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**Covid-19 in the Gulf
Special Coverage**

**Covid-19 Crisis and Iran-Turkey-Qatar Relations: Economic
Downgrade and Corona Diplomacy
Nesibe Hicret Battaloglu**

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Nesibe Hicret Battaloglu

Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has become a global issue beyond being a health crisis alone. Since its emergence in China, the virus has spread to every continent except Antarctica. The Middle East is no exception and the socio-economic repercussions of the crisis have been severely felt in the region.

Iran was the epicenter of the virus in the Middle East and Tehran reported first confirmed Covid-19 cases on February 19 from religious city of Qom. The number of cases and casualties [surged rapidly since then up to 110,767 and 6.733](#) respectively by May 13, 2020. The virus also travelled around the Gulf, as the confirmed cases from GCC states soared. [Qatar reported first Covid-19 case on February 27, and the tiny Gulf sheikhdom reached the 2nd highest number of cases](#) in Arab countries with [25, 149 cases](#).

In Iran's neighbor Turkey, the first confirmed Covid-19 cases came little later and Turkish Ministry of Health announced first novel coronavirus case of an individual contracted the virus after returning from Europe on March 11. The numbers in Turkey rose to 141, 500 as of 12 May 2020, ranking 9th in terms of confirmed cases in the world.

All three countries, the virus caused relatively low mortality rates. As of 12 May 2020, [Covid-19 related mortality rates](#) stood at 2.75 % in Turkey, 6.08 % in Iran, and 0.06 % in Qatar; while France reported 19.25 %,

14.44% in UK and 11.8 % in Spain. Yet, the outbreak of the pandemic has affected almost every aspect of lay citizens and (inter) state affairs. The extreme measures, from closures of borders and suspensions of air and land traffic to imposed quarantine, have interrupted the flow of people and goods domestically and regionally.

The impact of the crisis on Iran has been particularly severe, exacerbated by the U.S. sanctions and historic low prices of oil, at a time when Tehran certainly needs oil income to [buffer the impact of the sanctions](#). For its part, Doha appears to be prepared for a total lockdown, as Qatar has secured diversified supply chains and moved towards self-sufficiency since the 2017 [blockade by Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates](#). Yet, the tiny Gulf country needs to keep cooperation and communication channels open with its regional allies against massive disinformation campaign amid Covid-19 crisis. Similarly, the economic outlook of Turkey is gloomy and the impact of the Covid-19 is projected to be disrupting Turkish exports and tourism, access to finance, currency [stability and inflation](#). Ankara has to find a fine balance between economic pressures and regional interventions in Syria and recently Libya.

Amid the unfolding impact of Covid-19 crisis, the bilateral relations between Turkey, Iran and Qatar appears to face a rapid downgrade in economic realms. Yet, all of the three countries try to keep communication channels open with each other. This is

particularly apparent in Turkey and Qatar's relations with Iran, showing solidarity and offering aid to crisis-hit country. The soft power approaches of Ankara and Doha towards Tehran and the corona diplomacy during these difficult times provide opportunities to enhance their international standing and shield away regional isolation.

Covid-19 Crisis and Economic Downturn in Bilateral Relations

The bilateral trade between Iran and Turkey is the hardest hit aspect of relations in Covid-19 crisis. There was an already [70% shrink in the trade volume](#) during first quarter of 2020, compared with bilateral exchanges in the corresponding period of the previous year. The re-imposed US sanctions and Trump's "the maximum pressure" policy since 2018 have complicated the bilateral trade relations and caused significant declines. The initial measurements to contain the spread of virus such as closure of borders and air and land traffic, has exacerbated this situation further.

Despite their different positions on the Syria conflict over the last decade, both Iran and Turkey succeeded to maintain cordial relations and scale up bilateral trade. In the trade relations, which usually are in Iran's favor, both countries approached economic relations pragmatically. For Iran, Turkey is the biggest importer of natural gas and historically a back up channel for its economy under several pressures. In return, Turkey views Iran as an important source of natural gas and crude oil at its doorstep to feed its energy demands. Also, Iran is a transit route for Turkish goods for Central Asian Markets, including Qatar since 2017, and, an important [market with](#)

[sizable population for Turkey's non-oil exports](#).

