



EXPLORING THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON TURKEY-GULF RELATIONS

Wikistrat's COVID-19 Webinar Series
May 13, 2020



WIKISTRAT'S COVID-19 WEBINAR SERIES

EXPLORING THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON TURKEY-GULF RELATIONS

BACKGROUND

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in the Middle East, a regional power competition has ensued between Turkey and Saudi Arabia for global Muslim leadership and regional influence. In addition, the pandemic also added to existing regional tensions between Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE. To understand the impact of COVID-19 on Turkey-Gulf relations, Wikistrat interviewed Dr. Ali Bakeer, an expert on the foreign policies of Turkey, Iran, and GCC countries.



Dr. Ali Bakeer

Dr. Ali Bakeer is an Ankara-based political analyst and consultant. He has a Ph.D. in political science/international relations from Beirut Arab University. He recently contributed a book chapter on the “Evolution of Turkey-Qatar Relations Amid a Growing Gulf Divide” to *Divided Gulf: The Anatomy of a Crisis*, published by Palgrave.

KEY INSIGHTS

COVID-19 doesn't change Turkey's strategic objectives in Syria: Ankara is still set on avoiding a PKK presence on its borders, restricting the flow of Syrian migrants towards Turkish borders, and on stopping Assad's military operations against his people, in the attempt to find a stable political solution. Nonetheless, if the pandemic is prolonged, it might constitute a problem for Turkey, because the Turkish military is increasingly concerned by the risk of its soldiers contracting the virus.

Turkey's "mask diplomacy" doesn't modify longstanding strategic issues in the regional calculus and beyond: The pandemic will exacerbate the situation with Saudi Arabia and UAE, deepen the relations with Qatar, and change nothing when it comes to the relations with Iran. It might offer an opportunity to improve Turkey's relations with the US, NATO, and some EU countries.

Turkish aid might increase its soft power in the Gulf: The potentially increased attractiveness of Turkey's image in the Arab world vis-à-vis the Saudi Arabia and the UAE is a cause of concern for MbS and MbZ, as it undermines their image and their legitimacy because people were seeing as performing badly compared to Turkey.

LIVE WEBINAR: FULL TRANSCRIPT

Wikistrat: Hello everyone and welcome to Wikistrat's special webinar on the impact of COVID-19 on Turkey-Gulf relations. At this webinar today, we'll discuss relations between Turkey and the Gulf states. We'll also be touching on Turkey's relations with Iran and also a bit with Syria. This webinar will be with Dr. Ali Bakeer, who is an Ankara-based political analyst and commentator specializing in Turkey-Gulf relations.

So Ali, just to start with you, how has COVID-19 impacted Turkey's relations with Saudi Arabia and UAE? And do you think that the pandemic provides an opportunity for rapprochement between these countries?

Dr. Ali Bakeer: Thank you very much for inviting me and giving me the chance to be with you to discuss this timely and important topic. Answering your question, I believe that the COVID-19 could have really provided a good opportunity for rapprochement between Turkey and Saudi Arabia and the UAE in particular. But unfortunately, this is not the case. It exacerbated the situation between these states.

But before explaining why this happened and how, allow me to provide [some] context with a brief summary about the state of relations between Turkey and

the Gulf states, especially Saudi Arabia and UAE.

Just before the breakout of the coronavirus, as you know, relations between Turkey and Saudi Arabia and the UAE, in particular, were very strained during the last few years, especially since the 2017 Gulf crisis when Saudi Arabia imposed a blockade against Qatar, and Turkey had to intervene to support Qatar and send its troop to Doha. And thus, Ankara became a critical player in Gulf security for the first time in 100 years.

At that time, Turkey tried not to sabotage its relations with Saudi Arabia and even followed a backdoor diplomacy sending high-level official delegation with the secret mission to Saudi Arabia to resolve the problem, but it didn't work out.

In 2018, the murder of Khashoggi at his country's consul in Istanbul actually sabotaged and undermined the relationship between Saudi Arabia and Turkish officials despite the fact that Turkish officials tried hard to distinguish between King Salman and the Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, but this didn't work either.

at then, the UAE – particularly Abu Dhabi – was considered as a primary

instigator against Turkey in the region, and the main driving force behind the Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's anti-Turkey policies in the region.

