

What explains the Saudi success so far in combating the coronavirus outbreak in the Kingdom

by Hugh Fitzgerald



Saudi Arabia is an authoritarian state, an absolute monarchy, which requires a curtailment of human rights, as enshrined in Western democracies, but also, at a time of crisis, this authoritarianism allows the government to act swiftly and relentlessly, as it has in its efforts to combat the coronavirus outbreak. So far it has performed admirably, and though there are many unflattering things to be said about Saudi Arabia, its response to the coronavirus is not one of them.

Mohammed Alsherebi, himself a rich Saudi businessman, grew

warm dilating upon this theme of Saudi competence in euronews, [here](#).

Saudi Arabia's bold, swift response to COVID-19 is a lesson to western countries, and means that there are – so far – minimal cases and only one death in the country. Compare this with neighbouring Iran, where deaths are well into four figures, or Turkey, where some health professionals speculate that 60% of the country is now COVID-positive.

Unlike some of its western allies, Saudi Arabia has taken the deadly coronavirus outbreak seriously from the very outset. The refusal to do the same in some governments in the West may have grave consequences for the public's trust in their leaders, and even the protection of human rights.

If the author, Mohammed Alsherebi, thinks that the U.S. – what other Western allies do the Saudis have? – did not “take the deadly coronavirus outbreak seriously,” he is, I think, unfair to the Trump administration. There were at most two or three weeks before the full extent of what was needed to combat the outbreak became clear, but then social distancing and shutting down of restaurants, stores, and workplaces were swiftly imposed. The country is now engaged in the massive production of test kits for the virus (with constant improvements in their efficacy), masks, gowns, and of such essential medical equipment as ventilators (now being produced by General Motors, acting under Presidential order).

Before the Kingdom had even recorded a single case of coronavirus, it banned foreign worshippers from performing pilgrimage in the holy city of Mecca, which no doubt halted the advance of the deadly disease. Compare this with, for example, neighbouring Iran which publicly claimed that God will protect their country and encouraged spiritual practices which allowed the spread of the disease in holy sites.

Alsherebi compares the quick Saudi response, preventing foreign worshippers from even going to Mecca, where crowds of pilgrims routinely gather, and closing access to mosques even before a single coronavirus death had been recorded in the Kingdom, with the agonizingly slow response of Iran's ruling theocrats, including the Supreme Leader, who believes in bizarre conspiracy theories; he thinks "djinn" might be cooperating with Americans to lay the Iranians low. Then there are those Shi'ite clerics who insist that mosques should remain open because, in their view, devout Muslims will in any case prove immune to the coronavirus. The worst of Iran's mistakes was in not shutting down the epicenter of the disease in that country, the city of Qom, where Shi'ite pilgrims and students in the city's many seminaries are now known to have spread the virus from Qom to at least eight countries: Bahrain, Kuwait, the UAE, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Pakistan, and Afghanistan.

While some governments have been paralyzed by the confusion, fear and uncertainty surrounding the pandemic, Riyadh has taken tough decisions for the greater good – and continues to do so. While many airports in Europe and North America remain open for flights, the Kingdom has gone further and faster by suspending all international flights into the country for two weeks. It is decisive acts like these which give Saudis confidence in their ability to fight this disease."

The Kingdom is an authoritarian state with one-tenth the population of the United States, which makes it much easier to impose, monitor, and enforce compliance with new rules designed to limit the coronavirus outbreak. The Saudi rulers do not need to win parliamentary or popular approval, as happens in North America and Western Europe. The system of federalism in the United States, with the national and state governments having different powers and responsibilities, complicates matters in fighting the epidemic; some states, having been stricken more severely with the coronavirus (as

New York, Washington, and California), have instituted lockdowns sooner than the other states; no nation-wide lockdown has yet been deemed necessary. Saudi Arabia was able to take decisive action at once because of its authoritarian, no-opposition-permitted form of government. Because of its vast cushion of oil revenues, it has less need to worry about the economic consequences of measures taken to combat the virus, such as shutting down all restaurants and shops save for grocery stores and pharmacies – than do the American and European governments. Besides, most of the workers affected by such restaurant and retail shutdowns are foreign workers, who if they become unemployed can simply be sent home by the Saudi government.

Alsherebi continues:

Further, the everyday reality for Saudis under the pandemic could not be more different to citizens of these western superpowers. Commentators have compared everyday life for Britons to those of refugees, and have warned of an impending humanitarian crisis if the outbreak is not dealt with properly. These concerns are based on rampant price gouging, panic buying and stockpiling, affecting people's ability to purchase even basic necessities.

By contrast, Saudi Arabia has protected its people's interests from day one, with citizens and residents finding themselves spoilt for choice in supermarkets, while shoppers in the Western world struggle, and sometimes fight, to secure basic food for their families. This is no accident: it is the result of the Kingdom's timely and carefully managed response to the situation, including open and transparent communication with its people.

There has been a mass mobilisation of Saudi government, media and civil society to create the kind of overnight awareness, focus and solidarity that is essential during a global pandemic. And it is this mobilisation that is sorely lacking

in some Western capitals.

