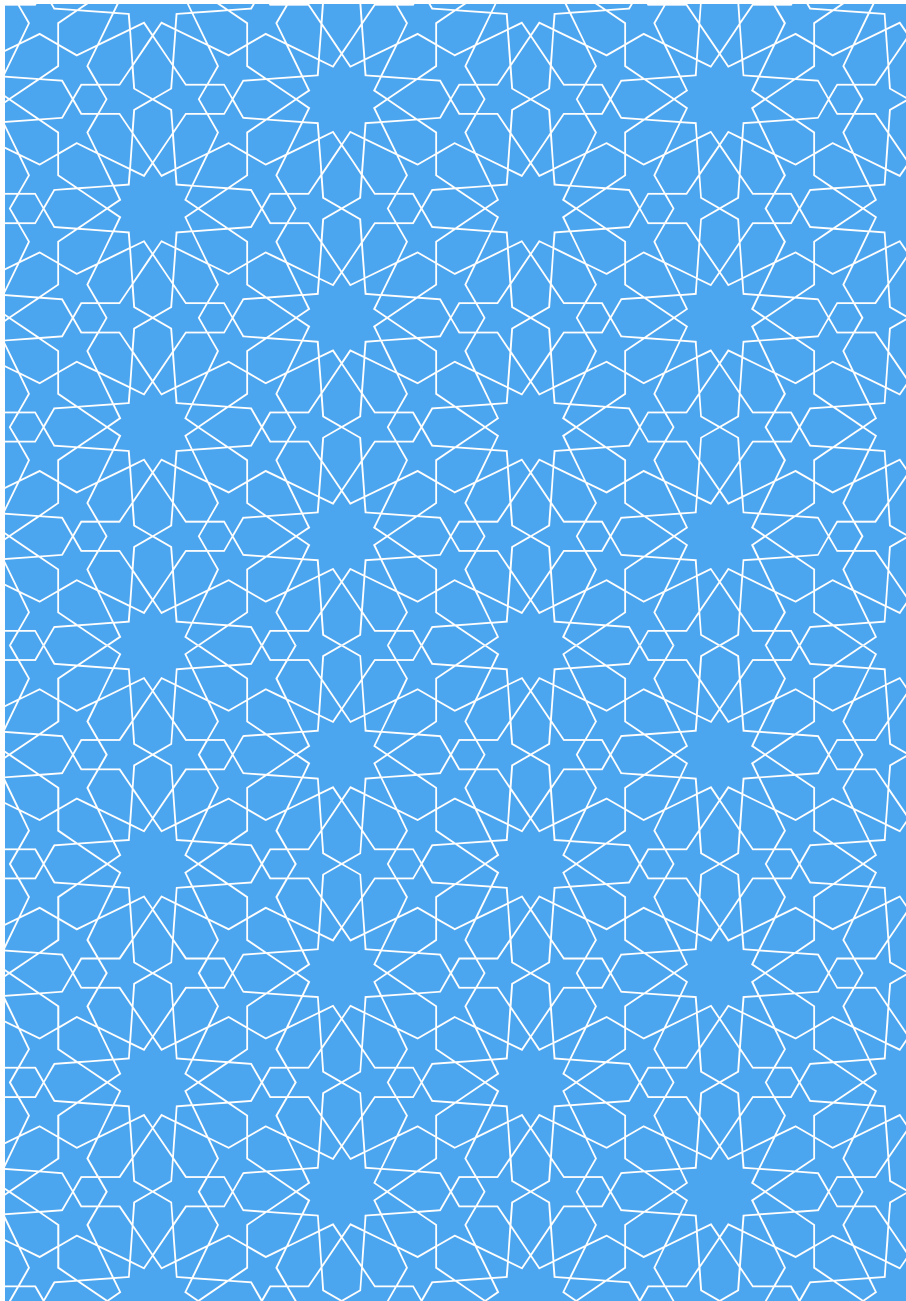
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# Responses to the COVID-19 Pandemic in Syria, Iran and Pakistan

Maryam Ghadyani, Hinna Hussain, Wael Odeh, Philip Wood



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## Abstract:

### Responses to the COVID-19 Pandemic in Syria, Iran and Pakistan

Maryam Ghadyani, Hinna Hussain, Wael Odeh, Philip Wood

This paper<sup>1</sup> describes the reaction to the COVID-19 outbreak on social media in Iran, Syria and Pakistan. In particular, we focus on issues of the place of religion in society, on international relations and on trust between society and government, where these issues have been invoked in the discussion of the epidemic. We conclude with timelines for the early phases of the epidemic in the three countries.

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<sup>1</sup> First submitted April 27, 2020. Revised text submitted May 7, 2020.

# Responses to the COVID-19 Pandemic in Syria, Iran and Pakistan

Maryam Ghadyani, Hinna Hussain, Wael Odeh, Philip Wood

COVID-19 has had a sudden marked impact on economies and societies around the world. But these effects have not been the same in all countries, and it is, as yet, very unclear how cultural differences may be affecting responses to the epidemic, such as social distancing.

The imposition of social distancing measures and voluntary or state-mandated isolation has prompted a massive re-orientation of public discussion on state and society, on religion and morality and on relationships between states. Pre-epidemic discourses have continued, of course. But they have increasingly been filtered through the new realities created by the virus.

In this paper we offer a digital ethnography of the public response to COVID-19 in Syria, Pakistan and Iran. It investigates how the digital public discusses the pandemic. We have gathered data during the period of lockdown in March and the first half of April 2020 through systematic observation of social media in Urdu, Arabic, Farsi and (where relevant) English, using platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and YouTube. These platforms are not discrete from one another: they frequently host content developed for other platforms through shared links, for example. Nevertheless, they each have a culture of their own and cater to a distinctive audience and demographics, and we have attempted to take these differences into account in our analysis. Our focus has been on how social media users made associations with the pandemic and with government responses to it. An appendix sets out timelines for government responses in each country and the reaction to this response, and a graph sets out rates of infection (which are currently much lower than many countries in Europe and North America).<sup>2</sup>

We can make some generalisations about country-specific social media use. Persian-speaking Twitter is dominated by members of the middle class and the diaspora and has a marked anti-regime slant, whereas Iranians tend to prefer Telegram and Instagram over Facebook because of high levels of regime scrutiny. (We found it hard to measure the popularity of posts within Telegram so we have not included data from this source in our sample. Other forms of social media were searched using the advanced search mechanisms provided by each platform).

In Pakistan, Facebook is often used to share information as pictures and videos by people who would not compose posts themselves. Twitter in Pakistan tends to be a platform for activists and journalists (and those who follow their work), who are much more conscious of international trends and tend to compare Pakistan to other states. Instagram here tends to be focused on celebrity culture (and is currently a way for celebrities to share tips on quarantine lifestyles).

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<sup>2</sup> Our thanks to Zulfiqar Bhutta, Leif Stenberg, Sanaa Alimia and Mohamad Meqdad for their comments and further information. Unless otherwise indicated, websites in Arabic and Urdu were consulted on April 12, 2020 and websites in Persian and English were consulted on April 27, 2020.

In Syria, unlike Pakistan, it was noticeable that people tend not to share media sources such as e-news, which seems to reflect a distrust of government information and of media in general. On the other hand, the government is widely suspected of disseminating information informally (as rumour) and then monitoring public reactions on Facebook, which is easily the most significant form of social media in Syria now. The Syrian government is very actively involved in monitoring and manipulating communication on Facebook and YouTube and the creation of a permanent electronic footprint is a real concern for Syrians in particular.

Finally, in all three countries there remains a digital divide that means that internet usage will greatly under-represent voices from rural areas, those who are illiterate in the national language or those beneath the poverty line (especially displaced people). We conceive of social media as a form of public space: images and texts circulate that generate a common emotional response and social media provides narratives into which users can imagine themselves. Nevertheless, we are aware that this is not the same thing as a common ideology and that social media is not a place that encourages reasoned dialogue, nor do we imagine that it is representative or all-encompassing. Some forms of social media are also likely to be much more conscious of international norms, and of international opinions regarding a domestic situation, than other forms of public discussion (including print media).<sup>3</sup>

Data from shares and likes have made it possible to isolate the most influential commentators, but we also attempted to identify trends in the responses to these comments to see which statements were nuanced or contested by their readers. We have often included media pieces, but only where these were widely shared or commented on. In normal situations, one has to be careful to differentiate the kinds of opinions that are expressed online from those that are expressed in person. And there may be a tendency for the anonymity of some platforms (especially Twitter) to allow for more impulsive comments. But in the scenario of a pandemic lockdown, online activity is often a substitute for all forms of social activity and, in that sense, it becomes more representative of a given individual's public interactions. Nevertheless, our method shares one weakness of much social media research in that we are unable to test how many users are exposed to content but do not react to it ('observers').

Of course, social media is never sealed off from other forms of discussion. Even during lockdown, private discussions on WhatsApp and Snapchat are also important media for information exchange. These are private and ephemeral, and we can only access their contents through personal networks or through references or reactions on social media. It may be that WhatsApp tends to be used for material that users know will trigger negative reactions if shared more broadly: examples include dark humour, conspiracy theories or criticism of politicians that might generate repercussions. One anecdote from Pakistan suggests that social media users may be unwilling to criticise religious figures such as Tariq Jameel on Facebook for fear of reprisals and accusations of impiety, and that such criticism is displaced onto WhatsApp.<sup>4</sup>

We have focused our attention on three Muslim-majority countries: Syria, Iran, Pakistan. Syria has responded to COVID-19 against a background of war, in which the Asad government has still not restored control over the whole of the country. There continues to be a large population of internally displaced refugees and medical infrastructure and

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. T. Peoll and J. Van Dyck, "Constructing Public Space: Global Perspectives on Social Media and Popular Contestation," *International Journal of Communication* 10 (2016), 226-34.

<sup>4</sup> We thank Stephen Lyon for this point.

personnel have been badly affected by ten years of war (though, anecdotally, there is some testing available for those suspected of carrying the virus). Iran was the first country to have an outbreak of COVID-19 after China. Its initial response was largely reactive and included attempts to conceal the full extent of the outbreak from domestic and international audiences. But Iran's ability to respond to the medical emergency has been hampered by American sanctions and its relative diplomatic isolation. Because the Iranian economy was already shrinking in 2019, senior figures like President Hasan Rouhani were extremely reluctant to pursue lockdown policies.<sup>5</sup> Pakistan has a federal system and responses to COVID-19 have varied by province: the province of Sind has been especially proactive, while inhabitants of Baluchistan and Gilgit-Baltistan have accused central government of providing insufficient funds. Pakistan currently stands as an outlier in keeping places of worship open, a point we return to later.

We begin by discussing how commentators have considered the theological significance of the pandemic, and the role of the clergy in fighting the virus, before considering trust between people and government and changes in the discussion of international relations.

### **Religion and society**

If all of the countries we examine here are 'Muslim', however we define this, the place of religion in the discussion of the epidemic has been very different. The relationship between clerics and the state is very different. In Syria contemporary clerics cannot be overtly critical of government and there is a long tradition of governments selecting clerical appointments. Iran is an Islamic Republic, where clerics themselves monopolise many high offices, but it also has regular elections and changes in government and high ranking clerics often criticise one another and the government. In Pakistan, religious leaders can wield considerable political influence, and religious parties can bring major cities to a standstill. In Pakistan blasphemy laws are endorsed by the general public, and the danger that individuals will take the law into their own hands makes statements that might be construed as blasphemy very dangerous. This environment plays a major role in censoring the public discussion of religion. Nevertheless, there are vocal critics of religion, and of the influence of religion upon politics, in all three countries.