In the Turkish media, the UAE is accused of being a supporter of the 2016 coup attempt and of financially supporting the Gulenist group which is listed in Turkey as a terrorist organization.

In the aftermath of the Gulf crisis, the relations between the UAE and Turkey have declined significantly, and economic relations, in particular, were severely harmed. I believe the volume of trade between them decreased in 2018 by more than 50%, if I'm not wrong.

So, taking this into consideration, starting from 2019, both Saudi Arabia and UAE increased their effort to counter Turkey regionally. This was obvious in many theatres, let's say in Libya, in Somalia, in Syria, in Sudan, in the Eastern Mediterranean region, in the Red Sea and elsewhere.

Of course, this struggle is about influence, leadership, and visions. Obviously, this struggle has been going on since the Arab Revolutions in 2011. But lately, it was very obvious in two, let's see, areas, which are Syria and Libya. For example, both Saudi Arabia and the UAE in 2019 condemned Turkish agreements with the UN-recognized government in Libya, the GNA. They also protested Turkey sending troops to support the government against Haftar's forces. In Syria, both Saudi Arabia and the UAE denounced Turkey's military operation against the Assad regime in Idlib. So against the backdrop of these developments, the pandemic came and

I believe it had the opportunity to offer a great rapprochement chance between Turkey and Saudi Arabia and UAE, but unfortunately, it exacerbated the situation between this.

Why? I believe because both Saudi Arabia and the UAE calculated that probably the pandemic will undermine and weaken President Erdoğan and his team. They probably thought that taking into consideration the fragile status of the economy, and the opening, establishment of the new political parties in Turkey, then this must be a great opportunity to increase the pressure on Turkey rather than to mend fences.

Yeah, so probably they thought that this is an opportunity to increase the pressure against Turkey rather than to mend fences. What happened is that during the first phase of the breakout of the coronavirus, the information roar against Turkey from Saudi Arabia and UAE increased noticeably.

For example, when it comes to Saudi Arabia, they started to urge people not to go to Turkey for tourism. Some commentators on the official Saudi TV urged people not to go because, as they said, Erdogan might transmit the coronavirus to the Saudi tourists and the Arab tourists via the medical equipment. And of course, this is a very silly accusation, but this is what had been happening.

Also, UAE media outlets increased criticizing Erdoğan and Turkey's stance from the region. After that, of course, Turkey responded by accusing Saudi Arabia of keeping the world in the dark when it comes to the spread of

the coronavirus in its lands, and also a Turkish court charged 20 Saudis including Asiri and Qahtani, who is the former aid of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, of murdering Khashoggi.

[Soon] after, Saudi Arabia blocked last week several Turkish media outlets, including the official broadcaster TRT and official news agency AA, and other websites. Turkey responded by blocking several Saudi and Emirati websites.

Of course, one of these websites was the Turkish version of the independent portal. Some might ask why would Turkey block the Turkish version of the independent portal? Well, just a few days before this decision, a junior Saudi Royal published an article in Okaz Newspaper. It's a Saudi newspaper. He praised the government's decision to block Turkish media outlets in Saudi Arabia.

He also urged the government to shift the battle to Turkey and use the Turkish version of the independent portal, which was actually bought by Saudi Arabia, I think, last year. So, Turkey decided to block this website also. Currently, the situation is escalating obviously between Saudi Arabia [and] the UAE from one side and Turkey from another side.

Ironically, the decision to escalate with Turkey right now comes in a time when both Saudi Arabia and the UAE are noticeably de-escalating with Iran. I think this is very interesting. We have a situation where Saudi Arabia and the UAE are escalating against Turkey and deescalating against Iran. I believe that there are two reasons to explain the situation. One is of a tactical nature, and the other one is of a strategic nature.