Turkish and Iranian officials have intensified their efforts to resume trade exchanges amid Covid-19 crisis. In a telephone conversation in late April between Turkish President Erdogan and his Iranian counterpart Rouhani it was stressed the importance of plans to preserve the [bilateral trade exchanges at the common border](#) in conformity with the health regulations.

The tourism will also be affected negatively in 2020, as the visitors from [Iran accounted 6.27% of total numbers of foreigners](#) who visited Turkey in 2019. For 2020, Turkey was expected to host 6 million tourists from Iran. Yet, the outbreak of the pandemic has led a devastating impact on tourism sector as the international travels to Turkey are completely stopped at the time of the writing.

The Covid-19 crisis might also affect recently flourishing economic relations between Qatar and Iran. While pursuing a mutually accommodating stance against each other since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, the two Gulf countries enhanced their relations, both politically and economically, amid the blockade against Qatar in 2017. Iran was one of the first countries to offer Qatar to use its airspace and shipping routes to evade the blockade. Also, [Iranian exports to Qatar rose by 181 percent](#) between 2016 and 2017. Yet, the Covid-19 crisis has already started to impact the economic relations between Doha and Tehran, [as Iran-Qatar Joint Economic Committee meeting](#) which was scheduled to take place on April 19 had been cancelled and both countries postponed the following up of the bilateral trade

objectives to post-corona times. It might also endangers the feasibility of [Turkey-Iran-Qatar transportation pact](#) signed in 2017 to boost trade volume between three countries.

Corona Diplomacy and Soft Power

The outbreak of Covid-19 in Iran facilitated humanitarian outreach to the pandemic-hit country from Turkey and Qatar. Turkey sent medical supplies, masks and medicine to Iran on March 27. Similarly, throughout March and April, Qatar [shipped multiple batches of medical aid to Iran](#); the fourth one was sent on April 29 with some 16 tons of medical supplies. Further, [Qatar Airways announced free of charge services](#) to all the people and government who are willing to supply medical aid and medical equipment to Iran. Both countries also exchanged telephone conversations at the highest level with their Iranian counterparts during the crisis.

Humanitarian diplomacy and foreign aid are important pillars of Turkish and Qatari foreign policies. With these gestures, Ankara and Doha prove to be reliable, capable, responsible and responsive partners at difficult times. From soft power analysis perspective, the coronavirus outbreak has enabled better-prepared and better-equipped actors like Turkey and Qatar to articulate soft power currency of benignity, which “reassures others of the agent’s peaceful or benevolent intentions, thereby inviting cooperation”.

Covid-19 crisis and its devastating impact on Iran has led to willingness to enhance diplomatic relations and humanitarian reach from Turkey and Qatar. The crisis created a room for Iran’s allies to initiate foreign

policy moves to enhance their soft power and international standings at a time when larger powers are struggling to contain the spread of virus domestically.

Conclusion

The novel Covid-19 virus has created big troubles and small opportunities for countries in the Middle East. The recent developments in the region, most notable the Gulf crisis and common animosity towards foreign policy stances of UAE and Saudi Arabia have brought Turkey, Iran and Qatar closer to develop mutually beneficial relationships. Yet, physical restrictions, economic hardships and future uncertainties amid coronavirus outbreak shadow the future of the relations. While Turkey and Qatar try their best to capitalize on corona diplomacy and humanitarian aid opportunities to show their good will towards Iran, the downgrading of economic relations would bring political divergences between those countries to surface sooner than expected. The most recent battle over Idlib in Syria presents a testing ground for Tehran’s relations with Ankara amid unfolding developments in 2020, as Turkey’s operations in Idlib front faced [a condemnation from Iran](#). From Qatar’s perspective, Doha has to walk in a tightrope to maintain [its pragmatic relations with Iran without irking Washington](#) amid Trump’s unbending pressure on Tehran.

About the author

Nesibe Hicret Battaloglu is a PhD candidate in Middle East Technical University (METU) Area Studies Program. Battaloglu completed

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