### **The representation of extreme religion in Iran**

In Iran, the holy city of Qom was one of the first places to be struck by the epidemic. There was initially a debate over whether or not to close pilgrimage shrines in Mashhad and Qom which prompted two devotees to take widely circulated images of themselves licking the metal bars of the shrine as a sign of their devotion to the Imams<sup>6</sup> Both men were later arrested amid much speculation that they were associated with, or inspired by the Shirazis, a Shia group that opposes the Islamic Republic.<sup>7</sup> Soon afterwards, the government closed the shrines, which led to further protests in which the doors of the shrines were smashed.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> [https://www.chathamhouse.org/expert/comment/covid-19-and-iranian-shadows-war?utm\\_source=Chatham%20House&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=11425646\\_MENA%20COVID-19%20newsletter&dm\\_i=1S3M,6SW32,O7OFTI,R87RM,1](https://www.chathamhouse.org/expert/comment/covid-19-and-iranian-shadows-war?utm_source=Chatham%20House&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=11425646_MENA%20COVID-19%20newsletter&dm_i=1S3M,6SW32,O7OFTI,R87RM,1)

<sup>6</sup> <https://nypost.com/2020/03/02/iranians-licking-religious-shrines-in-defiance-of-coronavirus-spread/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://twitter.com/aghPlt/status/1234467602069696514>. For the Shirazis in general see <https://english.alarabiya.net/en/features/2018/03/12/Who-are-the-Shirazis-opposing-Iran-s-Guardianship-of-the-Islamic-Jurist->

<sup>8</sup> <https://twitter.com/rezahn56/status/1239672237931868166>



But if some commentators used the protests to attack the Shirazis, others used the events to attack religious fanaticism in general (which implicitly includes supporters of the regime): “The interesting thing is that a number of people are walking around, saying that this is not a real Shiite. These are British Shiites. No, my brother, you idiot, the purest Shiites in the country are these animals”.<sup>9</sup> The commentator acknowledges that the government is trying to distinguish between the proper use of Shia guidance in politics and those of its critics, which it associates with foreign enemies. But he dismisses this claim: the excesses of religiosity shown in Qom are not only irrational but are actually the essence of Shi’ism.

Another axis for the discussion of the religious significance of the pandemic was the contestation over ‘Islamic medicine’. Globally the epidemic has seen a resurgence of interest in alternative medicine, where figures in Europe, India and the US have promoted vitamin C, ginger or honey as cures for COVID-19. ‘Islamic medicine’ in Iran can be seen as an example of this broader trend, except that here, until quite recently, it was promoted by religious figures on state television. Herbal remedies were said to enjoy the support from the precedent of the Prophet and the Imams.<sup>10</sup> But the epidemic saw a significant volte-face by the Islamic Republic in which supporters of Islamic medicine like Ayatollah Tabrizian were mocked.<sup>11</sup> The fact that several mullahs were early victims of the virus also meant that there was widespread scepticism, especially after a medical doctor commented on the uselessness of ‘Islamic medicine’: “Mohsen Sharifi, a young man from Anzali, who was hospitalised in Anzali Hospital due to corona, and two days ago, one of Abbas Tabrizian's students went over his head in clerical clothes and rubbed Islamic medicine on his mouth!! He died an hour ago. Dr. Tahaei, the director of Anzali Hospital, said: “This cleric was introduced by Islamic propaganda.”<sup>12</sup>

### **Places of worship: The debate in Pakistan**

Across much of the world, including Muslim-majority countries, places of worship have been closed. Images of the empty Kaaba in Mecca have helped to disseminate the idea that these are exceptional times in which the hajj is suspended.<sup>13</sup> In Pakistan, however, the government was indecisive over the issue of banning prayers in mosques and has ultimately chosen to keep mosques open. The Ministry of Religious Affairs and the Council of Islamic Ideology (CII) of Pakistan held consultations with clergy to discuss in confidence the possibility of offering prayers from home. This has had no legal impact. In practice mosques remain open for prayer.<sup>14</sup> Some limited sanitation measures are in place and include: removing mosque carpets, holding Friday prayers in two shifts, limiting numbers of people in prayers to 5, and disinfecting prayer halls (though how far these steps have been implemented is

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<sup>9</sup> <https://twitter.com/paatesi/status/1239674507457150977>

<sup>10</sup> Note the discussions of I. Perho, *The Prophet’s Medicine: A Creation of the Muslim Traditionalist Scholars* (Helsinki: Finnish Oriental Society, 1995) and G. Kharmi, “*Al-tibb al-nabawi: The Prophet’s medicine*”, in R. Tapper and K. McLachlan (eds), *Technology, Tradition and Survival. Aspects of Material Culture in the Middle East and Central Asia* (London/ Portland OR: Frank Cass, 2003).

<sup>11</sup> [radiofarda](https://twitter.com/radiofarda). Also <https://twitter.com/Mjr768/status/1232549235733733377> and <https://twitter.com/deeas93/status/1231882599062294528>

<sup>12</sup> <https://twitter.com/AfshinHojjat/status/1242047224328093696>

<sup>13</sup> In Iran, mosques have been re-opened from May 3, 2020 in so-called white zones where there has been a significant decline in the rate of infections. Major mosques in Aleppo and Damascus have allowed Ramadan prayers to take place from May 8, 2020.

<sup>14</sup> The province of Sindh introduced a curfew from April 3, 2020 from 12:00 to 15:00, which has, in practice, prevented people from attending Friday prayers.

questionable).<sup>15</sup> The government has issued an edict (Section 144) to discourage public and religious gatherings or processions but this has not prevented prayer in mosques.<sup>16</sup> In Ramadan the government and clerics agreed that the congregational and supplementary evening *tarwih* prayer should go ahead, albeit with social distancing and other precautionary measures encouraged within the mosques.<sup>17</sup> A Gallup poll on April 22, 2020 indicated that in 26% of Pakistani households at least one male member had attended Friday prayers.<sup>18</sup> The discussion on social media has attempted to discourage people from attending mosques, which may illustrate that this discussion is out of step with the majority of the population.

Pakistani social media has been broadly critical of this stance, and commentators have urged people to pray from home. This reflects the broadly left-liberal slant of Pakistani Twitter in particular. Some commentators have tended to present their ideas as a call for rationality or reasonable precautions over ‘religion’, which suggests that it is part of their public self-fashioning as members of a (Westernised) educated middle class and/ or as ‘rational Muslims’. Many of the videos posted on social media show large crowds attending mosques in defiance of bans by local government or congregating to pray outside closed mosques.<sup>19</sup>

### **Calls to piety**

Social media has tended to find religious responses to the epidemic in Pakistan and much of the Arab world. These posts include Quranic verses, *dua* (prayers), and opinions of religious scholars and local preachers about seeking strength from faith, calls for *tawba* (forgiveness from Allah) and religious charity, and reminders of the importance of religious practices, such as regular reading of the Qur’an. In Syria, shared material included inspirational comments by celebrities (such as the popular scholar Ratib Nablusi)<sup>20</sup> or invitations to online versions of congregational prayers.<sup>21</sup> Iran did not show this pattern, perhaps because public religious statements would seem to imply support for the regime, and people tend to use social media as an alternative to official media sources which are already saturated with religious ideas about the virus.

Posts couched in religious language have sought to raise money for religious charities. Pakistan Day (March 23) was an occasion for people to show their commitment to the nation by pledging their time to fight the epidemic<sup>22</sup> and the Pakistan Ulema Council urged

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<sup>15</sup> <https://www.dawn.com/news/1543355>, Dawn e-newspaper, Imtiaz Ali/ Sirajuddin/Umar Bacha/Tariq Naqash/Arif Hayat/ Javed Hussain, Mar 25, 2020, 74 comments

<sup>16</sup> <https://dailytimes.com.pk/576713/coronavirus-section-144-imposed-in-pakistan-for-one-month/>, Daily Times, Web Desk, March 15, 2020

<sup>17</sup> <https://twitter.com/ArifAlvi/status/1251873073441255430>.

<sup>18</sup> [http://gallup.com.pk/declining-by-23-since-march-nearly-1-in-3-29-pakistanis-continue-to-report-that-a-male-family-member-has-visited-the-mosque-for-friday-prayers/?fbclid=IwAR07\\_6hgi75-OVGDxINiS7Ye--rUCgti1RwQEI5-Avvt1HtccCWQaFd32UI](http://gallup.com.pk/declining-by-23-since-march-nearly-1-in-3-29-pakistanis-continue-to-report-that-a-male-family-member-has-visited-the-mosque-for-friday-prayers/?fbclid=IwAR07_6hgi75-OVGDxINiS7Ye--rUCgti1RwQEI5-Avvt1HtccCWQaFd32UI)

<sup>19</sup> <https://twitter.com/qureshik74/status/1248567051851046912>, Twitter account of Khurram Qureshi, April 10, 2020, 293 retweets, 892 likes, 29.1k views

[https://twitter.com/omar\\_quraishi/status/1242077539515928577](https://twitter.com/omar_quraishi/status/1242077539515928577), Twitter account of Omer R Quraishi, March 23, 2020, 305 retweets, 787 likes, 63.5k views

<sup>20</sup> [https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story\\_fbid=217815412961762&id=110239713719333](https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=217815412961762&id=110239713719333)

<sup>21</sup> [https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story\\_fbid=623306905188804&id=100025285003300](https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=623306905188804&id=100025285003300)

<sup>22</sup> <https://twitter.com/ZaidZamanHamid/status/1249246659273424897>

philanthropists and the wealthy to pay *zakat* prior to Ramadan to alleviate the financial crisis faced by daily-wage earners and the poor.<sup>23</sup>

The Prime Minister, Imran Khan, described the battle against the epidemic as a *jihad*, in a statement widely shared and discussed on social media: “You do not need to panic. It is our belief that life and death are in the hands of Allah. We as a nation need to win this war against coronavirus”.<sup>24</sup> Khan’s comments were made against the context of his establishment of a Corona Relief Tiger Force, which sought to mobilise young people, principally associated with his political party, the Pakistan Tehreek-e Insaf (PTI), to provide food and information.<sup>25</sup> There has been some criticism of this force because of its links to PTI and opposition party spokespeople have expressed fears that it will become a means for misusing the Coronavirus Relief Fund. Imran Khan’s language of *jihad* fits into a wider anti-Islamophobic use of the term *jihad* in non-military contexts, as a way of demonstrating the significance of religiously motivated struggle to social causes (the ‘greater *jihad*’). This also shows parallels to the rhetoric of many male world leaders where the pandemic has been described as a form of warfare and to older strands of discourse that reach for military language to generate national solidarity (e.g. Habib Bourgiba’s *jihad* for economic development or Lyndon Johnson’s ‘war on poverty’).

