

# Gulf States and the Management of the Covid-19 Crisis



By:  
Dr. Ashraf Keshk

## Introduction

Although the Gulf states are located in a turbulent region and have extensive experience in managing crises, the Covid-19 pandemic that swept the world in just a few weeks represented a more challenging situation to the Gulf countries than any other crisis in the past. This is for three reasons. First: They are neighbors to Iran, the main source of the spread of the virus to all the Gulf states. Second: The Gulf states are home to a large number of expatriates, more than 13 million workers from all countries of the world, and airports in the region see heavy daily air traffic and the movement of millions of travelers around the clock. Third: As with other countries, the GCC states were taken by surprise by the rapid spread of the pandemic. The crisis has particularly affected the health sector - the response to the crisis required the teaming up and concerted efforts of all state agencies, but the greatest burden was shouldered by the medical sector.

Despite the aforementioned, if we compare the numbers of positive cases and the number of recoveries in the GCC to other countries, we find that the rate of the spread of the virus is still low. This means that the Gulf countries have been able to deal with the crisis in a professional and comprehensive manner. There are a number of approaches to managing a crisis. One approach is complacency with a tendency to deny the existence of a crisis or belittle its effects. Then there is a more serious approach that calls for the setting up of teams of professionals to manage the crisis and using strategic planning as the cornerstone for their work. This is the approach adopted by the Gulf states as will be discussed in greater detail in the following report.

## First: Early Precautionary Measures Taken by GCC States

Crises and disasters cannot, for the most part, be prevented. If they are to happen, they will happen. What distinguishes one country from another is the response speed, not to prevent the crisis or disaster, but rather to reduce its destructive effects. Crises in general have three characteristics: **(1) they are sudden in nature, (2) there is scarcity or inconsistency of information and (3) time constraints.** **In responding to a crisis,** a decision maker is faced with two options: either to immediately deal with the crisis and make critical decisions to reduce its effects, or take time to make decisions, risking the crisis progressively developing into a worse scenario and becoming a "disaster". The Coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic exhibited the three characteristics of a crisis. No country in the world had enough information about the nature of the Covid-19, despite the important role that world intelligence services play in this regard. Unlike this crisis, at the end of the year 2002, which saw the emergence of the SARS virus in China and its spread to several other countries killing 800 people, the German Foreign Intelligence Service submitted a report to the German government on the nature of the virus even before China had officially announced it.

The Gulf states took a number of precautionary measures such as the closing of educational institutions and many government departments. These were highly efficient and timely measures and included the following:

1. The early evacuation of the majority of Gulf nationals from China and other Asian countries and confining them to quarantine on arrival or home isolation for fourteen days to ensure that they were free from the virus. The implementation of this measure was strict, and violators of quarantine instructions were severely punished. In contrast, a number of countries were content with medical examination at the airport and those coming from abroad were not quarantined or placed under self-isolation. Gulf states decontaminated airports around the clock and deployed medical teams to check passengers arriving from abroad using advanced devices, such as thermal cameras. GCC states also stopped the issuance of new work permits and upon-arrival visas, and called on their citizens not to travel to Iran, Thailand, Singapore, Malaysia or South Korea, which had all earlier contracted the infectious virus from China. The GCC also made it mandatory for all people coming

from countries infected with the virus had to undergo a test to prove that they did not have the virus.

2. Cultural, educational and recreational activities were suspended at an early stage. International travel was then once the virus had been declared pandemic, after spreading to around 134 countries. Certain countries did not take such measures until the second half of March, long after the spread of the virus has worsened worldwide.
3. GCC states were prompt in their early collective response to the crisis. On 18 February 2020, the health ministers of the Gulf states convened an extraordinary meeting at the headquarters of the GCC General Secretariat in Riyadh. It was then agreed to implement the International Health Regulations (2005) approved by the World Health Organization (WHO) and the Unified Health Procedures' Guide that were approved by the GCC in 2018 for implementation at all border crossings of the member states. The health ministers also mandated the concerned committees to follow up the developments and updates on the Coronavirus and facilitate the exchange of information among the members states. On the other hand, there was no European collective mechanism in place at this time, for example, to respond to the virus. Europe viewed the outbreak of the virus as a health issue concerning each country individually and not as part of the functions of the Union as a regional bloc. As for NATO, it did not take any measures until 2 April 2020 when NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg announced during a video conference with NATO foreign ministers that, "the military command was directed to coordinate on any surplus capacity or stocks to assist the most affected countries". At the international level, international efforts did not surface until 3 April 2020, when the United Nations General Assembly adopted a resolution calling for international solidarity to combat the spread of the Coronavirus, urging all countries to exchange information and scientific knowledge among themselves and stressing the importance of international cooperation in combatting the pandemic.