I'm sorry, maybe I took long answering this question, but I'm coming to an end. When it comes to the tactical reason, both Saudi Arabia and the UAE need, right now, a distraction from their internal and regional problems. For example, you might know that Saudi Arabia launched an oil price war with Russia last month. It flooded the whole market with oil and the prices went down in an unprecedented way, since 20 years, [to] less than \$20.

This is very problematic to Saudi Arabia because it needs the price of oil to be above \$68 at least. So, they are having deficiencies, and in a time where they need to spend –money- very much internally because of the pandemic. Also, Saudi Arabia had to close the Hajj season for Muslims this year, and it's a source of revenue to the Saudi government.

Third, because of the pandemic, Saudi Arabia lost the chance to rebrand Mohammed bin Salman via chairing the G20 meeting. As a result, Mohammed bin Salman's 2030 vision is disrupted. So, we have a lot of problems inside Saudi Arabia and in the region. And they had to draw attention the people away from that.

Typically, they would use Iran, but Iran proved to be dangerous and constitutes a military threat, so I think that they think that escalating against Turkey is less costly and less dangerous. And, at the end of the day, serves their primary goal.

When it comes to the strategic reason, I believe both the UAE, or let's say more accurately Mohammed bin Zayed and Mohammed bin Salman believe that Turkey is a genuine threat to their

regimes comparing to Iran. Iran's model is not attractive in the region and mostly promoted by some sectarian proxies.

But this is not the case when it comes to Turkey; regardless of our opinion of how Turkey is performing internally or externally, many Arabs think of it very positively. Turkey is popular in the Arab world and this issue, I think, undermines the Saudi and Emirati regimes and that's why they have an interest in countering Turkey and constraining it. That's the answer to the question.

Wikistrat: Okay. And as I asked before, do you think that the pandemic provides an opportunity for rapprochement between these countries? In other words, does COVID-19 also provide an opportunity to deescalate tensions between Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Turkey in your opinion?

Dr. Ali Bakeer: No, I think that it could have been a great opportunity for rapprochement, but on the contrary, it exacerbated things between Turkey and Saudi Arabia and the UAE, particularly because Riyadh and Abu Dhabi think that the pandemic will weaken Turkey. So it's an opportunity for them to increase the pressure on Turkey rather than to mend differences.

Wikistrat: That's fine. But if I understand correctly, should both Riyadh and Abu Dhabi see this as some kind of a potential weakness of the AKP regime, and Erdoğan specifically? That Saudi wants to increase the pressure to put the AKP, the government, in an uncomfortable situation?

Dr. Ali Bakeer: Yes. They want to utilize the pandemic to increase the pressure and weaken

Turkey because they think the pandemic is already weakening the government, and it's a chance for them to increase the pressure.

Wikistrat: Okay, understood. Given the reports we've seen in Turkish media in late March of talks between President Erdoğan and Qatari Emir Al Thani on COVID-19, how has COVID-19 impacted Turkey's relations with Qatar? Do you think that the pandemic will drive the two countries even closer together than they already are?

Dr. Ali Bakeer: Yes. Officials of both Qatar and Turkey had talks during the pandemic, and I believe that the pandemic will not change the relationship between Qatar and Turkey. If something, yes, it will further strengthen the relationship between the two states.

As you know, Qatar and Turkey are in a formal alliance since 2014. They have a stable and strong mechanism for consultation [and] cooperation. This mechanism works very well for both countries. It is a high-level mechanism and both are on the same page when it comes to bilateral relations or regional issues.

Now, I believe that the Turkish-Qatar relations are really strong as they managed to surpass or overcome difficulties and tests during the last few years starting from the '16 failed coup attack in Turkey, then the 2017 Gulf crisis, then the 2018 economic crisis in Turkey. And now we have the pandemic.

As you know, Qatar right now ranks third in the Gulf when it comes to the number of cases of infected people. Luckily, the

2017 Gulf crisis, I believe, put it in a better situation to deal with the issue and now it is well equipped with the needed tools to deal with this issue, despite being still under the blockade.

Also, I believe that the blockade helped deepening the alliance between Turkey and Qatar. When it comes to the talks between the Emir of Qatar and the President of Turkey, the media didn't give details about the content of the phone call between the two leaders besides the typical message of consultation and cooperation.