Some figures in Pakistan have framed their discussion of the pandemic as the punishment of God. One recent example of this phenomenon is the statement of Mawlana Tariq Jameel, while sharing a platform with Imran Khan during a telethon on April 25, 2020. Jameel condemned the fact that Muslim women wore revealing clothing or danced and appeared to attribute the spread of the virus to immorality (he later apologised).<sup>26</sup> The idea that religious leaders had blamed the virus on divine judgement had already been used to criticise religious leaders for facilitating the spread of COVID-19. In particular the Federal Science and Technology Minister, Fawad Chaudury, commented that people should not call ignorant men ‘scholars’, but reserve this term for people who spoke about matters on which they were actually knowledgeable.<sup>27</sup>

In Syria some very early posts on the pandemic identified it as a divine punishment and called on people to “wear Hijab and fear our God instead of wearing a mask and fearing Coronavirus”<sup>28</sup> or quoting a statement from an important *hadith* transmitter to attribute the virus to the spread of adultery<sup>29</sup> or the Chinese persecution of the Uighurs.<sup>30</sup> As the

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<sup>23</sup> <https://www.dawn.com/news/1542491/ulema-urge-the-wealthy-to-pay-zakat-before-ramazan>. The Pakistani government also assured clerics that *zakat* (obligatory tithes) would not be diverted from religious institutions towards ‘philanthropy’: <https://www.dawn.com/news/1550419/govt-accepts-most-demands-of-clerics>

<sup>24</sup> <https://nation.com.pk/18-Mar-2020/no-need-to-panic-says-prime-minister>, *The Nation* e-newspaper, Maqbool Malik, March 18, 2020

<sup>25</sup> <https://twitter.com/PakPMO/status/1244714908719202307>, Twitter account of Prime Minister’s Office, Pakistan, March 31, 2020, 166 comments, 499 retweets, 1.8k likes

<sup>26</sup> <https://dailytimes.com.pk/601968/maulana-tariq-jameels-comments-on-women-create-controversy>. Also note <https://www.dawn.com/news/1551400/kohat-clerics-elders-refuse-to-observe-sops-for-ramazan>. The latter report claims that the virus has not been spread in mosques and that it is “God’s wrath for wrongdoings”. Accessed April 25, 2020.

<sup>27</sup> <https://twitter.com/fawadchaudhry/status/1243067407968677889>

<sup>28</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/bahaa.rajb.3/posts/488828885098714>

<sup>29</sup> [https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story\\_fbid=670937353677719&id=100022843815567](https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=670937353677719&id=100022843815567)

<sup>30</sup> [https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story\\_fbid=2944143139006761&id=2290751384345943](https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=2944143139006761&id=2290751384345943)

pandemic spread, others began to criticise those who circulated jokes about it, and called upon people to approach it seriously, as an expression of their Islamic morality.<sup>31</sup> However, an overwhelming majority of posts from Syrians (both in the diaspora and inside the country) framed their discussion of the pandemic in anti-clerical terms, possibly in response to the descriptions of the pandemic as the wrath of God in earlier Syrian posts and in discussions in the rest of the Arab world. Unlike in Pakistan, the discourse about charity was often anti-clerical, and giving to hospitals was contrasted to giving to mosques, rather than classed as a similar kind of religiously motivated giving: “The virus will not respect your religion but your immune system. It will not fear your *dua*, it will fear your vaccination”<sup>32</sup>. Posters commented that the virus did not discriminate on the basis of religion and mocked religious leaders for their obsessive hatred of ‘infidels’.<sup>33</sup> Others commented that religious extremism remained a more dangerous threat than COVID-19 (of course, similar sentiments are expressed for a wide variety of problems in Syria, ranging from the lack of fuel to the rate of unemployment).<sup>34</sup>

Religion, therefore, plays a very different role in the online politics of our three case studies. In Pakistan there is a ‘rationalist’ critique of the role of the clergy in ascribing the disease to divine punishment, but this does not extend into criticism of religion per se or its role in society. In Syria, commentators seemed much more conscious of religion as a potential source of division within society, no doubt reflecting the sectarian dimension of recent conflict. In Iran positive commentary on religion would mark one as a regime sympathiser: here we may be seeing a reversal of the process seen in Eastern Europe in the 1980s, where the Catholic church’s opposition to the Soviet Union made it an attractive source of national identity. In Iran, criticism of the role of religion has tended to follow ‘safe’ paths of religious extremes that had already been condemned by elements within the state itself, such as Islamic medicine or the Shirazi movement.

### **Trust and distrust in government**

Some commentators in all three of the countries sampled were critical of the states’ ability to handle the epidemic. It should be noted, of course, that this is true of all online commentators in all parts of the world: where there are no clear models for how a government ought to respond to a global epidemic public criticism is almost inevitable. In all of our cases, criticism of the government followed themes that were familiar before the epidemic.

In Iran there is a long tradition of civil society criticising the state, though this is sometimes mollified when it is perceived that Iran is being subjected to unfair treatment from other states. Commentators were very sceptical of the statistics being produced by the government

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<sup>31</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/sami.dabbit/posts/10216433435208845>. This commentator is a Syrian doctor living in Dubai.

<sup>32</sup>

<https://www.facebook.com/search/top/?q=%D8%A5%D8%BA%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%82%20%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AD%D8%B1%D9%85%20%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D9%83%D9%8A&epa=FILTERS&filters=eyJycF9jcmVhdGlvb190aW11Ijoie1wibmFtZVwiOlwiY3JlYXRpb25fdGltZVwiLFwiYXJnc1wiOlwie1xcXCJzdGFydF9tb250aFxcXCI6XFxcJlIwMjAtMDNcXFwiLFxcXCJlbnRfbW9udGhcXFwiOlxcXCiYMDIwLTAzXFxcIn1cIn0iLCJycF9sb2NhdGlvb1I6IntcIm5hbWVcIjpcImxvY2F0aW9uXCIsXCJhcmdzXCI6XCIXMDYyNDIyNDI3NDg2MjNcIn0ifQ%3D%3D>

<sup>33</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/rateb.shabo/posts/3562327840504987>

<sup>34</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=264526177860230&set=pb.100029085483183.-2207520000.&type=3&theater>

and accusations that the government had delayed the cancellation of flights from China. The arrest of prominent critics led to the suspicion that there was something to hide, especially from Twitter users who were already accustomed to attacking the regime.<sup>35</sup>

In Pakistan there was an expectation of corruption in government-operated relief funds. Past crises were used to frame the response to the epidemic, especially where the federal government was seen to give false reassurances to the public or to be acting indecisively (though initial public praise for the government of Sindh was an important exception).<sup>36</sup> Political interference in the leadership of the healthcare system and inadequate medical provision were also points of criticism, especially when young doctors in Quetta, Baluchistan were arrested for protesting at the lack of PPEs.<sup>37</sup> The absence of testing meant that the public was often sceptical of official infection figures, but most polling suggests that Pakistanis in general are confident in the government's management of the crisis (60% in a Gallup poll conducted on March 25, 2020).<sup>38</sup>

In Syria trust in the government was already very low after its involvement in war crimes against its own citizens. The journalist Nedal Maaloouf, now resident in Turkey, expressed his fears that weak states like Syria will be poorly equipped to face the virus and observed that prison and torture would not be an effective way of responding to the virus.<sup>39</sup> Commentators believed that the regime had already concealed the extent to which the virus had spread in Syria.<sup>40</sup> (One parallel here is the Syrian government's denial of the presence of HIV/ AIDS in Syria and other Arab states). Other commentators used dark humour to express their uncertainty over the situation: one early post was of an open grave, with the caption "precautionary measures from the department of health".<sup>41</sup>

During the military conflict, there was much public criticism of "traders of the conflict", of profiteers who made money out of the war. The same vocabulary was used in two very widely shared videos that shamed political and religious authorities (both Muslim and Orthodox Christian) and challenged them to do the same and live up to their principles, while

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<sup>35</sup> <https://twitter.com/HedayatBahare/status/1238088461904683008>;

<https://twitter.com/peka1355/status/1237032486015774722>;

<https://twitter.com/sabaazarpeik/status/1235545386540060673>

<sup>36</sup> <https://www.dawn.com/news/1542163>, *Dawn*, Zofeen T. Ebrahim, March 30, 2020;

<https://www.dawn.com/news/1540230>, *Dawn* e-newspaper, Ikram Junaidi, March 12, 2020;

<https://twitter.com/AamirInqlabi/status/1245431514193629186>

<sup>37</sup> [https://twitter.com/zarak\\_khaan/status/1247100489361211396](https://twitter.com/zarak_khaan/status/1247100489361211396), Zarak Khan official Twitter account, April 06, 2020, 451 retweets, 746 likes. Government reports on the May 4, 2020 now claim that PPE production in Pakistan meets requirements:

<https://twitter.com/zfrmrza/status/1257190717987917825/photo/1>

<sup>38</sup>

<https://www.facebook.com/GallupPak/photos/rpp.112923232073343/3041551835877120/?type=3&theater>. Also

<https://www.facebook.com/GallupPak/photos/a.168760703156262/3079636168735353/?type=3&theater>

<sup>39</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/nedal.malouf/posts/10157267911074895>

<sup>40</sup> Cf. <https://www.usnews.com/news/best-countries/articles/2020-03-18/doubts-surround-syrias-claim-of-zero-coronavirus-cases>, which was shared by Syrian commentators.

<sup>41</sup>

<https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=927839027611793&set=a.321299454932423&type=3&theater>



criticising the so-called “traders of the crises”. The success of these videos owed much to their ability to draw on a vocabulary that criticised hypocrisy that had been developed during the conflict of the past decade.

Diaspora Syrians have also used the discussion of the epidemic as another means to criticise the government. They claimed that “the actual virus is the regime” and it is “much more dangerous for people than the coronavirus itself”.<sup>42</sup> Its symptoms include “forced displacement, torture, detention” and “the death of a million Syrians”<sup>43</sup>. M. Katt shared a poster showing two photos to compare the number of people wearing masks to avoid the virus and the huge number of refugees escaping from the regime.<sup>44</sup> These posts were prominent in the early discussion of the pandemic in Syria.

The uncertainty in Syria seems particularly acute because of the absence of any government communication, in an authoritarian society that is very accustomed to the personality cult surrounding Bashar al-Asad. Among the very few high officials who publicly spoke about the problem was the Minister of Health, who answered a question from a journalist on what message he would send to citizens who are concerned and scared of the current problem. Building on earlier rhetoric in which the President compared the opposition to germs, the Minister stated that “the army of the Syrian Arab Republic has cleansed many of the germs on the soil of Syria... and I assure you that, up till this moment, we don’t have any coronavirus case in Syria”<sup>45</sup> (March 13, 2020). People expected the President to appear on national TV and declare his government plans to protect people’s lives and its policy to support the affected economic sectors. To assure people, Damascus Now (دمشق الآن) Facebook page tried on April 8, 2020 to explain the absence of the President from the scene: The page said that “the President, as a doctor, has since the beginning been searching for a cure for the virus before it spreads among his people, and he has reached important results. We will surprise the whole world soon”.<sup>46</sup> Whether this page was really representing the point of view of the President or not, it was widely shared and filled with loyalist messages assuring the President of victory in his struggles.

The requirements of social distancing amid a global economic downturn are and will be a strain on the trust between the state and society across the globe, including Europe and the United States. But even critics of their own state may realise that current governments are the only possible actors who can distribute resources and create new norms quickly in response to an epidemic. The scepticism seen in Iran and Syria expresses longstanding legitimacy deficits for these governments, but it is interesting that Imran Khan’s policies seem to have received a relatively positive reception. Pakistan is also an outlier in allowing mosques to remain open, and it remains to be seen whether the long-term cost of this policy may deepen the effects of the epidemic here.

