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Mahjoob Zweiri
And
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Introduction

On February 2020, Qatar recorded its first case of corona virus, a month later the country announced lockdown, a state of emergency that created both local and international chaos. The lockdown meant that people's healths, their freedom of travel, the operation of their businesses, their education and everything else that societies once took for granted and considered basic day to day activities are at stake. The chaos that covid-19 created came from the fact that it was dangerous and vast spreading, however, chaos also came from the fact that there was lack of knowledge and understanding towards a virus that looked completely different from one patient to the other, and from one country to another.

Although Qatar was dealing with a significant political battle at the time, the Gulf Blockade, it had to deal with a crisis within a crisis, this time though, battling it with the rest of the world. This policy brief will demonstrate the strategies that Qatar applied to contain and limit the collateral damage of the pandemic. It will highlight Qatar's strengths and weaknesses, as well as Qatar's employment of resilience opportunities and possible future threats.

With the outbreak of Covid-19, the entire world went into a state of emergency and needed to employ a strategic plan to control the spread of the pandemic on a state level, but also on an international level. The World Health Organization [WHO], along with numerous scientific research institutions and governments, spent millions of dollars studying the dangerous virus, and constructing a response plan. The response plan needed to include a number of elements; it needed to put out a plan to contain cross-border spread of the virus, as well as contain the virus in single states, especially those that are densely populated. Furthermore, and most importantly, it needed to define the severity of Covid-19, and provide the world with the medical treatment required to limit the number of casualties resulting from the infection of the virus.

Qatar demonstrated what this policy brief will define as 'Health Privilege'. Health Privilege demonstrates the inclusive approach that Qatar took towards fighting the pandemic. It demonstrates the balance it created between international needs and recommendations, while applying what works for the Qatari reality. Qatar created 'Health Privilege' and was a leading example in utilizing its financial ability, as well as its social and political aspects to receive quick treatment for its community, offer aid to the international community, and invest in researching and containing the spread of Covid-19. By doing so, Qatar limited all economic and political harms inflicted by the virus, as well as gained clear local and international trust.

¹ Director of the Gulf Studies Center, Qatar University.

² Research Assistant at the Gulf Studies Center, Qatar University.

How did Qatar obtain Health Privilege in the midst of a global pandemic?

“This crisis has shown that there is no alternative to international cooperation and exchange of experiences, which necessitate the redoubling of the joint efforts to eliminate COVID-19³.” Those were the words of Shaikh Tamim Bin Hamad Al Thani, the Emir of the State of Qatar at the Global Vaccine summit in 2020. Qatar donated millions of dollars in Covid related research and participated in the GAVI-COVAX summit, a summit that was held in Japan in 2020. This summit aimed to generate knowledge on the virus, accelerate the containment of the virus, and arrange to distribute the necessary aid to countries most in need. During the summit, Qatar once again demonstrated its willingness to be a prominent international player and supported over 80 countries in their fights against the virus⁴. Qatar’s total contribution to Corona related aid amounts to over 30 million USD, where 20 million dollars was donated to GAVI-COVAX, as well as 10 million USD dollars to the WHO, making it only one of four countries to donate such sums of money for the fight against corona.⁵ Qatar’s thorough participation in international research and aid programs to contain the pandemic is a strategic use of Qatar’s soft power skills, as well as its financial ability. Qatar was able to employ large sums of money to be one of the leading fighters for the wide spreading virus and ensured to the international community its willingness to invest in controlling the virus. This in return would give Qatar access to research related to the virus, as well as tools to fight it. Finally, it would allow the international community to put trust in Qatar’s actions towards the virus, as well as put trust in the country that would be hosting the biggest upcoming sport event in 2022, The World Cup.

Local Resilience Plan: Where Strengths meet Opportunities

As mentioned above, Qatar raced to purchase the Pfizer-BioNtech vaccine, hours after its clearance for administration,⁶ making it one of the first countries in the world to purchase a Covid-19 approved vaccine, and amongst the first to employ a plan to vaccinate its entire population, local and expatriates, all at the expense of the government. Alongside Qatar’s active participation in generating knowledge and aid against the virus, the state ensured its participation in all major work done towards eliminating the dangers of the virus. In attempts to maximize Qatar’s efforts towards fighting the pandemic, Qatar sent a research team that would observe and partake in research in the labs of Wuhan, where the virus was believed to have first been studied.⁷

³ “His Highness Speaks at the GLOBAL Vaccine Summit 2020.” *Government Communications Office*, 6 June 2020, www.gco.gov.qa/en/speeches/his-highness-speaks-at-the-global-vaccine-summit-2020/.