## Second: Security Measures

As with other countries of the world, the Gulf states have taken several security measures to contain the spread of the Coronavirus, including:

1. The Ministries of the Interior in GCC states issued instructions with respect to gatherings and the imposition of partial curfew/lockdown during specified hours. These instructions were detailed and very clear in terms of what was required of citizens and.
2. The implementation of the curfew/lockdown measures was gradual and according to developments on the ground and the spread of the virus. For example, in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, a curfew was imposed at the beginning from evening to morning, and the hours of lockdown were then extended as and when necessary. All-day lockdown was imposed in certain cities and regions, and others were isolated where required.
3. Although the authorities in GCC countries announced that those who violated the lockdown instructions would be punished by a fine or imprisonment, there were not many incidents of lockdown violation in the same way that happened in other countries. In Iraq, for example, it was reported that 20,000 persons were arrested for lockdown violation since it came into effect in March 2020. The adherence of Gulf citizens to the lockdown instructions can be attributed to a number of reasons. These include the collaborative nature of the Gulf regimes and societies, the high level of education and awareness of Gulf citizens and their strong belief in the idea of joint responsibility and solidarity during crises. For these reasons, the security authorities in the Gulf states did not have to resort to any violent measures, as happened in other countries. In the Philippines, for example, President Rodrigo Duterte not only arrested those who violated the lockdown, but also said that he had instructed the police and the army to shoot violators of the lockdown. Security forces in other countries were also seen using disproportionate force and violence against violators of lockdowns. The GCC states issued very clear instructions and detailed descriptions of penalties. The public prosecutor in the UAE issued orders detailing penalties for fifteen types of lockdown violations, such as not wearing face masks in closed places, specifically by those who have chronic diseases or symptoms of common cold and influenza, or not observing social distancing.

4. Plans were put in place to deal with violators of the rules of residence permits. In Kuwait, a joint committee comprising three ministries, including the Ministry of Interior, and ten charity organizations decided to allocate two schools in each governorate to accommodate expatriates who violated the lockdown, and they were provided with beds and meals. If the number of violators of any nationality reached 200, they were to be expelled from the country.
5. The authorities in the GCC expressed their willingness to facilitate the return of foreign workers to their countries, if they wished. Some Gulf countries have even announced that they would bear the cost of returning home.

There are two things that can be noted about the security measures taken by the Gulf states. **First:** The Kingdom of Bahrain and the Sultanate of Oman did not impose a lockdown, but instead took other strict measures to contain the spread of the Coronavirus. For example, the Kingdom of Bahrain decided to close shops and stores from 26 March to 9 April 2020. **Second:** Security forces in the Gulf countries had to shoulder additional burdens, not only because of the nature of the Coronavirus, but also because of the presence in their countries of large numbers of expatriate workers from different nationalities and cultures. Some of these workers expressed their desire to return to their countries, which again required additional security efforts.

### **Third: The Role of the Gulf Media in Responding to the Corona Virus Crisis**

The work of the media becomes very difficult during crises, and was even more difficult during the Corona crisis due to several reasons. These include the challenge of achieving a balance between maintaining accurate and objective reporting and the desire of being the first to splash the news. People around the world turn to the media in search of breaking news and updates which places more responsibility on the media, not forgetting that the traditional media is also facing fierce competition from the social media. Furthermore, the media has a duty to refute rumors that were fueling fear, unease and tension in many societies. Professional reporting on a serious issue like the Coronavirus requires seeking the expert opinions of professionals in many fields. It is true that doctors had the largest share of the media coverage, but talking about the crisis from all angles requires the views of experts in crisis management, as well as in the economic, military, security, social, psychological and

other fields. So, how did the Gulf media deal with these challenges during the Corona crisis? The role of the Gulf media can be explained in terms of the following:

1. The ability of the print, audio and visual media to work professionally throughout maintaining objectivity without underestimation or exaggeration. This strengthened the role of the Gulf media in exposing the rumors and misinformation on the social media such as "Twitter", "Instagram", "Snapchat", "YouTube" and "Facebook".
2. During crises, wide divisions are always seen in the stance of the supporters and opponents of government actions, but this was not the case during the Corona crisis. The media was the mirror that reflected the efforts of the state. Citizens did not require detailed analysis and interpretations but needed accurate and reliable information about the measures taken by the state to control the spread of the virus. For this reason, people in the Gulf sought to obtain the latest news from the Gulf's official news agencies, which had access to the official sources of the news. Because of the reliability of the news published by the official news agencies, they have become the main source of information for the social media in the Gulf states. This helped reduce the spread of rumors that very often quoted unrealistic numbers of Corona virus cases, or gave inaccurate information about the nature of the virus itself and the methods of infection. With millions of people staying at home, the role of traditional media, especially television, has once again gained importance. On-line editions of newspapers have also become more popular and some renowned newspapers even stopped printing paper editions. The mistrust in the social media is not prevalent in the Gulf states only but also in many other countries. A recent opinion poll revealed that half of the American people still have less confidence in social media.
3. In some Gulf countries that still publish printed newspapers, it is noted that government efforts to contain the Corona virus are splashed as headlines on the front page. This sends messages of reassurance to citizens and residents about fighting the pandemic, especially when they see senior officials leading the efforts by chairing meetings relating to fighting the virus and following up on developments and progress.

4. Having a dedicated official spokesperson was often stressed during crises. In all Gulf states, however, it was noted that multiple officials in differing capacities have played this role, starting with the rulers who gave brief speeches to give reassurance to citizens and residents, through Ministry of Health officials who held daily press conferences to give briefings on the latest developments, to the crises management teams (and first responders) who issued regular statements and updates. The media covered all these activities in a transparent manner to give reassurance messages to the public about the ability of the Gulf countries to deal with this crisis, especially in light of the tragic scenes seen in countries that are supposed to have well-developed health systems. In fact, it has been observed that the media in some Gulf countries broadcast or published messages in different languages to reach out to foreign nationals living in the country, such as the initiative launched by the United Arab Emirates under the theme “Emirati Voices in International Languages”, a TV Covid-19 awareness campaign in different languages.
5. Certain countries imposed restrictions on the media during the crisis, including Iran, China, Turkey, Hungary, Belarus, and India. In India, the government sought to be able to scrutinize all news about the Corona virus before publication. The Supreme Court rejected this measure and the Prime Minister Narendra Modi then asked journalists to “tackle the spread of pessimism, negativity and rumors”. In the GCC, no restrictions were imposed on the media in its coverage of this crisis and newspapers and TV channels were able to play their role in a free and responsible manner.

#### **Fourth: The Role of Voluntary Work in the Management of the Corona Crisis**

No one can underestimate the importance of the crucial role of the official state agencies in responding to and managing crises, especially if the state has appropriate mechanisms in place and possesses the resources and tools needed to respond to the crisis. However, the role of civic society and voluntary efforts remain equally important, especially if the crisis is wide-spread and acute. The Gulf countries witnessed significant voluntary efforts during the Corona crisis which helped to contain the spread of the pandemic in comparison to what happened in other countries.



In the **Kingdom of Saudi Arabia**, the Ministry of Health launched an initiative to attract health volunteers and train them to be ready in case of need. More than 78 thousand male and female volunteers registered under the initiative.

In the **Kingdom of Bahrain**, the National Taskforce for Combating the Coronavirus called for volunteers to support the kingdom's efforts to combat the spread of the virus. Volunteers were required for providing medical and administrative services and logistical support. Sources indicated that about 12,700 Bahraini men and women registered to volunteer.

The **United Arab Emirates** launched the "Your City Needs You" initiative calling on volunteers to help in their areas of expertise such as health services and community services, especially giving care to the elderly and helping the community to cope with the spread of the virus. The UAE Ministry of Health trained about 535 volunteers to support the medical staff as part of the effort to combat the Corona virus.

In the **Sultanate of Oman**, the National Youth Commission issued a call-to-action to young volunteers to participate in Relief and Shelter Sector efforts.

In the **State of Kuwait**, the Ministry of Interior opened the door for citizens to volunteer in the Civil Defense Department to receive training on how to deal with emergencies. The initiative received a huge response from citizens and some 25,000 Kuwaitis registered to volunteer.