## **Religious identity and the treatment of minorities**

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<sup>42</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/songa.younga/posts/2717875288303161>

<sup>43</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/songa.younga/posts/2717875288303161>

<sup>44</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/mwafaq.katt/posts/2977195388999524>

<sup>45</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/all4syria.org/posts/1847008925433190>

<sup>46</sup>

[https://www.facebook.com/search/top/?q=%D9%83%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%88%D9%86%D8%A7%20%D8%A8%D8%B4%D8%A7%D8%B1%20%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D8%B3%D8%AF&epa=SEARCH\\_BOX](https://www.facebook.com/search/top/?q=%D9%83%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%88%D9%86%D8%A7%20%D8%A8%D8%B4%D8%A7%D8%B1%20%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D8%B3%D8%AF&epa=SEARCH_BOX)

Discussion of how the epidemic has been concentrated in certain communities has provided an avenue for the ‘scientific’ expression of the distrust of internal communities and their lifestyles. In the context of the epidemic, lifestyle choices come to imply a danger for the whole of society by incubating the virus. But such criticisms also echo earlier criticism of minority groups. Thus criticism of the segregation of minorities or anxieties over minority birth rates may imply the dense clustering of settlement. Distrust of the hygiene, dietary or sexual practices of minority communities may be the presumed causes for the spread of disease. And the dominance of minority religious leaders whose rulings are trusted over those of the state may be seen as an underlying cause of the spread of disease in minority communities because social distancing measures are ignored. We find good examples of this suspicion of minority groups in the reporting of COVID-19 in Hasidic communities in Israel or Muslims in India.

In Pakistan, discussion of the origins of COVID-19 has taken on a sectarian dimension. Some Sunnis have commented that it was spread by returning pilgrims from Iran via the Taftan border.<sup>47</sup> A high profile criticism of the Special Assistant for Overseas Pakistanis, Zulfi Bukhari, by Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz leader, Khawaja Asif, has given legitimacy to these criticisms. Others have identified a meeting of the Sunni missionary organisation Tablighi Jamaat at Raiwand Markaz as the source of the infection, where Palestinian and Kyrgyz Tablighis were tested positive for the virus after they returned home.<sup>48</sup> In Syria, by contrast, discussion did not take on this sectarian tone, except perhaps when anti-government commentators accused Iranians allied to the government of spreading the virus.<sup>49</sup>

### **International relations**

For many states, foreign policy provided the initial lens through which COVID-19 was understood. For the countries in this sample, as for Anglophone Muslims, the first reaction to the news that COVID-19 had been identified in China was to blame the Chinese themselves or the Chinese state. For some, the Chinese had a particularly unhygienic lifestyle, and the foolishness of eating wild animals like bats, cats and dogs. This occasionally implied endorsement of Muslim dietary laws and the superior hygiene of Muslim societies.<sup>50</sup> For others, the outbreak in Wuhan was the consequence of divine punishment for the Chinese mistreatment of the Uighurs and their authoritarian government. The latter tended to be the analysis used by clerics, especially those in Iran (where COVID-19 discourse was well-developed at an early stage because of the earlier outbreaks in Iran).

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<sup>47</sup> <https://www.dawn.com/news/1543139>

<sup>48</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/pakistanPKAffairs/photos/basw.Abq> and <https://www.dawn.com/news/1547354>

<sup>49</sup> <https://ar.qantara.de/content/%D9%88%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%A1-%D9%83%D9%88%D9%81%D9%8A%D8%AF-19-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A7-%D9%87%D9%84-%D9%8A%D8%B5%D8%A8%D8%AD-%D9%81%D9%8A%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%B3-%D9%83%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%88%D9%86%D8%A7-%D9%83%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%AB%D8%A9-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A7-%D8%AE%D8%B5%D9%88%D8%B5%D8%A7-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D9%85%D8%B9%D8%AA%D9%82%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%86%D8%B8%D8%A7%D9%85%D8%9F>

<sup>50</sup> <https://twitter.com/ghazeyekpa/status/1224085124494647296>. One English-language example is [https://twitter.com/Sahiba\\_e\\_Dil/status/1240277273317605377](https://twitter.com/Sahiba_e_Dil/status/1240277273317605377)

However, several of the states in our sample have had good recent relations with the Chinese state. Pakistan has received large sums from China for the construction of a ‘Karakorum highway’ and the development of the port of Gwadar in Baluchistan. Here the narrative of China-Pakistan friendship soon replaced the initial criticisms of China. Pakistan sent aid to Wuhan and then received aid in turn after the first outbreaks, in the form of medical supplies and expert personnel.<sup>51</sup>

Iran has been reliant on China for imports during a period of US sanctions.<sup>52</sup> Early in the epidemic there was controversy over how business interests had lobbied to prevent the closure of the border to Chinese citizens.<sup>53</sup> After China provided aid to Iran in medical supplies there was a slight shift in rhetoric, as some expressed gratitude,<sup>54</sup> while others saw the interventions as a way for China to interfere in Iranian affairs, or mocked the help offered as being insufficient.<sup>55</sup>

A public dispute involving the Chinese ambassador was also criticised in social media, where the Iranian health ministry accused the Chinese of producing false statistics. The ambassador replied, “Sir, I hope you respect the great facts and efforts of the Chinese people”, which many commentators found to be a breach of etiquette.<sup>56</sup> This was a good example of an Iranian Twittersphere that is normally rather critical of the Iranian government rallying to attack non-Iranians who seem to disrespect Iran or fail to treat its officials with respect. The argument prompted criticism of China’s authoritarian policies, especially with regard to filtering Twitter;<sup>57</sup> its polluting industries<sup>58</sup> and its role in exporting the virus (which generated a famous spoof on the Chinese flag).<sup>59</sup> Some of this criticism employed overtly racist language and imagery, referring to the Chinese as “almond eyes”.<sup>60</sup>

However, discussion in Iran pivoted towards the United States after high-ranking clerics commented that American sanctions made it very difficult for Iran to respond effectively to the pandemic<sup>61</sup> and even accused the US of deliberately spreading the virus among its enemies.<sup>62</sup> Some commentators urged the lifting of sanctions to allow Iran to participate fully in a common global struggle.<sup>63</sup> Nevertheless, Iranian Twitter has a particularly critical

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<sup>51</sup> <https://images.dawn.com/news/1184847>; <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2185641/1-g-b-receives-medical-aid-china-fight-spread-coronavirus/>; <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2163437/1-coronavirus-will-not-impact-cpec-projects-yao/>

<sup>52</sup> <https://www.irna.ir/news/83656926/شود-د-متو-قف-امر-وز-از-چین-مستقیم-بر-وا-های>

<sup>53</sup> [https://twitter.com/amirmoghadam\\_ir/status/1223936058750128128](https://twitter.com/amirmoghadam_ir/status/1223936058750128128);

[https://twitter.com/yasaman\\_2018/status/1224063740653514753](https://twitter.com/yasaman_2018/status/1224063740653514753);

<https://twitter.com/FourCzen/status/1223869092748238849>

<sup>54</sup> <https://twitter.com/rezaalavi56/status/1232269861507813377>

<sup>55</sup> <https://twitter.com/nikita11ad/status/1232322700225458176>;

[https://twitter.com/h0d3r\\_fa/status/1232268279189778433](https://twitter.com/h0d3r_fa/status/1232268279189778433)

<sup>56</sup> [Twitter link](#); [RadioFarda](#). Comments at:

<https://twitter.com/alirezaroashan/status/1247127955572228097> and

<https://twitter.com/mhasanpour329/status/1247062462748385281>

<sup>57</sup> [https://twitter.com/amirmoghadam\\_ir/status/1247139183564595206](https://twitter.com/amirmoghadam_ir/status/1247139183564595206)

<sup>58</sup> <https://twitter.com/AfsharMahnaz/status/1247174433388838912>

<sup>59</sup> <https://twitter.com/Majid06311897/status/1247086057776197635>

<sup>60</sup> [https://instahaha.com/p/B\\_KnwahHRjv.html](https://instahaha.com/p/B_KnwahHRjv.html)

<sup>61</sup> <https://twitter.com/MehdiMMJ/status/1243193879622549505>

<sup>62</sup> [economist](#)

<sup>63</sup> [https://twitter.com/Rouhani\\_ir/status/1241072247999287296](https://twitter.com/Rouhani_ir/status/1241072247999287296)



attitude towards the Islamic Republic and commentators accused the government of using crises like the pandemic to their own advantage: “One day war was a blessing to them. Then the boycott was a blessing to them. Now [#كورونا](#) It's been a blessing. With Corona they want to lift the embargo. The same boycott that was a blessing in itself. Corona is being deployed in Iran as leverage to lift sanctions. Everything that is a misery of the people is a blessing for the Islamic Republic.”<sup>64</sup>

In contrast to our expectations, conspiracies about an American bio-weapon were not widely supported, though this was the official reason for refusing US aid. In particular, the high rates of pandemic infection in the US seemed to give the lie to the idea that the virus had been designed to target “the Iranian genome”.<sup>65</sup>

The government of Pakistan itself intervened in this situation by asking the US to lift its sanctions, in response to a letter by President Hasan Rouhani. Imran Khan appealed to the international community to lift sanctions on humanitarian grounds.<sup>66</sup> This met with some praise from commentators: Khan’s actions fit into a longer context of Pakistan presenting itself as a champion of the Muslim world (not least in its claim that its possession of nuclear weapon serves as a deterrent to enemies of other Muslim countries). Some Iranians felt that Pakistan was engaging in unnecessary interference: “ppl of #Iran are none of ur business. #KhameneiVirus rejected the help, #IslamicRepublicVirus has ruined Iran. U zip it & mind ur own business”.<sup>67</sup>

In Syria, commentary on China focused on the effects of the lockdown on the Chinese economy and fears that lockdown would allow online American companies like Ebay and Amazon to take over the local market. The Chinese example was praised as early as the end of January because Chinese entrepreneurs like Jack Ma, owner of the Alibaba group, “bought all the stagnated goods with high prices .... Then he offered them on his Alibaba website with low prices making loss”: “this patriotic man” did not exploit the situation to make huge profit to himself.<sup>68</sup> There is a sense here of the threat of local Syrian profiteers, but also a wider context of American cultural and economic globalisation, in which China is seen as an ally and role model. In a similar vein, Syrians’ observation of the pandemic in Europe and North America has led many to the conclusion that an authoritarian model has proved much more effective than the vacillation seen in more democratic countries.

In general, the trend has been for initial criticisms of China to give way to admiration, whether commentators have seen China as a potential ally or as a good role model for efficient (i.e. non-democratic) government. One facet of this improved image may be the handling of the crisis by the United States, which was exacerbated in the case of Iran by the preservation of sanctions. To some extent, American sanctions have also caused critics of the Iranian government to mute their criticisms. Contemporary geopolitics have been much more important in guiding the discourse than any theoretical proximity between Christians and Muslims.