⁴ “Qatar supports the COVAX facility to accelerate global access to COVID19 vaccines: Minister of Public Health.” *The Peninsula Qatar*, <https://www.thepeninsulaqatar.com/article/02/06/2021/Qatar-supports-the-COVAX-facility-to-accelerate-global-access-to-COVID19-vaccines-Minister-of-Public-Health>.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ “Corona vaccines across the Middle East: Which vaccine is Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Qatar buying?” *The National*, www.thenationalnews.com/world/mena/corona-vaccines-across-the-middle-east-which-vaccine-is-egypt-saudi-arabia-and-qatar-buying-1.1123656.

⁷ “Qatar health expert joins WHO team in Wuhan to investigate Covid-19 origins.” *Doha News*, 17 Jan. 2021, <https://www.dohanews.co/qatar-health-expert-joins-who-team-in-wuhan-to-investigate-covid-19-origins/>.

However, Qatar's international contribution would not have sufficed without its inclusive approach against the virus; therefore, it had to construct a strong resilience plan to be implanted locally. One of the first difficulties that Qatar had to address at the breakout of the covid disease was containing the chaos in the midst of a storm of rumors, inaccurate research information and fear over the consequences of shutting down almost all state activities. Companies who had suffered losses during the blockade on Qatar was now suffering a larger strain on their time and money.

Construction Companies were amongst the most effected economic sectors in Qatar, and the most needed if Qatar planned to continue the operation necessary to complete the two upcoming sporting events taking place in it: the FIFA Arab Cup 2021 and the FIFA World Cup 2022. These companies relied heavily on two elements that were immediately compromised with the breakout of Covid, and those were employing migrant workers on site, and the import of construction material. Labor camps were amongst the first areas to witness a complete lockdown in Qatar. Thousands of migrant workers were expected to refrain from movement within the city of Doha as hundreds contracted covid in the early weeks of the pandemic. Labor camps are highly populated areas on the outskirts of Doha where it was difficult to contain the spread of the virus. Therefore, Qatar took strict action in limiting access to these labor camps, put a halt on the majority of constructional activities around Doha, and ensured that construction workers were fit to resume work and were prioritized in Qatar vaccination timeline.⁸

Qatar only imposed a strict lockdown on all aspect of the community for a short period until it was able to study the situation, and put forth a strategic and feasible solution in place.⁹ Since Qatar was able to purchase vaccines enough for the entire community, it implemented a fast vaccination plan that proved effective over time. Qatar was able to vaccinate more people, in less time than predicted, drastically reducing the numbers of infected people in Qatar. Furthermore, with a gradual and steady process, Qatar lifted travel restrictions and was allowing economic activity to resume in the state to limit the financial impact that the pandemic could potentially have on the residents of Qatar as witnessed in other places in the world. The steps that Qatar took were successful in one main element, which was limiting and reducing the chaos that was first felt at the breakout of the pandemic, as well as gaining the public's trust. Qatar continued a rigorous action plan conducting random covid tests in schools and institutions, and leisure outlets such as malls. Furthermore, people were only allowed to travel across Doha with a mobile application called "Ehteraz" which was linked to one's medical profile. This application demonstrated one's health situation, and whether or not the person was vaccinated. This method allowed the government to ensure control over people getting infected with the virus, as well as limiting people interactions without a lockdown. Qatar was able to limit the spread of the virus in certain strategies without stopping economic activities or putting too many restrictions on the society as whole.¹⁰

Pandemic or not, Qatar is ready to host the World Cup in 2022!

⁸ Tadros, Amjad. "Coronavirus spreads 'exponentially' in Qatar's labor camps." *CBS News*, 19 May 2020, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/coronavirus-in-qatar-spreads-exponentially-in-migrant-worker-labor-camps/>.

⁹ "Qatar reimposes strict lockdown as Covid-19 cases surge." *Al Arabiya English*, 7 Apr. 2021, <https://english.alarabiya.net/coronavirus/2021/04/08/Qatar-reimposes-strict-lockdown-as-COVID-19-cases-surge>.

¹⁰ "Qatar makes COVID-19 app mandatory, experts question efficiency." *Al Jazeera*, 26 May 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/5/26/qatar-makes-covid-19-app-mandatory-experts-question-efficiency>.

Just as the blockade on Qatar was not going to act as an obstacle to Qatar's hosting the World Cup, neither was the Coronavirus going to do so. Qatar employed all resources to ensure three main elements, which are that all infrastructure works were to be completed on time, that the international community trusts Qatar to host the World Cup during these times, and that the Qatari society is protected from the Virus, locally, and from the international fans expected to land in Doha at the end of 2022.

In under two years since the breakout of the virus, Qatar was able to vaccinate around 83% of its population, 10% more than it needed to secure the safety and security of the state.¹¹ It followed a strict vaccination schedule, prioritizing front liners, migrant workers and the fraction of the population most in need for medical protection, and followed that category with the rest of the population according to age and occupation. This way, Qatar ensured the containment of the virus, the trust of its society and the readiness for the population to host the world cup, and resume normal life.

