

# COVID-19 in Religion, Gender & Conflict

## Hajj and the Muslim World:

*How Coronavirus has Brought Devastation to this Billion Member Community*

*By Iman Syed*

The delicate white cloth worn by hundreds of thousands juxtaposes the black, veiled Kaaba under the imposing Mecca sun. Masjid Al-Haram engulfs these Muslim pilgrims; their clothes are an equalizing force, breaking down economic, racial, and gender barriers. Moving as one community around the cubed Kaaba seven times, the worshippers complete the first of their shared five-day spiritual journey, the Hajj.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Mecca was largely vacant this July, with only around 1,000 worshippers instead of the two million pilgrims who typically flocked to the holy city in years past.<sup>1</sup> The Saudi Ministry of Hajj and Umrah announced in June that the annual ritual will be closed to foreigners, only allowing Saudi Arabian residents to participate.<sup>2</sup>

This is the only cancellation in Saudi Arabian history since the country's establishment in 1932. The fallout of the decision is a symbol of the shared grief within the Muslim world.<sup>3</sup> The most vital aspects of Islam are dependent on

physical presence to facilitate faith and unity, but they are now on the back burner as our social distancing is essential to combat the virus.

### History of the Hajj

The Hajj, established in 628 A.D. by the Prophet Muhammad, is a five to six-day journey that begins and ends at the Kaaba in Mecca. As one of the five Pillars of Islam, the pilgrimage involves several rituals meant to emphasize the worship of one God, to pray for forgiveness, and to remember the plight of past prophets.

These practices also illustrate the closeness of the Muslim diaspora; regardless of background, all pilgrims wear modest clothes, men and women pray beside one another, and everyone moves through the processions as one community.<sup>4</sup> The once-in-a-lifetime pilgrimage draws millions to Mecca annually, with some saving money for years to pay for the journey. It is a profoundly spiritual experience for individuals across the Muslim world.

### Health and Hajj

Massive gatherings, like those the size of the Hajj, are breeding grounds for gastronomical and respiratory diseases. Within the Sacred Mosque in Mecca, there can be six pilgrims per square meter, and a single tent accommodation fits anywhere from 50 to 100 people. This environment is a critical part of the Hajj's shared and individual experience—the sense of being physically close to fellow brothers and sisters from around the world. However, when combined with excessive heat and gross overcrowding, this closeness becomes a cradle for disease.<sup>1</sup>

To prevent the potential spread of diseases, the Hajj Visa Application already requires proof that applicants receive vaccinations for yellow fever, oral polio/inactivated poliovirus, meningococcal meningitis, and the seasonal influenza.<sup>5</sup> The Ministry also implements electronic surveillance systems to track the spread of diseases and provide mobile isolation units on the ground for social distancing measures.<sup>6</sup>

To combat previous outbreaks of infectious diseases—like SARS or MERS (Middle Eastern Respiratory Syndrome)—the Saudi government enforced more cautious policies. During the SARS outbreak (2002-2003), they limited immigration from some affected areas in East Asia. During the MERS outbreak in 2012 and 2013, the Saudi Arabian government discouraged pilgrims considered high-risk, including those who were over 65, from participating in the Hajj.<sup>7</sup>

In this case, however, regulatory policies used to contain previous infectious diseases would not suffice. With the lack of understanding around the novel virus, the Saudi Arabian government was forced to take the most cautious of all options: cancellation. Although the decision was necessary, the disruption of spiritual collaboration among Muslims brings immense pain to the community.

### The Self and Hajj

Imam Mokhi Turk sits in sorrow on his farm in the Kunduz Province of Afghanistan. Four years have gone by, and he is the only member of his family who has made registry to participate in the 2020 Hajj. His neighbors even sold their land to afford to pay for the voyage to see Mecca for themselves. His dreams are shattered.

"This makes me very sad, because every Muslim hopes to go to Hajj once in his whole life, and when it was my turn, it was cancelled[...] I'm very upset because I'm not sure if I'll be alive in the next few days, let alone next year."

Imam Turk's pain is shared worldwide. School administrator Zeinab Ibrahim of Egypt, unable to contain her pain, speaks through her tears:

"It was my only wish," Ms. Ibrahim said. "To cancel it completely is such a shame. May God relieve us of this burden."<sup>8</sup>

Many Muslims spend years saving before embarking on the milestone journey,<sup>9</sup> with pilgrimage packages costing anywhere from 3,000 to 10,000 dollars.

United in pain, Yashir Qadhi, the Dean of the Islamic Seminary of America set to lead a group of pilgrims, emulated the religious implications of the cancellation to the individual:

"The Hajj is a transformative, emotional and spiritually moving experience—the spiritual pinnacle of a devout Muslim's life."<sup>8</sup>

Core aspects of Islam have continually faced disruption because of the pandemic. To prevent gatherings during Ramadan earlier this year, countries across the MENA region implemented curfews and closed mosques.<sup>3,10</sup> Now, the Hajj—the climax of spiritual awakening for the individual within Islam—follows the trend of physical upheaval in Muslim life.