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<sup>64</sup> <https://twitter.com/Alighazizade/status/1243617393383026691>

<sup>65</sup> <https://twitter.com/morkazemian/status/1243313716956991490>

<sup>66</sup> <https://nation.com.pk/20-Mar-2020/pakistan-calls-for-lifting-of-sanctions-on-iran>

<sup>67</sup> <https://twitter.com/ImranKhanPTI/status/1241697736703049729>

<sup>68</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/songa.younga/posts/2717875288303161;>

<https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=2446518142278189&set=a.1411189712477709&type=3&theater>

## Hopes for the future

The historian of religion Jan Hjärpe commented that the shared experience of the second World War was a crucial source of definition for Europe.<sup>69</sup> The experience of the war has been a defining feature of the way that narratives about the past were framed for all European states and for all European families (or rather for any family that self-fashioned as European).

COVID-19 may turn out to be a common defining moment on a similar scale, in that it has the potential to establish political and economic patterns for a generation, as well as generating everyday experiences of lockdown and the displacement of social life onto the internet that will be broadly similar across different societies. There has been much speculation about how these trends may affect life after the virus is over, partly because commentators anticipate that this may establish longer-term trends. In Britain, for instance, commentators have speculated that the epidemic may generate a sense that society is only as strong as its weakest member and prompt a return to enthusiasm for the welfare state.

In our sample, we found Iranians speculating that the epidemic will generate an anti-religious backlash,<sup>70</sup> as well as a repositioning of the global order of states.<sup>71</sup> Both are issues that were already close to the forefront of the Iranian popular imagination, especially because it has suffered as a result of its treatment by the US, which is currently the only globally hegemonic power. Syrians are likely to be exhausted from speculating about the future on the basis of a rapidly changing present and the abstract nature of hopes for the future may reflect the impossibility of safely suggesting any concrete alternatives to the current political situation. One Syrian comment that was widely shared expressed the hope that the new heroes of Syria would be “doctors, nurses and people working in public service” rather than “footballers, singers or reality tv stars”.<sup>72</sup> Finally, in Pakistan we found that commentators were disinterested in this kind of long-term speculation: here the media narrative has tended to be parochial, and has rarely speculated on how the country might change after lockdown beyond a limited discussion on Pakistan’s future economic challenges.

Social media certainly offers the potential for the emergence of new forms of politics and new avenues to power for traditional politicians. For instance, Tobias Matthiesen’s study of Shia politics in eastern Saudi Arabia and Bahrain argues that sectarian agitation is an effective shortcut to promotion for ambitious clerics.<sup>73</sup> We hypothesise that, as use of social media becomes more widespread, the potential exists for groups to cohere around minority positions of all kinds, both ‘conservative’ and ‘liberal’, however these are defined. One liberal example from Syria is the cleric Mohammad Habash, who criticised clerics who thought that religion could provide the answer to the pandemic: “Confronting the epidemic and searching

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<sup>69</sup> J. Hjärpe, “What will be chosen from the Islamic basket?”, *European Review* 5 (1997), 267-74.

<sup>70</sup> [https://www.instagram.com/p/B\\_IVicHpTw8/?igshid=17i6rzu5sczt5](https://www.instagram.com/p/B_IVicHpTw8/?igshid=17i6rzu5sczt5)

<sup>71</sup> [https://twitter.com/vahabzadeh\\_ali/status/1244239358087122946](https://twitter.com/vahabzadeh_ali/status/1244239358087122946)

<sup>72</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/firas.tlass.9/posts/304276153885232>. However, note that Tlass is a controversial figure. A member of the Syrian Opposition, he was the son of a Defence Minister under Hafiz al-Asad, but he is a popular figure in the Syrian Opposition and amongst religious minorities and repeatedly criticised his father’s ‘mistakes’, both explicitly and implicitly.

<sup>73</sup> T. Mathiesen, *Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and the Arab Spring that wasn't* (Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 2013)

for a drug is the task of science alone ...As for the cleric, his task is to confront hatred..., and to spread faith and love”.<sup>74</sup>

If one effect of the pandemic is to encourage use of social media and to increase digital literacy on these platforms, then 2020 may prove to be a turning point, when the social effects of the transition of political discourse into online spaces accelerates. Especially for younger people who were already ‘digital natives’, the experience of lockdown may increase the importance of social media as the space for display where reputations are formed. In all linguistic and cultural domains this transition is likely to involve a breakdown of a unified public sphere into different silos. Of course, such a transition is also dependent on the continued expansion of online access, and therefore on the wider economic climate.

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<sup>74</sup> [https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story\\_fbid=10216466774285932&id=1354218088](https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=10216466774285932&id=1354218088)

## Timeline of COVID-19 in Pakistan

### i) January 2020

- **Jan 19, 2020:** The Foreign Minister of Pakistan, Shah Mahmood Qureshi, stressed the importance of the international community's continued attention to the suffering of Kashmiris and demanded the issue be resolved in line with the UN resolutions and the will of the Kashmiri people.<sup>1</sup>
- **January 26, 2020:** The Foreign Office of Pakistan rejected the possibility of coronavirus among any Pakistani students in Wuhan, China.<sup>2</sup>
- **January 27, 2020:** Authorities in Gilgit Baltistan (GB) stopped two shipping containers carrying goods from entering Pakistan through Khunjerab Pass and requested the federal government to delay re-opening of the China-Pakistan border amid the COVID-19 scare.
- **January 29, 2020:** Coronavirus was confirmed in four Pakistani students studying in China.<sup>3</sup>
- **January and February 2020:** Social media blamed the dietary practices of Chinese people as the main cause of COVID-19.

### ii) February 2020

- **February 02, 2020:** The Pakistani government sent medical aid to Wuhan, which was the epicentre of COVID-19 at that time.<sup>4</sup>
- **February 02, 2020:** Amid COVID-19 scares, 10 Pakistani students arrived in Lahore from China via Bangkok after flight cancellations and the government's refusal to bring them back immediately.<sup>5</sup>
- **February 02, 2020:** The State Minister of Health, Zafar Mirza, informed the public that Pakistan had received its first COVID-19 diagnosing materials<sup>6</sup> and that health information booths had been set up at the airports as initial precautionary measures.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <https://twitter.com/SMOureshiPTI/status/1218920930212286465>, Twitter account of Shah Mahmood Qureshi, Jan 19, 2020, 349 retweets, 1.5K likes

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.dawn.com/news/1530684>, Dawn e-newspaper, Naveed Siddiqui, January 26, 2020

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.dawn.com/news/1531241>, Dawn e-newspaper, January 29, 2020

<sup>4</sup> <https://nation.com.pk/02-Feb-2020/coronavirus-supplies-for-china-arrive>, The Nation, web desk, February 02, 2020

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/608148-10-pak-students-reach-lahore-from-china-via-bangkok>, February 03, 2020

<sup>6</sup> <https://twitter.com/zfrmrza/status/1223895185156911104>, Twitter account of Zafar Mirza, February 02, 2020, 1k retweets, 5.5.k likes

<sup>7</sup> <https://twitter.com/zfrmrza/status/1223930637649883138>, Twitter account of Zafar Mirza, February 02, 2020, 73 retweets, 271 likes

- **February 22, 2020:** Chief Minister of Baluchistan, Jam Kamal Khan, declared a health emergency in districts of the province bordering Iran when five deaths were confirmed there.<sup>8</sup>
- **February 23, 2020:** Pakistan temporarily closed its border with Iran and decided not to allow anyone to cross into Pakistan without screening at Taftan and four other entry points in Baluchistan.<sup>9</sup>
- **February 25, 2020:** Chinese Ambassador to Pakistan, Yao Jing, speaking at the inaugural ceremony of Energy Week, said that the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) would not be affected by the COVID-19 crisis.<sup>10</sup>
- **February 26:** State Minister of Health, Zafar Mirza, confirmed the first two cases of coronavirus in Pakistan and suggested citizens avoid panic as the situation is under control.<sup>11</sup>

### iii) March 2020

- **March 01, 2020:** The Sindh government decided to close all educational institutions in the province until March 13, 2020, due to the COVID-19 threat.<sup>12</sup>
- **March 02, 2020:** Pakistan closed its Chaman border with Afghanistan from March 02, 2020, over coronavirus fears while other crossing points at Torkham, Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) remained open.<sup>13</sup>
- **March 03, 2020:** In Gilgit Baltistan (G-B), the first COVID-19 case was confirmed in a woman who returned from Iran a few days before.<sup>14</sup>
- **On March 04, 2020:** Special Assistant to the Prime Minister on Health, Zafar Mirza, dismissed the view that the government is hiding confirmed COVID-19 cases by stating “Every little case of the common cough or flu should not be mistaken for the coronavirus”.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> <https://nation.com.pk/23-Feb-2020/balochistan-declares-coronavirus-health-emergency-along-border-with-iran>, *The Nation*, News Desk, February 23, 2020

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.dawn.com/news/1536327>, *Dawn* e-newspaper, Saleem Shahid, February 24, 2020

<sup>10</sup> <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2163437/1-coronavirus-will-not-impact-cpec-projects-yao/>, *The Express Tribune*, Correspondent, February 26, 2020

<sup>11</sup> [https://twitter.com/zfrmrza/status/1232707169163841537?ref\\_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etwetembed%7Ctwterm%5E1232707169163841537&ref\\_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.24newshd.tv%2F26-Feb-2020%2Fdr-zafar-mirza-confirms-two-coronavirus-cases-in-pakistan](https://twitter.com/zfrmrza/status/1232707169163841537?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etwetembed%7Ctwterm%5E1232707169163841537&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.24newshd.tv%2F26-Feb-2020%2Fdr-zafar-mirza-confirms-two-coronavirus-cases-in-pakistan), Twitter account of Zafar Mirza, February 26, 2020, 529 comments, 2.8k retweets, 8.2k likes

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/622608-coronavirus-threat-in-sindh-educational-institutions-to-remain-closed-till-13th>, *The News*, News Report, March 02, 2020

<sup>13</sup> <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2167234/1-pakistan-close-chaman-border-afghanistan-amid-covid-19-outbreak/>, *The Express Tribune*, Mohammad Zafar, March 1, 2020

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.thenews.com.pk/latest/627631-gilgit-baltistan-reports-second-case-pakistan-tally-rises-to-20>, *The News*, Web Desk, March 11, 2020

<sup>15</sup> <https://dailytimes.com.pk/570314/govt-not-hiding-coronavirus-cases-in-pakistan-due-to-psl/>, *Daily Times*, March 05, 2020