However, my information says that Qatar actually asked for protective gear and some medical equipment from Turkey. Both sides discussed Libya and Syria, which is something typical for them. It is a de facto point of discussion, always on the agenda.

They might also have discussed cooperation to send aid to needy countries, third-party needy countries. They already have an agreement that allows them to do joint investments or joint effort to aid some countries, especially in Africa. I believe maybe Somalia might have benefited from these agreements.

So, all in all, I think that the pandemic will further strengthen the relation between Turkey and Qatar. During the last few years, Turkey worked hard to prove itself to its allies as a trust worthy and reliable partner. I think that [in] hard times, such as these times, these partners and allies got to know the value of Turkey to them, including Qatar, of course.

Wikistrat: Looking now also to Iran. So, how you

think the pandemic impacted Turkey's relations with Iran? We've seen some reports on Turkish humanitarian aid to Iran. So, how do you think this aid will improve Turkey's relations with the Islamic Republic?

Dr. Ali Bakeer: Well, personally, I believe that no sort of aid from Turkey to Iran, no matter how big it is, will change the nature of relations between Turkey and Iran on the strategic level. Of course, it might benefit Turkey when it comes to soft power or its positive image inside Iran. But other than that, speaking on the strategic level, no kind of aid will change the type of relations between Turkey and Iran.

As you know, historically, Iran is Turkey's primary regional rival and the relation between Turks and Iranians is often described as the relation between water and oil, meaning that you cannot mix them no matter what. I believe that both countries... The 2011 Arab uprising put the two countries against each other with totally different and contradictory regional agendas.

The greatest conflict of interest is still in Syria, where Iran chose to support the Assad regime against its people. Now in 2016, I believe, yes, Iran tried to utilize the failed coup attempt to come closer to Turkey, but that didn't change much the nature of the relation. Generally speaking, it remained cold.

The 2017 Gulf crisis, however, was a game-changer for Iran because it pushed both Turkey and Qatar to come closer to Iran. And in order to overcome the blockade and to sustain the Turkish aid to Qatar, there was no other way than Iran. Iran knew this and utilized this

opportunity very well, actually pushing for better political and economic relations with Qatar and Turkey.

So, because of Saudi Arabia and the UAE, Turkey was forced to modify its relations with Iran, and also Qatar did the same thing. But still, both countries cooperated on very limited and tactical issues, mostly when it's come to PKK and the Kurdish issue, for example, the KRG referendum in Iraq, but other than that no big, let's say, shift in the relation between the two countries.

Turks don't usually trust Iranian, especially when it comes to Syria. They tend to ignore Iran and they deal directly with Russia when it comes to the situation inside Syria. Of course, this is not received well in Iran. But anyway, each one of them has its own agenda and is working for its own interests.

When it comes to the US-Iran escalation in the region, during the last year and so, Turkey tried to display a neutral role, meaning that it's not siding with any of the players, whether Iran or the US, but in my opinion, and practically when we observe carefully the Turkish stands, we will notice that Ankara is always closer to the United States than to Iran. We can see this in the protest of Iraq last year. We can see it after assassinating Qassem Soleimani in Iraq.

Despite protesting at the beginning of the sanctions on Iran and promising not to cut oil imports from Tehran, at the end of the day, Turkey fully implemented the sanctions. So, I believe that yeah, coming back to the pandemic and its implications, Iran turned actually early to Turkey for help. Turkey reportedly

advised the Iranian officials in January and early February to lockdown Qom city.

The Iranian officials responded that there's no need to take such measures, such harsh measures, and lock down the city. So, Turkey decided to close its border with Iran and also suspended flights going to and coming from Iran. After that, in early March, an Iranian delegation asked officially to visit Turkey, but the Turkish officials responded by saying, "Don't come, please. We can Skype."

The talks between the two sides resulted in Turkey sending around ten tons of aid, medical aid, to Iran. The Iranian officials thanked Turkey for this help. But after all, as I said, it will not change the nature of the relationship with Iran. They will stay rivals, and the problematic issues will stay the same way.