**It is not possible to discuss in this brief report all the volunteering efforts to help in this crisis which is still ongoing at the time of writing this report, but the question is: How important was the voluntary work in responding to the crisis?**

**The importance of voluntary work can be summarized in the following points:**

- 1- Voluntary work helped promote patriotism, national belonging and instill a sense of responsibility. For example, a number of women who volunteered to work in a hospital in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia said that the voluntary work brought to mind the spirit of solidarity seen during the second Gulf war in 1991, when voluntary efforts were needed to deal with the effects of the war. As such,

we can say that voluntary work helps promote the values of giving, solidarity and cohesion between members of the society. Volunteering during the crisis was seen as a civilized behavior and a national duty.

- 2- Sudden and severe crises, such as the Corona crisis, that threaten the life and the very existence of people have more destructive consequences than wars, hence the need for all people to work together with the government to control the spread of the virus.
- 3- Voluntary initiatives launched by the government are quite important. The success of the implementation of these initiatives, however, depends to a large extent on the voluntary work of the people in the different regions of the country. The people of each region are more knowledgeable of and more familiar with their areas and with the circumstances of individuals and families in need of help.
- 4- Controlling a severe crisis such as the Corona crisis requires the efforts not only of the medical teams, but all the segments of the society to boost voluntary efforts in all medical, security, economic and social fields etc.

## **Fifth: Use of Technology in Combatting the Corona Virus**

The Gulf states have already made important progress in implementing their e-government systems. This gave them a strategic advantage in their effort to fight the Corona virus, as follows:

### **1. Work from Home**

Because of the severity of the Corona crisis and the need to adhere to “social distancing” as one of the main strategies to combat the virus, the Gulf countries have resorted to working from home at an early stage. Some GCC countries started with 50% of employees working from home while others progressed gradually until they reached 100%, which means all employees were worked from home. The e-governments helped ensure that the work of government institutions in the Gulf is not interrupted nor the output is affected in any way. Many meetings within each Gulf country or joint meetings between officials from different Gulf states, were held via video conferencing. Furthermore,

educational institutions in the Gulf, such as public and private schools and universities resorted to e-learning, which meant that education was not badly affected by the Corona virus crisis.

## 2- Use of Technology in Combatting the Corona Virus

In the **Kingdom of Bahrain**, the “BeAware Bahrain” application was launched, which allows the concerned authorities to track active cases of house isolation. The Ministry of Health requires that all such isolation cases be registered in the application, while registration is optional for the general public. Using a geographical location system, the application tracks people that come in contact with existing cases, alerts citizens and residents in the event they become in close proximity to or contact with existing or suspected Corona cases and requests the user to undergo a medical examination in case of need. It also provides information, statistics and local and world updates related to the virus, according to Mohammed Al-Qaed, CEO of the e-Government Authority.

In the **Kingdom of Saudi Arabia**, the Ministry of Health, in cooperation with the Communications and Information Technology Commission, has sent more than two billion awareness and educational short text messages (SMS). The messages were addressed in 24 languages to all segments of society, including citizens and foreign residents. These messages which were also posted on electronic screens in airport halls, radio and TV channels and the social media included instructions on how to prevent acquiring the virus.

In the **Sultanate of Oman**, an electronic platform was launched to provide non-emergency on-line consultations by a number of specialist doctors in order to encourage citizens to stay at home. The Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries, in cooperation with the Oman Technology Fund, launched “Behar” electronic platform for online fish auction at the fish wholesale market. It is intended for the use of wholesale traders and companies, through which they can sell and buy fish and link the wholesale market to the retail markets to ensure the delivery of high-quality services to the ultimate consumer.

In the **United Arab Emirates**, doctors in Dubai devised a technique for the remote-screening of potential infected cases. A “Virtual Doctor for Covid-19” platform was also launched to help in the

detection of Coronavirus cases as citizens and residents can directly access the website. If a person is found to be positive, that person is then required to contact the Ministry of Health for further action. Drones that are equipped with day and night-vision cameras were used to enforce the closure of beaches. The drones can also give instructions to the public in multiple languages. The National Emergency, Crisis and Disaster Management Authority launched the national electronic platform “Weqaya” to raise public health awareness on the Coronavirus and provide information on preventative health and safety measures to curb the spread of the virus. The platform was launched in cooperation with the Ministry of Health and Prevention, Abu Dhabi Health Department, Dubai Health Authority and a number of concerned health authorities in the UAE.