- **March 04, 2020:** The federal government expelled Health Secretary, Dr. Allah Bakhsh Malik, and appointed Dr. Syed Tauqir Hussain Shah as the additional secretary in-charge.<sup>16</sup>
- **March 05, 2020:** Chief Minister of Baluchistan, Jam Kamal Khan Alyani, informed that the government had made all necessary arrangements to deal with the coronavirus. A minimum of 1,800 pilgrims were treated and screened at the quarantine centres at the Taftan border.<sup>17</sup>
- **March 08, 2020:** Despite criticism from conservative segments of the country, the annual Aurat March was held in Karachi, Lahore, Islamabad, Sukkur and Quetta to celebrate International Women’s Day.<sup>18</sup>
- **March 09, 2020:** Nine people who returned to Karachi from abroad were tested coronavirus positive and pushed the total count to 13 cases in Sindh and 16 in Pakistan overall.<sup>19</sup>
- **March 09, 2020:** The US\$ climbed to PKR 3.65 in the interbank after six months. Exchange Companies of Pakistan former general secretary, Zafar Paracha, said, “for the past few days, foreigners have been unloading their positions in the stock market [\$16.7 million last week] and repatriating back the dollars, which has put pressure on the interbank rate.”<sup>20</sup>
- **March 10, 2020:** Approximately 70,000 to 80,000 members of Tablighi Jamaat attended the religious congregation held at Raiwind Markaz, Punjab. This included people from 40 different countries.<sup>21</sup>
- **March 11, 2020:** Dr. Syed Tauqir Hussain Shah was removed from his position as the additional secretary in-charge, though he had been appointed to this position only a week earlier.<sup>22</sup>
- **March 13, 2020:** The Federal Minister of Education, Shafqat Mahmood, announced the closure of private and public educational institutions in the country until April 05, 2020, although everything else in the country was open.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> <https://www.dawn.com/news/1540230>, DAWN e-newspaper, Ikram Junaidi, March 12, 2020

<sup>17</sup> <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2170286/1-1800-pilgrims-screened-taftan-border-cm/>, *The Express Tribune*, Mohammad Zafar, March 06, 2020

<sup>18</sup> <https://twitter.com/umar8528/status/1247490333933535232>, Twitter account of Umar, 109 retweets, 227 likes

<sup>19</sup> <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2172615/1-5th-coronavirus-case-emerges-karachi-tally-soars-8-pakistan/>, *The Express Tribune*, Sameer Mandhro, March 09, 2020

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.dawn.com/news/1539719>, *Dawn* e-newspaper, Mutaher Khan, March 10, 2020

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.dawn.com/news/1547354>, *Dawn* e-newspaper, Asif Chaudhry, April 08, 2020

<sup>22</sup> <https://www.dawn.com/news/1540230>, *Dawn* e-newspaper, Ikram Junaidi, March 12, 2020

<sup>23</sup> [https://twitter.com/Shafqat\\_Mahmood/status/1238464735538003968](https://twitter.com/Shafqat_Mahmood/status/1238464735538003968), Twitter account of Shafqat Mahmood, March 13, 2020, 2.2k retweets, 8.4k likes



- **March 14, 2020:** The Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) announced the suspension of flights from different airports across the country from March 16, 2020, to March 31, 2020, amid rising COVID-19 cases.<sup>24</sup>
- **March 15, 2020:** Section 144<sup>25</sup> was imposed across the country for a month discouraging congregations (including Tablighis), processions, and public and religious gatherings.<sup>26</sup>
- **March 16, 2020:** Senator Murtaza Wahab informed that the total number of COVID-19 cases in Sindh reached 146. One hundred and nineteen of 146 cases were Zaireen (Pakistani Shia pilgrims who had been visiting Iran) who were kept in Sukkur, Karachi, and Hyderabad.<sup>27</sup>
- **March 17, 2020:** Pakistan Super League (PSL) matches were postponed after a foreign player in the team was tested COVID-19 positive.<sup>28</sup>
- **March 17, 2020:** PM Imran Khan addressed the nation and advised the masses to seek strength from their faith while equating the fight against corona with *jihad* (holy struggle). He said, “You do not need to panic. It is our belief that life and death are in the hands of Allah. We as a nation need to win this war against coronavirus.” In his address, he ruled out the possibility of locking down cities to fight the pandemic.<sup>29</sup>
- **March 17, 2020:** The Pakistan Ulema Council (PUC) issued a *fatwa* to postpone all political and religious congregations "immediately" due to coronavirus. The Council announced that it would discontinue Urdu sermons and shorten Arabic sermons during Friday congregations. It also advised to keep a safe distance between rows of worshippers and to offer prayers on floors washed with soap and water instead of prayer mats. The elderly and the sick were advised to pray at home.<sup>30</sup>
- **March 20, 2020:** PM Imran Khan gave instructions to open the Chaman-Spinboldak border and let trucks cross into Afghanistan.<sup>31</sup>
- **March 20, 2020:** Following the letter written by the President of Iran, Hassan Rouhani, requesting Pakistan to play a role in the lifting of American sanctions on

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<sup>24</sup> <https://www.pakistantoday.com.pk/2020/03/14/coronavirus-cao-suspends-flight-operations-several-airports/>, *Pakistan Today*, Staff Report, March 14, 2020

<sup>25</sup> “According to Section 144, five or more people are barred from gathering at one point hence sports, festivals, religious congregations, ceremonies and other gatherings are banned”.

<sup>26</sup> <https://dailytimes.com.pk/576713/coronavirus-section-144-imposed-in-pakistan-for-one-month/>, *Daily Times*, Web Desk, March 15, 2020

<sup>27</sup> <https://twitter.com/murtazawahab1/status/1239590690864103427>, Twitter account of Senator Murtaza Wahab, March 16, 2020, 695 retweets, 2.1k likes

<sup>28</sup> <https://www.thenews.com.pk/latest/630522-psl-2020-postponed-due-to-coronavirus>, *The News*, Web Desk, March 17, 2020

<sup>29</sup> <https://nation.com.pk/18-Mar-2020/no-need-to-panic-says-prime-minister>, *The Nation* e-newspaper, Maqbool Malik, March 18, 2020

<sup>30</sup> <https://www.dawn.com/news/1541658/pakistan-ulema-council-issues-fatwa-to-postpone-political-religious-gatherings-immediately>, *Dawn* e-newspaper, Javed Hussain, March 17, 2020

<sup>31</sup> <https://twitter.com/ImranKhanPTI/status/1240853149033906177>, official Twitter account of Imran Khan, March 20, 2020, 5.8k retweets, 32k likes

Iran amid COVID-19, PM Imran Khan urged the international community to lift sanctions against Iran on humanitarian grounds.<sup>32</sup>

- **March 20, 2020:** The Government of Pakistan asked the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to consider giving “a low-cost, fast-disbursing loan under the fund’s Rapid Financing Instrument (RFI) to deal with the adverse economic impact of COVID-19”.<sup>33</sup>
- **March 22, 2020:** Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi urged his German counterpart Heiko Maas to provide relief on loan payments to countries like Pakistan which are under external debt so they can focus their efforts on overcoming the pandemic.<sup>34</sup>
- **March 22, 2020:** Gilgit-Baltistan imposed a two-week lockdown with exemptions for groceries and pharmacies.<sup>35</sup>
- **March 23, 2020 (Pakistan Day):** People showed their commitment to continuing their fight against coronavirus.<sup>36</sup>
- **March 23, 2020:** The Sindh government issued a directive to lock down and close everything except essential services.<sup>37</sup>
- **From March 23, 2020:** The Prime Minister of Azad Kashmir (AJK), Raja Farooq Haider, announced a three-week lockdown in AJK.<sup>38</sup>
- **March 24, 2020:** The Punjab government announced partial lockdown in the province with exemptions for grocery stores and pharmacies.<sup>39</sup>
- **March 24, 2020:** The Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) government announced partial closure from March 22, 2020, to March 24, 2020, with an exception for pharmacies, groceries, petrol stations and auto workshops.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> <https://nation.com.pk/20-Mar-2020/pakistan-calls-for-lifting-of-sanctions-on-iran>, *The Nation*, Anadolu, March 20, 2020

<sup>33</sup> <https://www.thenews.com.pk/latest/641344-imf-to-provide-pakistan-14-billion-to-stabilise-economy-amid-coronavirus-crisis>, *The News*, Web Desk, April 9, 2020

<sup>34</sup> <https://m.facebook.com/dawndotcom/posts/10163358824955442>, Facebook page Dawn.com, March 22, 2020, 349 reactions, 24 shares

<sup>35</sup> <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2181718/1-g-b-declares-home-lockdown-monday-midnight-regions-covid-19-tally-tops-70/>, *The Express Tribune*, Shabbir Mir, March 22, 2020

<sup>36</sup> <https://twitter.com/TheRealPCB/status/1241976371703939072>, Twitter account of Pakistan Cricket, March 23, 2020, 165 retweets, 1.5k likes

<sup>37</sup> <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/633180-sindh-under-lockdown-for-next-15-days>, *The News*, Azeem Samar, March 23, 2020

<sup>38</sup> <https://www.thenews.com.pk/latest/633406-coronavirus-three-week-lockdown-imposed-in-azad-kashmir>, *The News*, Web Desk, March 23, 2020

<sup>39</sup> <https://nation.com.pk/24-Mar-2020/partial-lockdown-in-punjab>, *The Nation*, March 24, 2020

<sup>40</sup> <https://nation.com.pk/24-Mar-2020/kp-reports-7-new-corona-cases-as-public-holidays-announced-till-28th>, *The Nation*, March 24, 2020



- **March 24, 2020:** Baluchistan deployed the army and imposed lockdown with exceptions for medical stores and basic groceries from March 24, 2020, to April 07, 2020.<sup>41</sup>
- **March 24, 2020:** The government of Pakistan granted permission to Fly Dubai and Qatar Airways to operate special flights to bring back stranded passengers at Abu Dhabi and Dubai airports to Islamabad Airport.<sup>42</sup>
- **March 24, 2020:** People in diverse parts of Pakistan heard the *azaan* (call to prayers) at an unusual time after 10:00 pm. People used hashtag '#Azaan' to share this experience.<sup>43</sup>
- **March 26, 2020:** Federal Minister for Science and Technology, Fawad Chaudhry, attributed the reason that COVID-19 had spread in the country to the ignorance of the conservative religious class that considers coronavirus as a punishment from God.<sup>44</sup>
- **March 26, 2020:** The Governments of Sindh and Baluchistan announced that people will not be allowed to offer congregational prayers on Friday. “The decision came only hours after the federal government said that mosques would remain open and congregational prayers would be offered in limited numbers”.<sup>45</sup>
- **March 27, 2020:** Gilgit-Baltistan received large amounts of medical supplies donated by China to cope with the coronavirus crisis in the region. The donation included “two tons of masks, test kits, ventilators, medical protective clothes worth 67 million rupees”.<sup>46</sup>
- **March 28, 2020:** “A special aircraft from China brought relief assistance to Pakistan including 12,000 test kits, 300,000 masks, and 10,000 protective suits. In addition to this, eight members of a medical expert team also arrived in Pakistan from China. Moreover, the Chinese government also provided \$4 million of support for a separate hospital for Coronavirus patients.”<sup>47</sup>
- **March 28, 2020:** Since COVID-19 was first reported in Pakistan, cases in Punjab rose to 448 which surpassed Sindh which had 425 cases.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> <https://nation.com.pk/24-Mar-2020/balochistan-govt-to-impose-lockdown-from-today>, *The Nation*, Web Desk, March 24, 2020

<sup>42</sup> <https://www.dawn.com/news/1543289>, *Dawn* e-newspaper, Mohammad Asghar, March 24, 2020

<sup>43</sup> <https://twitter.com/ImJaveria/status/1242519177396662277>, Twitter account of Javeria Ali, March 24, 2020, 124 retweets, 2k likes

<sup>44</sup> <https://twitter.com/fawadchaudhry/status/1243067407968677889>, March 26, 2020, 2.7K retweets, 17.5k likes

<sup>45</sup> <https://www.dawn.com/news/1543890>, *Dawn* e-newspaper, Javed Hussain and Amir Wasim, March 26, 2020