I think they might come to a problematic engagement in Syria later, whether during this year, or in the near future, or later. Besides the increasing Turkey soft power in Iran, and they're giving a positive image, I don't see any change or an impact of the pandemic on Turkey-Iran relations.

Wikistrat:

You also mentioned Syria just a few minutes ago. So, how does the pandemic, and especially the need for regional and international cooperation, impact Turkey's Syria policy? Particularly looking, for example, at the Turkish policy towards Idlib?

Dr. Ali Bakeer:

If you mean Turkey's strategic goals in Syria, I don't think so. Turkey has three main goals in Syria. First, not to allow a

PKK presence on its borders with Syria. Second, not to allow Syrian citizens to come towards Turkish borders and to stop Assad's military operations against his people. And third, to reach a political solution which can guarantee a stable, secure, and prosperous Syria. These are the main primary goals for Turkey in Syria. And I don't think the pandemic will change them. Yet, having said this, I think that the pandemic, depending on whether it will stay for a long time or not, it might impose challenges. It might impose challenges on the Turkish military presence in Syria and constrain its movements.

For now, according to Turkey's Defense Minister, no Turkish soldiers were infected with the coronavirus, but anyway, they issued a restriction order to restrict the movement of the Turkish soldiers inside Syria to the minimum. Some players might utilize the situation, and we are already seeing indicators on this issue.

Several players also are not apparently happy with the latest deal between Turkey and Russia in Idlib after the Operation Spring Shield at the beginning of March. Last March, for example, the UAE reportedly urged Assad to violate this deal in return for billions of dollars of aid. Of course, we cannot confirm this information, but they are already there in the media.

Iran for example, also right after the deal, it recruited 9,000 militia members in Syria and started to fortify its positions near Idlib and in the surrounding areas especially – I don't know if you have this, if you know this information or not – after the big drone hit that killed many

of its militia members in the Operation Shield the Spring by Turkey. So, Iran is also working on this front.

I found it weird that the Turkish president also warned that Assad is trying to utilize the pandemic to violate this deal. So, I see there's probably a connection between all these movements in the area. And lastly, few days ago, some Russian media outlets harshly criticized Assad for the first time, which is weird in my opinion, and they accused him of being corrupt and not doing the work that is supposed to do it.

So, probably, there's something being prepared in the area. Maybe Moscow is not comfortable with the Iranian movements and influence over Assad, maybe it's not also comfortable with the UAE approach to Assad. We will see whether this information is true or not. But anyway, I think that the Turkey-Russia last deal is tactical anyway, and it will not last long. So, everyone is just fortifying their positions and preparing for the next step. Now, if the pandemic will prolong, it might constitute a problem for Turkey in this regard because the Assad regime doesn't care whether it will hit its people or not, but this is not the case for the Turkish soldiers and the areas where they are deployed.

Wikistrat:

Ali, thank you so much for these great points. I'd like to open up for discussion, right now, for some questions. I see we already have a question from George. So, Ali, the question is: We have seen reports of dealing with COVID-19 in the US and French militaries. How is the situation with Turkish armed forces? Has this affected operations or relations with Qatar?

Dr. Ali Bakeer: Well, as I said, according to the Turkish Defense Minister, COVID-19 till this moment didn't influence or affect the Turkish army. No Turkish soldiers were infected by this virus up until now. And activities of Turkish soldiers in Syria and Iraq are constrained to the minimum. Other than that, I think, in the sea there has been, if I'm not wrong, a drill in the Eastern Mediterranean a few days ago, close to Libya.

Obviously, the Turkish Navy is not constrained when it comes to COVID-19. Probably, they took their measures before in order not to allow the virus to come into their ships. And how this affects relations with Qatar. I don't see any relation. I mean as far as I know also the Qatari army is free of coronavirus, COVID-19,...Unlike other countries, they did also a drill. But for the interior ministry, and yeah, I think the army also participated.