For example, Jeddah-based Arab News, the largest English language newspaper in the region, has modified its logo on Twitter to be partially covered by a facemask. This is not a marketing ploy; it signals to the general public the importance of collective action to fight the disease at all levels of society. The equivalent in the UK would be to have a facemask covering the second "B" in the BBC's logo, something that perhaps the broadcaster should consider.

Saudi Arabia's version of the "lockdown" has protected the public while preserving daily life. It has acted quickly to close markets, shopping malls, beauty salons and gatherings in public places, following its suspension of schools in previous weeks. At the same time, supplies and services have been secured, and enforcement has not been heavy-handed, unlike in some parts of mainland Europe.

We only have Alsherebi's word for it that enforcement of the Saudi lockdown has not been "heavy-handed." That would be out of character of the Saudi police, who have in the past not hesitated to enforce rules aggressively (as did the mutaween, the religious police, too, until quite recently, when the Crown Prince decreased their powers), and are not likely to have behaved any differently when it was a matter of enforcing the closing of restaurants, stores, shopping malls, and gatherings in public places.

Contrast the response in Riyadh with that in parts of Europe and North America, where gentle encouragement rather than clear instructions, and mixed messages as opposed to coherent strategies, have undoubtedly cost lives.

It is true that the Saudi people, used to an authoritarian regime that brooks of no dissent, were able to fall swiftly into line with the new regulations. But that society-wide

submission, so useful during a time of pandemic, has a lot less to recommend it in normal times, where one would wish for a less submissive population, keen to defend and expand its own rights, and to limit the powers of an authoritarian regime.

There are fewer challenges to a society and a government greater than a global pandemic, and the associated economic downturn. The fact that Saudi has responded so well – despite neighbouring one of the global epicentres of the disease [Iran]- shows that the Kingdom's leadership is more fluid and resilient than perhaps some outside observers realise.

This note of appreciation, from someone who clearly has flourished financially in Saudi Arabia – Alsherebi describes himself as an “entrepreneur and philanthropist,” which means he is very rich – will no doubt win him even more goodwill, and opportunities to add to his fortune, from his masters in Riyadh. But he does have a point: the Saudis anticipated what needed to be done even before the first coronavirus case in the Kingdom was announced, while neighboring Iran delayed by more than a month the shutdown required (and even that has been incomplete when it finally came, for many mosques and shrines remain open in Iran) and consistently has fed its population misinformation, undercounting the numbers of infected and dead by a factor of ten. The Saudis swiftly instituted the strictest measures, cutting off foreign pilgrims' access to Mecca. By March 20, having closed down all other mosques in the country to communal prayer, the Saudi government suspended the holding of daily prayers and the weekly Friday prayers inside and outside the walls of the Masjid al-Haram in Mecca and the Masjid an-Nabawi in Medina. Compare that with the mosques, and shrines, still being visited in Iran by the faithful who refuse to take seriously the Iranian government's advisories – not rules – to stay away from communal prayer.

Good governance is one of the key aims of the Kingdom's Vision 2030 – the country's flagship policy for change in the region. It is a region that will be hit harder than most by COVID-19. Iran is burying its people in mass graves. Turkey is locking people up for even posting about it.

Saudi Arabia, on the other hand, is showing that the complex mix of personal freedoms, public safety and public health can be balanced, even at the most difficult of times. And the Kingdom's definition of human rights includes, above all, the right to human life.

What explains the Saudi success so far in combating the coronavirus outbreak in the Kingdom is not, as Alsherebi wishes you to believe, the balancing of a “complex mix of personal freedoms, public safety and public health.” There are very few “personal freedoms” in Saudi Arabia. It is, rather, the lack of most personal freedoms, and of agency, that explains how quickly the Saudi people heard the commands from on high dealing with the coronavirus, and fell at once into line with the new regulations.

Does Mohammed Alsherebi think that the Saudi Vision 2030 – that is, the grandiose ideas for changing the kingdom that come from the fevered brow of Crown Prince Mohammed –really includes “good governance” as one of its “key aims”? Nothing in the reports that have been published about Vision 2030 refers to “good governance” – that is, a government more responsive to its people's well-being, and answerable to them for failures to provide that well-being. There is nothing in Vision 2030 about enlarging political freedoms, granting more civil rights such as freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, and freedom of religion (including the right to apostasize). There is nothing about establishing a national legislative body whose members will be elected rather than appointed, nothing about the possibility of permitting an organized opposition, nothing about placing limits on the still

untrammelled power of the Saudi royal family, especially as regards their appropriating much of the nation's oil wealth for themselves.

That the Saudi rulers dealt so swiftly with the coronavirus outbreak was impressive, especially when compared with the dithering and crazed conspiracy theories in neighboring Iran where too many mosques have stayed open for too long. But the Saudi rulers will have to change the Kingdom much more to deserve the high praise Mohammed Alsherebi lavishes upon them, beginning with the most important change of all. And that would mean elevating the political status of the people of Saudi Arabia, long overdue, transforming them from being subjects, to becoming citizens.

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