<sup>46</sup> <https://twitter.com/CathayPak/status/1243474608784904192>, Twitter account of the Chinese Embassy in Pakistan, March 27, 2020, 756 retweets, 3.2k likes

<sup>47</sup> <https://nation.com.pk/03-Apr-2020/pakistan-appreciates-china-s-support-to-cope-with-coronavirus>, Shafqat Ali, April 03, 2020

<sup>48</sup> <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2185974/1/>, *The Express Tribune*, March 28, 2020

- **March 28, 2020:** The Prime Minister of Pakistan, Imran Khan, wished HRH Prince Charles and UK Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, a speedy recovery and good health. He emphasised the need for an internationally coordinated response to counter COVID-19.<sup>49</sup>
- **March 29, 2020:** Sindh Chief Minister, Murad Ali Shah, approved a suggestion to release 4,000 convicts from prisons in Sindh for three months to prevent the spread of coronavirus. This verdict did not apply to prisoners convicted of drug and terrorism charges.<sup>50</sup>
- **March 31, 2020:** The Prime Minister of Pakistan, Imran Khan, invited the overseas Pakistani community to participate in the Corona Relief Fund and to help Pakistan come out of the crisis.<sup>51</sup>
- **March 31, 2020:** The UN Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) marked “Pakistan among the countries which would be the hardest-hit by the global pandemic of coronavirus” and demanded that prompt relief measures be taken.
- **March 31, 2020:** The federal cabinet approved a PKR1.2-trillion Corona Relief Package. The Economic Coordination Committee (ECC) also approved a special relief package of cash aid for 12 million poor families under the ‘Ehsaas Programme’.<sup>52</sup>
- **March 31, 2020:** The Prime Minister’s Office announced the establishment of the ‘Corona Relief Tiger Force’ comprising youth who would join the Government’s and the army’s efforts to provide aid, food, and awareness to the masses.<sup>53</sup>

#### iv) April 2020

- **April 01, 2020:** The Minister for Planning and Development, Asad Umar, announced that lockdown conditions in the country would continue for two more weeks until April 14, 2020.<sup>54</sup>
- **April 02, 2020:** Prime Minister Imran Khan condemned the new domicile law introduced by the Indian government in occupied Kashmir which allows an Indian citizen who has resided in occupied Jammu and Kashmir for 15 years to call the territory his or her place of domicile.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> <https://twitter.com/ImranKhanPTI/status/1243924181932216321>, Twitter account of Imran Khan, March 28, 2020, 7.4k likes , 41.3k likes

<sup>50</sup> <https://www.dawn.com/news/1544810>, Dawn e-newspaper, Imtiaz Ali, March 30, 2020

<sup>51</sup> <https://twitter.com/PakPMO/status/1244715590880821249>, official Twitter account of the Prime Minister’s Office, Pakistan, March 31, 2020, 183 retweets, 582 likes

<sup>52</sup> <https://www.geo.tv/latest/280078-federal-cabinet-meets-to-approve-coronavirus-relief-package>

<sup>53</sup> <https://twitter.com/PakPMO/status/1244714908719202307>, official Twitter account of the Prime Minister’s Office, Pakistan, March 31, 2020, 166 comments, 499 retweets, 1.8k likes

<sup>54</sup> <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/638213-govt-extends-lockdown-to-april-14-to-fight-coronavirus>, The News, April 02, 2020

<sup>55</sup>

<https://www.facebook.com/dawndotcom/photos/a.250924510441/10163436300320442/?type=3&theater> 3.2K likes, 850 comments, 261 shares

- **April 05, 2020:** A case was registered against the Lal Masjid (Red Mosque) cleric Maulana Abdul Aziz and seven others for “provoking people against the state, playing *jihadi* anthems and organising congregational prayer despite the ban”. This was done when congregational Friday prayers were banned by the district government.<sup>56</sup>
- **April 06, 2020:** Nine people were killed in occupied Kashmir as authorities enforced a lockdown to fight the spread of the coronavirus.<sup>57</sup> Jammu-Kashmir had already been under curfew after India revoked its special status as a semi-autonomous state on August 05, 2019.
- **April 06, 2020:** Chief Justice of Pakistan, Gulzar Ahmed, expressed discontent over the federal government’s failure to overcome the pandemic.<sup>58</sup>
- **April 06, 2020:** Baluchistan Police arrested more than 12 young doctors in Quetta for protesting over the unavailability of PPE in provincial hospitals during the spread of COVID-19.<sup>59</sup>
- **April 06-09, 2020:** The border crossing points at Chaman and Torkham were re-opened at the special request of the Afghan government. This permission was granted only for Afghan citizens, not for Pakistani citizens.<sup>60</sup>
- **April 09, 2020:** The Government of Pakistan “pledged US\$ 3 million” towards the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) COVID-19 Emergency Fund for regional support against coronavirus.<sup>61</sup>
- **April 09, 2020:** The News reported that the IMF planned to provide a US\$1.4 billion loan to Pakistan by the following week. Additionally, “the World Bank (WB) has approved a \$1 billion loan and the Asian Development Bank has approved \$1.5 billion in aid for Pakistan”.<sup>62</sup>
- **April 13, 2020:** Over 53 senior clerics of the Wafaqul Madaris al-Arabia of Rawalpindi and Islamabad, warned the government not to extend the restrictions imposed on mosque congregations to control the coronavirus. This warning was issued before the government’s plan to control the pandemic in the month of Ramadan.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2191133/1-lal-masjid-cleric-booked-defying-friday-congregation-ban/>, *The Express Tribune*, April 05, 2020

<sup>57</sup> <https://www.dawn.com/news/1546805/nine-killed-by-indian-forces-in-held-kashmir>, *Dawn* e-newspaper, source: agencies, April 06, 2020

<sup>58</sup> <https://www.instagram.com/p/B-omAzLBcSn/>, *Jangdotcom*, April 6, 2020, 280 likes

<sup>59</sup> <https://www.dawn.com/news/1546921>, *Dawn*, Ghalib Nihad and Syed Ali Shah, April 06, 2020

<sup>60</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/etribune/photos/a.280780001939033/3695408657142800/?type=3&theater>, *The Express Tribune* Facebook page, April 06, 2020, 43 reactions, 5 comments, 1 share

<sup>61</sup> <https://twitter.com/ForeignOfficePk/status/1248290212893122563>, official Twitter account of the spokesperson of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Pakistan, April 09, 2020, 152 retweets, 406 likes)

<sup>62</sup> <https://www.thenews.com.pk/latest/641344-imf-to-provide-pakistan-14-billion-to-stabilise-economy-amid-coronavirus-crisis>, *The News* website, Web Desk, April 9, 2020

<sup>63</sup> <https://www.dawn.com/news/1548934/more-than-50-clerics-warn-govt-not-to-further-restrictions-on-prayer-congregations>, *Dawn* e-newspaper, Kalbe Ali, March 14, 2020

- **April 14, 2020:** Prime Minister Imran Khan announced an extension of lockdown in the country for another two weeks with exceptions for certain industries like construction.<sup>64</sup>
- **April 15, 2020:** Of a total of 2,945 COVID-19 cases confirmed in Punjab, 1,055 were members of Tablighi Jamaat.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> <https://www.thenews.com.pk/latest/644354-pm-imran-extends-pakistan-lockdown-by-two-weeks>, *The News*, Web Desk, April 14, 2020

<sup>65</sup> <https://twitter.com/UsmanAKBuzdar/status/1250142149934489602>, Twitter account of Usman Buzdar, April 15, 2020, 471 retweets, 2.1k likes

## Timeline of COVID-19 in Syria

### i) December 2019

- Very few comments and updates about the situation in China.

### ii) January 2020

- **January 25, 2020:** Towards the end of January an increasing number of Syrians expressed their concerns about the possibility of the virus reaching Syria. The official authorities still looked at it as an external threat. The ministry of health announces on its Facebook page that it is “applying strict health measures to prevent the virus by monitoring all border crossings”.<sup>66</sup> **January 25 and 26, 2020:** Rumours circulated about cases in Syria including areas controlled by the opposition. Many Arabic and Syrian news websites, as well as social media pages circulated news about the virus reaching Syria.
- **January 26, 2020:** Both the regime and the opposition denied the presence of COVID-19. According to the Nedaa Syria website,<sup>67</sup> the Minister of Health, Nizar Yazjee, confirmed on the ministry’s Facebook page that “no cases of the virus have been recorded in Syria so far”. He also assured that the ministry was “taking all necessary measures to prevent the virus from spreading in Syria... through monitoring all of the border crossings and the airport and checking the suspected cases especially those who are coming from the badly affected countries”.<sup>68</sup> The Enab Baladi website (opposition) quoted medical sources in the hospital that the two girls died after suffering from rapid respiratory failure, which was not due to coronavirus, according to Dr Muhammad al-Saleh, the Coordinator of the Early Warning and Response Network for outbreaks in northern Syria.<sup>69</sup>

### iii) February 2020

- **February 06, 2020:** The government announces a national plan to prevent the virus from entering Syria. This includes general medical preparation.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>66</sup>

[https://www.facebook.com/MinistryOfHealthSYR/posts/490523468271641?\\_xts\\_\\_\[0\]=68.ARCvzjYlZeRqTtCqUEvW5WC6wdYbv88SaD33Eog0QeodxmtHC0rq13fITOu-9Pt4gAXasl-90y0L1VJhJ5DTNyTiuyaDXEfrdUD9TPBYA3ub92EMDmly5tTjMOLmAOwoS\\_8ak\\_93UjTmAmUiL1\\_bAwT99FRskm0f2qBF8byCBzslMxngKZmrN7RyyjblLkaPm4cC-9X-Eja1V9sRC6RhU7WSxlluSY-HLpSn1XS0WpbxYRbdjUQZlp2cay7BtavUBihIcPKo-KGmEteo8Uqo-xxXwM9dHk1xjwpAjvx7pLNOx9WWI6I4GAmuwDOZTQN8m7YjUaEAqzNINmuCc0&\\_tn=-R](https://www.facebook.com/MinistryOfHealthSYR/posts/490523468271641?_xts__[0]=68.ARCvzjYlZeRqTtCqUEvW5WC6wdYbv88SaD33Eog0QeodxmtHC0rq13fITOu-9Pt4gAXasl-90y0L1VJhJ5DTNyTiuyaDXEfrdUD9TPBYA3ub92EMDmly5tTjMOLmAOwoS_8ak_93UjTmAmUiL1_bAwT99FRskm0f2qBF8byCBzslMxngKZmrN7RyyjblLkaPm4cC-9X-Eja1V9sRC6RhU7WSxlluSY-HLpSn1XS0WpbxYRbdjUQZlp2cay7BtavUBihIcPKo-KGmEteo8Uqo-xxXwM9dHk1xjwpAjvx7pLNOx9WWI6I4GAmuwDOZTQN8m7YjUaEAqzNINmuCc0&_tn=-R), 700 likes, 72 comments, 66 shares

<sup>67</sup> <https://nedaa-sy.com/news/18385>

<sup>68</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/MinistryOfHealthSYR/posts/490838381573483>, 256 likes, 25 comments, 23 shares