Why? I think that when it comes to the implications of COVID-19 on the Gulf countries, there's a side of the story that is not usually discussed in the media. This virus can actually constitute a security threat to certain countries in the Gulf, especially those with a high number of foreign workers – Kuwait, Qatar, UAE, to some extent Arabia – because these workers right now, they are constrained. They cannot go to work. There's no income for them, and they are very poor and they are living in close areas.

If the virus [is] prolonged for a long time, they can be provoked to do... protests, maybe leading to some kind of obstruction in these countries. This scenario can constitute a problem for the Gulf countries. So right now, there's

no problem, but if the virus is prolonged, I say this can constitute a problem, a security problem to Gulf countries. That's why maybe the Gulf countries' armies, at least, are alerted when it comes to this issue.

Wikistrat: Okay. I know this isn't directly related to the Gulf, but do you think that the pandemic has impacted in any way or will impact in any way Turkey's relations with NATO? Not so much political relations, but in terms of joint military exercises or security agreements or in terms of long-term military planning as a result of the pandemic?

Dr. Ali Bakeer: Yes, I think actually this is a good question. Thank you for asking. I think that... I don't know if you heard it or not, but around 100 countries have asked Turkey for medical aid right now. The country is working its best to answer all the requests. So far, it has helped around 30 countries out of 100. Of course, some of these countries were NATO members and also European countries like Britain, like Italy, even Spain, I think, yes, Turkey sent aid to it.

The presidency issued a private license to send medical stuff because there's already a legislation to prevent any medical equipment to go out of the country. So I think that, in some way, this crisis of pandemic helps Turkey to improve its relations with its European neighbors and with NATO members.

Also, Turkey sent urgently, at the beginning of the crisis, help for the United States. Even some Turks were complaining about how you, the Turkish government, can send protective gear and medical stuff for the United

States before insuring your people. Some Turkish opposition figures were protesting this action.

So I think now, Turkey, as I mentioned before, is trying to prove that it is a reliable partner and you can depend on it in the hard times. And this was really a good opportunity to improve relations with NATO, the US, and European countries.

Wikistrat: Okay. And going back to the question of Turkey's relations with the Gulf states. So, you said before that you don't see any change on the political level with Saudi Arabia and the UAE, but do you think that Turkey's outreach efforts right now could improve its image in the eyes of the people of Saudi and Emirati people or Gulf states populations more generally?

Dr. Ali Bakeer: The effect of the pandemic on the relation between Turkey and Saudi Arabia and the UAE, in particular, is negative. It is positive when it comes to Qatar, and it is neutral when it comes to Iran. So, coming to the second part of the question, yes, it will definitely increase the positive image of Turkey in the Gulf. And this is a problem for some regimes like Saudi Arabia and the UAE because it undermines their image and their legitimacy because people are seeing them performing badly comparing to Turkey.

They would say, "Okay, Turkey is a Muslim country. We are a Muslim country. Turkey is a big country. We are a big country. Turkey is rich. We are rich. Why are the Turks performing better than us internally or regionally?" These are the questions that many Gulf people are asking themselves.

And accordingly, they are answering, and they are getting the bad image of their government. The governments of Saudi Arabia and the UAE realize this equation and that's why they are trying to escalate against Turkey in the media and counter the Turkish influence regionally. This is one reason why they are now escalating the issue.

Question: I'd like to ask you: What extent is the pandemic going to hurt Erdoğan's rule in the sense that there are a lot of people saying that it's true that Saudi Arabia is going to be hurt by, especially, the oil price and so on? But at the same time, Saudi Arabia can count on the wealth funds, and so even though vision 2030 is probably not going to be achieved, at the same time, there are some reserves that can be used in Saudi Arabia, while on the other hand, Turkey has to battle with a very strong economic crisis over there. Do you think Erdoğan is going to be hurt by the pandemic or not?

And the second question I'd like to ask is [about] the role of the EU. Do you think that the EU should work as a moderator between Saudi Arabia, sorry, and Turkey, considering the very strong ties that the EU has with Turkey because of the Customs Union, because of the fact that Turkey is [an] annexation country? Or do you think also because of the ties with Saudi Arabia, especially in defense, or do you think that could be detrimental? Thank you very much.