In the **State of Kuwait**, drones were used to track violators of the lockdown and warn people not to assemble in large or public gatherings. The drones were equipped with calling devices that can address people in multiple languages.

The use of technology by the Gulf countries in combatting the spread of the Corona virus reflects two important things, as follows:

**First:** The Gulf countries’ early investments in the shift towards e-government and the wide-spread use by the people of modern devices such mobile phones and other electronic devices had a great impact on managing the crisis. In contrast, other countries faced problems, for example, in e-learning and in the enforcement of the lockdown measures through modern technology. Proper enforcement of lockdown was crucial because all countries of the world knew the importance of social distancing as the most effective precautionary measure to contain the spread of the Corona virus.

**Second:** Technology has strengthened the capabilities of the Gulf states, despite the fact that they were small countries facing great challenges during the crisis. The use of technology has given them a strategic advantage, especially when considering that they are the home for expatriate communities from all countries of the world, and that each community must be addressed in its own language.

## Sixth: Economic Measures

The Gulf states have taken many economic measures but we will focus here on the most important ones, especially those that have had a tangible effect on alleviating the impact of the crisis on citizens and residents. These include but are not limited to the following:

In the **Kingdom of Bahrain**: According to the royal directives, a BD4.3 billion financial and economic package has been launched to address the repercussions of the Corona crisis, including **(1)** the payment of salaries of Bahrainis working in the private sector through the Unemployment Insurance Fund for the months of April, May and June 2020, **(2)** payment by the government of the electricity and water utility bills for all subscribers both individuals and companies, Bahraini and non-Bahraini, for the same months, and **(3)** exempting commercial establishments and businesses from municipal fees for the same months, in addition to many other economic measures. His Majesty the King has also issued directives on working part-time and working from home, in addition to His Majesty's directives to provide aid to needy families affected by the crisis.

In the **Kingdom of Saudi Arabia**: In line with the directives of the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques, the Saudi government announced that it would be shouldering 60% of the salaries of Saudi citizens employed by private sector companies that were affected by the Corona pandemic. A sum of SAR 9 billion was allocated for this purpose. The Saudi Ministry of Finance also announced that it was taking economic measures involving more than SAR 120 billion to mitigate the consequences of the outbreak of the Corona virus on economic activities in the Kingdom.

In the **United Arab Emirates**: A stimulus package of AED 126 billion was approved to reduce the cost of doing business, support small companies and accelerate the execution of major government infrastructure projects.

In **Kuwait**: The Council of Ministers approved a draft law to increase the budget of the government and ministries by KWD 500 million for the year 2020-2021 to mitigate the repercussions of the Corona crisis, in addition to approving an economic support package to **(1)** protect citizens working in sectors affected by the Corona virus crisis, **(2)** maintain the necessary subsidies to stabilize the prices of food

and medicines, (3) secure a minimum income for the affected workers, (4) assist the owners of small and medium-sized enterprises, and (5) exempt affected business in productive economic sectors from paying certain government fees.

As for the **Sultanate of Oman**, it has taken many measures to alleviate the economic impact of the Coronavirus crisis. These include providing additional reserve stocks of basic food commodities, making government warehouses available to the private sector for storing consumer goods and food commodities free of charge for the next six months and reducing air freight charges on food products and medicines.

Without going into details of the economic measures taken by the Gulf states, we can say that these measures reflect two things:

**First:** The economic measures applied to both citizens and foreign residents alike, including the waiving of residence permit fees, visa renewal and fees for other services. Indeed, when the Gulf states announced the treatment of people infected with Coronavirus would be free, they emphasized that it covered both citizens and residents. This reflects the Gulf states' understanding of true human rights. The Corona crisis revealed the human dimension of the policies of the Gulf states in dealing with foreign residents living in their countries. This fact can be and must be used in future to refute unsubstantiated campaigns from international human rights organizations.

**Second:** Although the Gulf states rely heavily on oil as the main source of national income, the drop in oil prices to about \$ 22 a barrel, which has not happened in 18 years, and the large deficits in Gulf states budgets that this drop caused, did not prevent Gulf governments from continuing to provide the utmost care to its citizens and foreign residents alike.