



The Cambridge Security Initiative

COVID-19 REFUELS FAMILIAR GEOPOLITICAL CONSPIRACIES IN THE MIDDLE EAST

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DR. DINA REZK, UNIVERSITY OF READING

The West, Iran, and Qatar have been popular targets of longstanding conspiracy theories on the Arab street, and the ongoing pandemic has rekindled old fears about the intentions and capabilities of these actors. Social media content, both official and user-generated, surrounding the origin and spread of the coronavirus has strained preexisting geopolitical tensions.

Mistrust of the West has intensified in both Shi'a and Sunni centres of power in the Middle East as a result of the pandemic. One of the principle conspiracies rife spread through social media content is that [the virus was manufactured in a U.S. lab](#), inverting similar American allegations against the Chinese. Notably, Iran's Ayatollah Ali Khamenei has given official voice to widespread postcolonial fears that [the virus is a form of biological warfare](#) intentionally targeting the region, and simply the latest in an ongoing Western agenda to subjugate the Middle East. Western media sources and journalists have also come under attack for highlighting how countries such as Egypt, heavily reliant on tourism, have been [underreporting rates of infection](#) - with the [hashtag #GuardianLies trending](#) on Twitter in mid-March. The Egyptian Health Ministry has [revoked the Guardian's accreditation and closed its office in Egypt](#).

Just as Iran has blamed its historic enemy the West for the crisis, so Iran has been labeled a culprit by a range of Sunni actors who have long regarded the Shi'a state as an existential threat. [On social media, videos of religious zealots kissing Shi'a shrines](#) have circulated on Twitter, exacerbating Sunni- Shia tensions in the region. Bahrain's [Ministry of Interior blamed Iran](#) for spreading the virus as "an internationally prohibited form of aggression." Similarly, [Saudi Arabia's Council of Ministers](#) stated explicitly, "Iran bears direct responsibility for the outbreak of corona infection." The Islamic State has also exploited anti-Iranian/Shi'a sentiment, [using the pandemic to take advantage of instability](#) in Baghdad to conduct further attacks and expand their reach in non-urban areas of Iraq.

Within the Gulf states, the pandemic has intensified the cold war between Saudi and Qatar ongoing since the 2017 blockade against Qatar. In March 2020 [the hashtag #Qatar is Corona stoked controversy on Twitter in a post originating with journalist Noura al-Moteari](#). Rumours on social media have suggested that Qatar used its oil wealth to create the virus in China in order to compromise Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 goals and derail Dubai Expo 2020, which was

delayed due to the pandemic. In April, [the same hashtag was used to castigate Qatar for holding Bahrainis in transit from Iran in Doha airport](#). At the official level, the [Qatari Health Minister was denied access to a GCC meeting in Riyadh](#) in March to manage the pandemic. In response, the Qatari Foreign Minister accused Riyadh of using Twitter to politicise a humanitarian crisis. In addition, [Saudi news outlets have used the crisis to highlight the poor conditions of labour camps](#) in the Qatari capital, despite the presence of similar conditions for migrant workers across the Gulf Cooperation Council countries.

OUTLOOK

The economic and security fallout from the pandemic is likely to further intensify preexisting tensions in the Middle East. As the pandemic exerts further pressure on domestic and regional economies, leaders will continue to use the crisis to deflect domestic failures and point the blame outwards. In the public sphere, both on the ‘street’ and on social media, a combination of state propaganda, lack of transparency, and generalized mistrust of authority at home and abroad will likely stoke a wider range of more nebulous conspiracies. Thus even as the public health crisis recedes, the internationalized narratives around COVID-19 will nonetheless remain politically relevant, furthering Sunni-Shi’a divides in the region as well as exacerbating suspicions of Western actors operating in the Middle East.