Praying alongside fellow followers, all equal in the eyes of Allah. Seeking forgiveness and atonement while gazing at the Kaaba. Collecting rocks on the fourth night for the fifth day's pebble throwing ritual and climbing Mount Arafat. These have become broken promises of spiritual enlightenment.<sup>11</sup>

Physical presence and social gatherings are fundamental to the function of Islam. The cancellation of Islam's most critical example of physical space and faith, the Hajj, is the epitome of the devastation weighing on Muslims everywhere.

The pilgrimage to Mecca—a transitory departure from this world—is a much-needed respite from today's current state. Without it, hope declines, and devastation and grief triumph.



P.C. Khaled Abdullah via Reuters

## A Gendered Look at COVID-19 in the MENA Region

*By Donya Zarrinagar*

*In the Middle East, COVID-19 is shedding light on gender inequality and shattering illusions of progress in women's rights.*

### Economic Instability

Economic evaluations predict that COVID-19 will cause a loss of 42 billion dollars in the GDP of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA).<sup>1</sup> These losses will impact most citizens; however, compared to men, women are more likely to suffer long-term effects.

Women's labor participation rates in the region hover around 20 percent—among the world's lowest rates. Although the labor participation gap has been steadily closing in the past few years, this progress may be set back by the estimated 700,000 jobs that women will lose due to the pandemic.<sup>1</sup>

The economic slowdown disadvantages women inside and outside the workforce. Peaking unemployment rates among women cause financial hardship on families and the economy, but could also lead to gender stratification and disrupt the global economy. In a region where women already comprise a minor percentage of the workforce, any sizable loss of the female workforce could reverse years of progress.

Men and women face different occupational exposures to COVID-19: men have greater exposure outside of the home, while women have greater exposure through caregiver roles in the workplace and at home. Public sectors in the region, particularly health and social services, are heavily powered by women; in Egypt, for instance, female nurses outnumber male nurses by 10:1.<sup>2</sup>

In these front-line health occupations, women are at a higher risk of infection and face harsh working conditions. This has been witnessed in Lebanon, where the pandemic has aggravated already long working hours and reduced salaries for nursing staff.<sup>1</sup> At a time when female participation in the job market was on the rise, this is a significant step back in advancing women's roles in the economy.

The Middle East is home to the second-largest gender gap in unpaid care and domestic work, with women working in unpaid domestic jobs 4.7 times more often than men, a figure that the pandemic is likely to exacerbate.<sup>2</sup> The closure of schools and childcare facilities further compels women to engage in unpaid work, such as homeschooling, performing routine household chores, and caring for the sick and elderly.<sup>1</sup> The increase in unpaid work and the simultaneous decrease in female participation in the labor force restricts women's financial independence and strengthens the homogeneity of labor divisions between men and women.

However, the increased burden on women does not end at physical labor—taking care of the ill can also have high costs on women's mental health. In the Middle East, where discussions of mental health are highly stigmatized, the pandemic only further barricades access to mental health resources.

The emotional and mental fatigue that women face by caring for the sick at home can affect their physiology by compromising their immune systems, thereby increasing their risk of infection.<sup>2</sup> Paradoxically, historically enforced gender roles, which are traditionally justified on the presumption that they protect women, harm them in this pandemic.

The heightened effect of infectious disease on women is not unique to COVID-19 and has been corroborated by past data. For example, the Ebola outbreak in West Africa in 2013 hindered improvement in closing the educational gender

gap. Girls with infected mothers often inherited domestic responsibilities, like caregiving and household chores.<sup>1</sup> Their increased domestic responsibilities came at the expense of their education, risking their ability to return to school and jeopardizing their future financial independence.

### Social and Mental Consequences for Women

COVID-19's economic effects on the family, such as financial pressure or food insecurity, cause psychosocial stress and maladaptive coping mechanisms. Women often suffer the consequences of conflict by becoming victims of violent outbreaks, which are only magnified in current situations of confinement. Since the start of lockdown, governments throughout the MENA region have reported a rise in hotline calls for domestic violence. In just the first month of lockdown, the Family Protection Department in Jordan reported a 33 percent increase in domestic violence cases.<sup>1</sup>

At the same time, gender-based violence in the Middle East is gaining exposure in the media, particularly in Turkey. With soaring rates of domestic violence and the horrific murder of 27-year old Pinar Gültekin, women have made "Women Supporting Women" a viral trend by challenging each other to post a black-and-white selfie.