<sup>69</sup> <https://enabbaladi.net/archives/358262>

<sup>70</sup> <https://www.sana.sy/?p=1101070>

- **February 21, 2020:** As Lebanon confirms its first case,<sup>71</sup> the Syrian Ministry of Health assures Syrians that Syria is coronavirus free.<sup>72</sup>

#### iv) March 2020

- **March 01, 2020:** The Syrian government announces precautionary measures including the temporary suspension of tourists coming from affected counties.<sup>73</sup>
- **March 13, 2020:** The Syrian government decides to suspend schools and universities, and reduces working hours as part of preventative measures to limit the spread of coronavirus in the country. The Syrian Arab News Agency said “Because of the increasing threat of the coronavirus worldwide as it has become a global epidemic, the Syrian government has taken a number of preventative steps to protect citizens”.<sup>74</sup>
- **March 21, 2020:** Measures include:
  - churches suspend services and public prayers until further notice.<sup>75</sup>
  - suspension of Friday prayers in mosques.<sup>76</sup>
  - shops close except for food stores and pharmacies.<sup>77</sup>
  - dedicating sections of many hospitals to coronavirus cases (quarantine).<sup>78</sup>
- **March 22, 2020:** The first case is confirmed. Syria announces the first person “coming from abroad” who tested positive of coronavirus.<sup>79</sup> The news is shared by the Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA) on Twitter.<sup>80</sup> Commentators expressed worries that Syria will go through similar scenarios as other countries. Some argued that the infection came from Iran in reference to the close relations between the regime and Iran. Other measures included:
  - suspension of public transport inside cities and between governorates.<sup>81</sup>
  - suspension of printed newspapers.<sup>82</sup>

<sup>71</sup> <https://www.sana.sy/?p=1110385>

<sup>72</sup> <https://www.sana.sy/?p=1110492>

<sup>73</sup> <https://www.sana.sy/?p=1115689>

<sup>74</sup> <https://www.sana.sy/?p=1122977>

<sup>75</sup> <https://www.sana.sy/?p=1126544>

<sup>76</sup> <https://arabic.rt.com/videoclub/1095834-%D9%84%D8%A3%D9%88%D9%84-%D9%85%D8%B1%D8%A9-%D9%85%D9%86%D8%B0-%D9%82%D8%B1%D9%88%D9%86-%D8%A5%D8%BA%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%82-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AC%D8%A7%D9%85%D8%B9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D9%85%D9%88%D9%8A-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%AF%D9%85%D8%B4%D9%82/>

<sup>77</sup> <https://www.sana.sy/?p=1126464>; <https://www.sana.sy/?p=1126906>

<sup>78</sup> <https://www.sana.sy/?p=1126652>

<sup>79</sup> <https://www.sana.sy/?p=1127164>

<sup>80</sup> <https://twitter.com/SanaAjel/status/1241805359599190019>

<sup>81</sup> <https://www.sana.sy/?p=1127063>

<sup>82</sup> <https://www.sana.sy/?p=1127191>

- Syria closes the borders with Lebanon.<sup>83</sup>
- **March 29, 2020:** The Syrian Ministry of Health announces the first death caused by COVID-19.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> [https://arabic.rt.com/middle\\_east/1096289-%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A7-%D8%AA%D8%BA%D9%84%D9%82-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AD%D8%AF%D9%88%D8%AF-%D9%85%D8%B9-%D9%84%D8%A8%D9%86%D8%A7%D9%86/](https://arabic.rt.com/middle_east/1096289-%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A7-%D8%AA%D8%BA%D9%84%D9%82-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AD%D8%AF%D9%88%D8%AF-%D9%85%D8%B9-%D9%84%D8%A8%D9%86%D8%A7%D9%86/)

<sup>84</sup> <https://arabic.cnn.com/health/article/2020/03/29/first-coronaavirus-death-syria>

## Timeline of COVID-19 in Iran

### i) January 2020

- **January 30, 2020:** Iran quarantines two Chinese women in Iran suspected of carrying coronavirus (later released).<sup>85</sup>
- **January 31, 2020:** Iran's Health Minister urges banning the entry of travellers from China.<sup>86</sup> The World Health Organisation declares coronavirus emergency situation.

### ii) February 2020

- **February 02, 2020:** Increasing criticism of the failure to stop flights from China to Iran.<sup>87</sup>
- **February 11, 2020:** The Anniversary of the Islamic Revolution of Iran
- **February 12, 2020:** Iran's Health Minister says there are no positive cases of COVID-19 up to now.<sup>88</sup>
- **February 19, 2020:** Two deaths from COVID-19 in Qom.<sup>89</sup>
- **February 20, 2020:** Closing of schools and universities in Qom.<sup>90</sup> Ongoing flights from China to Iran.<sup>91</sup>
- **February 21, 2020:** Iranian legislative election.
- **February 22, 2020:** Closure of schools, universities, theatres and cinemas in Iran.
- **February 23, 2020:** Neighbouring countries close their borders with Iran.<sup>92</sup> Iran's Leader says enemies tried to use coronavirus to affect votes.<sup>93</sup>
- **February 24, 2020:** Iran's Deputy Health Minister: "I am not supporting quarantining Qom. It is a pre-World War I method".<sup>94</sup>
- **February 25, 2020:** The Governor of Qom: "We have no plans to quarantine Qom or to close holy shrines and mosques in Qom".<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> [Irna](#)

<sup>86</sup> [Reuters](#)

<sup>87</sup> [Radiofarda](#)

<sup>88</sup> [Tasnimnews](#)

<sup>89</sup> [Aljazeera](#)

<sup>90</sup> [Asriran](#)

<sup>91</sup> [Eghtedasonline](#)

<sup>92</sup> [Radiofarda](#)

<sup>93</sup> [Reuters](#)

<sup>94</sup> [BBCPersian](#)

<sup>95</sup> [Tasnimnews](#)



- **February 26, 2020:** President Rouhani: “Coronavirus situation to return to normal. Fomenting fear about coronavirus is a plot by the enemies who are attempting to halt the Islamic Republic’s activities”.<sup>96</sup> The Chinese Ambassador to Iran states that China has sent humanitarian aid (test kits) to Iran.<sup>97</sup> Arrest of 24 people for generating rumours about COVID-19 in Iran.<sup>98</sup>
- **February 27, 2020:** Ban on the entry of Chinese citizens to Iran.<sup>99</sup> Cancellation of Friday prayers in Tehran and other cities in Iran.<sup>100</sup>
- **February 28, 2020:** Closure of the Iranian Parliament.<sup>101</sup>

### iii) March 2020

- **March 03, 2020:** Iran temporarily frees 54,000 prisoners to combat the spread of coronavirus.<sup>102</sup>
- **March 13, 2020:** Khamenei calls coronavirus a “possible biological attack” and asks guards to contain it.<sup>103</sup>
- **March 14, 2020:** The President of Iran states that U.S. sanctions “severely hamper” Iran’s fight against COVID-19.<sup>104</sup>
- **March 16, 2020:** Closing of Iran’s holiest sites to visitors.<sup>105</sup> Protests and breaking of the gate of the holy shrine of Masoumeh in Qom to enter in protest against its closure.<sup>106</sup>
- **March 20, 2020:** Nowrouz (the Iranian new year and the start of holidays and travels). The President of Iran writes a letter to the U.S. blaming its sanctions for coronavirus deaths in Iran.<sup>107</sup>
- **March 22, 2020:** Closure of all commercial centres in Tehran except pharmacies and supermarkets.<sup>108</sup> The Iranian leadership refuses U.S. help to fight COVID-19, citing conspiracy theory.<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> [Irannewsdaily](#)

<sup>97</sup> [Twitter](#)

<sup>98</sup> [Tasnimnews](#)

<sup>99</sup> [Irannewspaper](#)

<sup>100</sup> [Khabaronline](#)

<sup>101</sup> [Irna](#)

<sup>102</sup> [BBC](#)

<sup>103</sup> [Radiofarda](#)

<sup>104</sup> [Reuters](#)

<sup>105</sup> [Irna](#)

<sup>106</sup> [Isna](#)

<sup>107</sup> [Radiofarda](#)

<sup>108</sup> [BBCPersian](#)

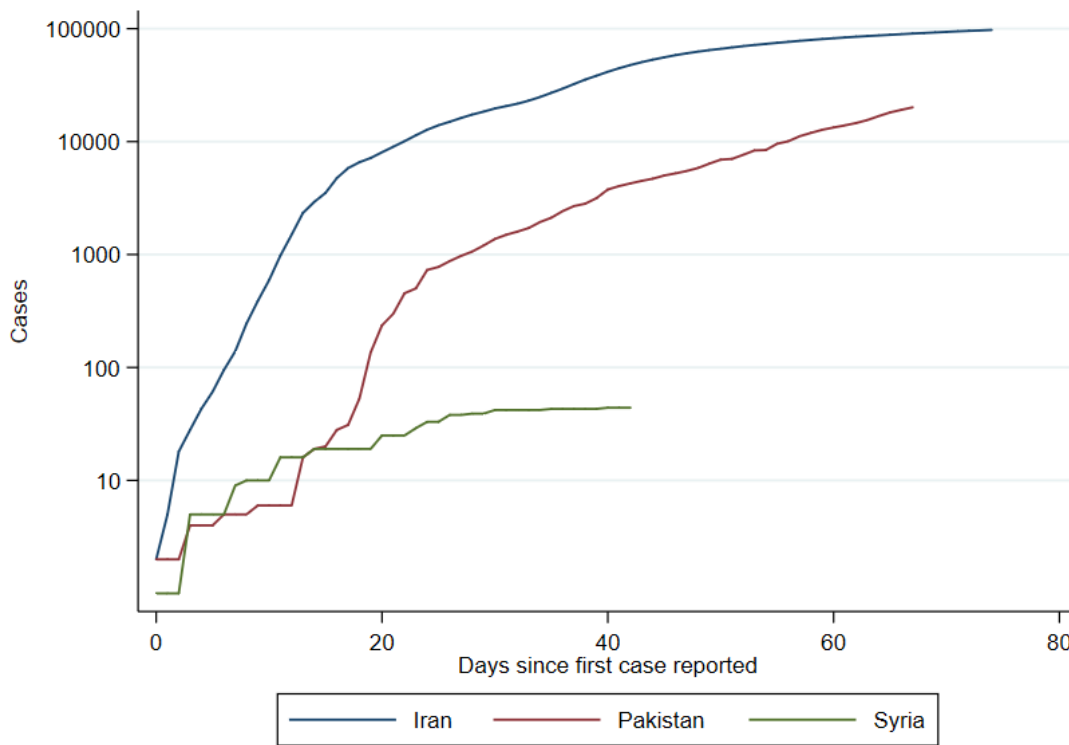
<sup>109</sup> [Time](#)

- **March 24, 2020:** Iran rejects offer of help by Doctors Without Borders (MSF) to fight coronavirus.<sup>110</sup>

iv) **April 2020**

- **April 06, 2020:** An Iranian Health Ministry official's criticism of China's coronavirus figures causes uproar.<sup>111</sup>

**Graph showing the spread of COVID-19 infection vs. time in Iran, Pakistan and Syria<sup>112</sup>**



<sup>110</sup> [Radiofarda](#)

<sup>111</sup> [RadioFreeEurop](#)

<sup>112</sup> Our thanks to Zulfiqar Bhutta (Aga Khan University, Centre of Excellence in Women and Child Health) for this graph.

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