Finally, in yet another demonstration of strategic planning and utilization of its soft power, Qatar announces its intentions to purchase 1 million vaccine shots for its World Cup Fans.¹² By doing so, not only does Qatar ensure that more people have access to the vaccine, a commitment it made at the early stages of the pandemic, it also ensures wider safety and trust in the games it wishes to host, and ensures its capability and readiness for an event with large momentum.

Overall, by utilizing its early access to a number of covid-19 vaccines, Qatar managed to limit the time and money lost in slowing down construction and infrastructural activities needed to ensure the readiness of Qatar for the World Cup. In addition to that, Qatar was able to lead in vaccinating its society, locals and expatriates all at the expense of the government, as well as offer international fans the opportunity to get vaccinated, and to attend the games while adhering to safety guidelines imposed by Qatar.

The Downside: Students and Education most Compromised

Since the breakout of the virus, the state of Qatar has demonstrated its utmost commitment towards the application of recommended Covid-19 prevention policies and has applied them with a local strict approach. Whether it was limiting people's interactions and gatherings, or shifting major educational and business institutions from working on-site to off-site, Qatar worked towards preventing the spread of the pandemic while limiting the level of harm inflicted on the society. However, the educational sector seemed to be one of the most marginalized sectors amongst the community.

With the outbreak of the pandemic, schools and universities were required to adopt distance learning, and with the gradual lifting of the restrictions, different educational institutions were required to tackle the virus in a different way. A number of universities continued to teach off-campus while other introduced the "blended learning" approach, an

¹¹ Bhatia, Gurman, et al. "Qatar: The Latest CORONAVIRUS Counts, Charts and Maps." *Reuters*, 29 Sept. 2021, <https://graphics.reuters.com/world-coronavirus-tracker-and-maps/countries-and-territories/qatar/>.

¹² "Qatar seeking virus jabs for all World Cup visitors." *France 24*, 16 Apr. 2021, <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20210416-qatar-seeking-virus-jabs-for-all-world-cup-visitors>.

approach that requires students to participate in both on and off-campus learning. There was no one single approach that was administered by the Ministry of Education in Qatar, which left both parents and students at a struggle. Many families complained that students were most harmed by the pandemic as schools were expected to shut down for a number of school terms. Parents and students demanded an easier educational platform, and proper training for faculty and teachers to be able to assist the students and smoothen the educational process while blended or studying solely from home.¹³

Seeing that leisure facilities were operating as normal, and employees were expected to fully report back from their offices, it was expected to see families reacting to the school's continuation of the 'blended learning' approach. However, institutions such as the United Nations recognized the difficulties corona imposed on students and urged all countries to gradually lift educational restrictions. Therefore, at the end of September 2020, Qatar announced its plans to ease all Covid related restrictions, and most importantly, the return of all students to their school campuses. Thus, once again, Qatar made sure to respond to both international and local recommendations in regards to the pandemic, and applied the United Nation's recommendation of resuming on campus education for the benefit of its students after considering the drop of local corona cases reported.¹⁴

Conclusion

In conclusion, the years 2020 and 2021 brought forth serious challenges to the global community as a whole. As shown in this policy brief, the state of Qatar was able to use its financial resources to limit the consequences of the pandemic on its society, as well as brand itself as an active international player, and a powerful state that is capable of hosting millions of fans in one of the world's largest sporting events. Through its quick action, and obtaining the approved Covid-19 vaccines, Qatar was able to follow recommendations put forth by international institutions such as the 'WHO' to vaccinate a majority of its society, as well as resuming its commitment to complete all necessary requirements to host the World Cup 2022. Being amongst the countries to first purchase the vaccines, and put forth a strategic vaccination schedule aimed at the entire community, Qatar limited local chaos, and allowed people to resume the 'old norm' at a faster pace compared to the rest of the World. Furthermore, it showed the international community that despite the blockade, and the struggles that Qatar went through in the past years, it was able to purchase and participate in distributing the pandemic vaccines around the world as a small country with tactical and strong financial abilities. Overall, Qatar was able to achieve health privilege during the pandemic through gaining trust from both the international community and its local community. Qatar was able to create a solid resilience plan based on the global community's recommendations and research, while combining it with what works best for the Qatari community. Today, Qatar is witnessed a drastic decrease in covid cases, and it ready to open its doors for the FIFA Arab Cup and the world Cup in 2022.

¹³ "إيجابيات وسلبيات" .. التعليم عن بعد .. إيجابيات وسلبيات" *Al Watan*, 9 Apr. 2021, <https://www.al-watan.com/Writer/id/14542>.

¹⁴ "العرب القطرية. العرب القطرية. الأمم المتحدة تطالب العالم بفتح المدارس.. والدوحة تقف على أرض صلبة" *العرب القطرية*, 29 July 2021, <https://alarab.qa/article/29/07/2021>.