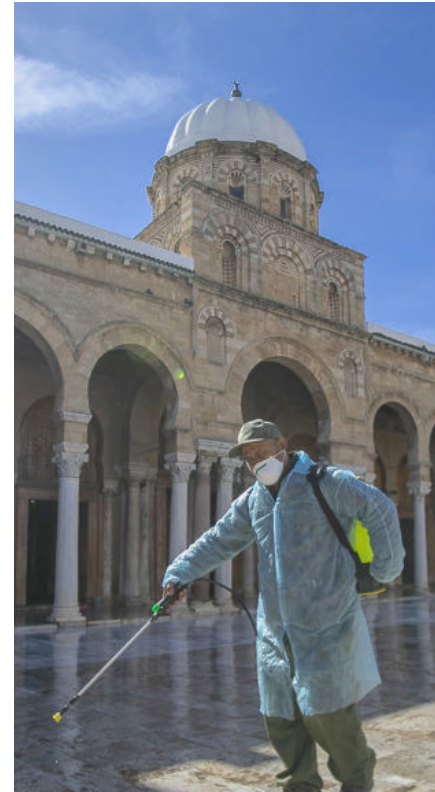
Although the media may highlight stories of domestic violence, the current overload on the healthcare system in the Middle East jeopardizes women's access to reproductive and sexual health resources, leaving survivors of abuse to cope with health concerns alone.<sup>2</sup> Services including safe spaces, shelters, and medical care, which are already limited in the MENA region, are likely to be suspended or reduced.<sup>3</sup>

Even as online services and hotlines continue to operate, women's ability to seek help is limited—nearly half of the women in the Arab region do not have access to a mobile phone or Internet connection.<sup>2</sup> Inaction on behalf of the police, government, and state officials not only permits men to control and abuse women, but also normalizes treating women as second-class citizens.

So, where do we go from here? Can we use COVID-19 to dismantle gender norms in the Middle East?

Women's financial empowerment should be at the forefront of the pandemic response. Financial independence allows women to leave toxic relationships, to say "no" in potentially harmful situations, and to advocate for their own health. Investing in women will make systematic change more likely and strengthen economic growth. This would also require legislative action in recovery measures—from including women in the governmental decision-making body to designating sexual and reproductive health services as essential and granting working women paid leave.<sup>3</sup>

By tackling economic disparities between men and women, the Middle East will be much closer to achieving gender equity.



P.C. Yassine Gaidi via Getty Images

### The Syrian Conflict: International Nuance and Regaining Hopes of Peace

On March 5, Turkey and Russia agreed to stop hostilities in Idlib after escalating violence displaced nearly one million people.<sup>4</sup> Peace agreements such as the Russian-Turkish ceasefire in Idlib have led to decreased violence compared to previous years.<sup>5</sup>

The withdrawal of Russia and Turkey in northern Syria has also allowed other nations to halt their hostilities around the rest of the country, which has in turn allowed international actors in Syria to focus on the pandemic. For example, instead of supporting the Assad regime within Syria, Shia Islamist political and militant groups, more commonly known as Hezbollah, have shifted their resources to help Lebanese civilians.

Similarly, Iranian attention has shifted to battling its massive outbreak, focusing on procuring medical supplies from China instead of sending weapons to Syria.<sup>6</sup> The pandemic is diverting international attention from

## The Pandemic in Syria and Yemen: How Coronavirus is Rewriting the Violence

By Maryanne Koussa

Across the world, the coronavirus pandemic has proven that the only solution is collective action; however, in Syria and Yemen, the rampant spread of the virus only further reveals the fragility of their governments.

Currently, only .014 percent of confirmed global coronavirus cases come from Syria and Yemen, but the external actors involved in these civil conflicts, including the United States, Russia, and Iran, lead the world in the number of cases.<sup>1</sup> The pandemic is playing a role in removing international intervening powers who face domestic battles against COVID-19, thus re-centering these civil wars to address internal issues and reduce violence created by external proxies.

Millions of Syrians remain internally displaced by the actions of a brutal government and non-state offensives. In Yemen, hundreds of thousands of civilians have been killed and millions are starving.<sup>2</sup> Medical facilities in both countries are not equipped for COVID-19 testing or prepared to treat infected patients.<sup>3</sup> The spread of the pandemic would prove disastrous.

To curb the spread of the novel coronavirus, intervening nations such as Russia and Turkey in Syria, and Saudi Arabia in Yemen, have called for ceasefires. Although these are temporary agreements to stop the violence, these ceasefires can potentially mark the beginning of long-term peace processes. By removing international actors from these regions, these countries can focus on rebuilding their nations and working towards achieving peace without external intervention.

Syria, allowing the country to focus on rebuilding its internal stability, which has taken a drastic hit as a result of the Assad regime, political alienation of non-Alawite sects, and severe economic inequality. Without the full military support of Iran, Hezbollah, and Russia, the Ba'athist regime is more vulnerable to change and could be forced into concessions with other political parties.

In the case of the Syrian civil war, the role of external actors places too much power and influence in the hands of the US, Russia, and Iran, ignoring the vital interests of domestic actors. Because Syrian medical facilities are not equipped for COVID-19 testing, the full impact of the virus remains unknown, though it is suspected to be low.<sup>7</sup> Although coronavirus has not spread as rampantly in Syria as it has in other nations, the pandemic's long-term effects may deter global superpowers from exacerbating this nearly decade-long conflict.