Dr. Ali Bakeer: Thank you very much. These are really excellent questions. The first question – would the pandemic hurt Erdoğan or not? First of all, the president and his team see the pandemic as an opportunity, actually. But I think that it is a two-sided sword.

Meaning if he managed to go out of the pandemic with the minimum losses, then he would definitely be a winner. But if this pandemic prolonged and we went to the worst scenario, which I was talking about before the broadcast, I think then he would definitely lose. Taking these two narratives into consideration, some Turkish medical professionals and also the political opposition in Turkey wanted a full lockdown of the country starting from the beginning. So they said that we are in favor of a full lockdown to prevent what is happening in Italy, for example, or in Spain.

But, the president and his team were thinking that if they applied full lockdown, they might save a lot of people at the beginning, but they might not be able to save the economy, which will result in more deaths [of] people later because they will not have the ability to back them [in] the health sector and also to support the needy people because if you put a lockdown, you have to provide services for the people who are locked in their houses. And especially for the poor people. For 80 million people country, this is very hard to do... Not only very hard, but very costly too. The president and his team preferred to take moderate measures and increase these measures as it takes.

Right now, they are saying, according to the health minister statements, that during the last week, the percentage of the increase in the numbers of infected people and victims is almost stable and going down. So, if they are correct and we will see by the end of the month, as I was telling Wikistrat, then we are heading to a better situation by next month. This

would be a win for the president and his team because they didn't shut down the economy. And also they kept the victims at a minimum level and, at the same time, they used their powers to increase Tukey's soft power and improve relations with the US, with Europe, with NATO.

But if this proved to be wrong, and Turkey had to take harsher measures and probably lock down the country, if things were going in the Italian scenario or the Spanish scenario, then this would be a lose situation for the president because this would definitely harm the economy to an unprecedented level. Now the World Bank estimations – and also I have taken a look at several institutions, economic institution's estimation – and surprisingly, although they are saying the Turkish economy will contract, but it will still score 0.5% growth. I mean, if this proved to be right, this is a great win for the president, even 0.5 is a great win.

So, depending on how long the pandemic will be and the type of measures that the government is going to take in the coming month, we'll decide whether we are going to the positive scenario or the negative scenario and whether the president is winning or not.

Now for the EU issue, I don't think that the EU can help to improve the relations between Saudi Arabia and Turkey. And thank you for this question. I think that there's a golden opportunity for the EU right now, in this moment, to increase the pressure on Saudi Arabia and the UAE in the Libyan issue because, right now, Haftar is losing big time in Western Libya and the center of Libya against the UN-recognized government. And as we know, he always refused to abide

by the ceasefire. He refused to agree on a political deal, and he was always boosted by the military support from the UAE and Egypt, and he's constituting a big problem in Libya. Right now, he's been undermined and the government is progressing. I think that this is a golden opportunity to interfere and say, "Look, we need to sit at the table and agree on the terms." And they have to put pressure on the UAE and Egypt. Otherwise, they might risk escalating the situation in Libya because if the government feels that Hafter became very weak, they will not stop, they will continue and there will be a war. On the other hand, Hafter would like to take back what he lost and maybe he will ask, right now, Egypt and the UAE for more support in order to counter-attack and this will increase also the violence in the country. So there's a golden opportunity, in my opinion,

to interfere and try to reach a solution right now in Libya. But regarding Saudi-Turkey, I don't think that the EU can help in anything in this regard. And also, we should not forget that the Crown Prince's relationship with many of the European countries is still not good, at least publicly, because of the Khashoggi issue. So they wouldn't like to engage directly, I think, in such issues.

Wikistrat:

Ali, thank you so much for this overview of Turkey's relationship with the Gulf states, particularly Saudi Arabia and the UAE, but also Iran. And it was really enlightening to see all of these relations changing or not change with the result of COVID-19.



WIKISTRAT'S COVID-19 WEBINAR SERIES

EXPLORING THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON TURKEY-GULF RELATIONS

For more information on Wikistrat's crowdsourced solutions and systems, contact: info@wikistrat.com

www.wikistrat.com