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

**Covid-19 in Qatar: Well Versed in Crisis Management
Marc Owen Jones**

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Covid-19 in Qatar: Well Versed in Crisis Management

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Introduction

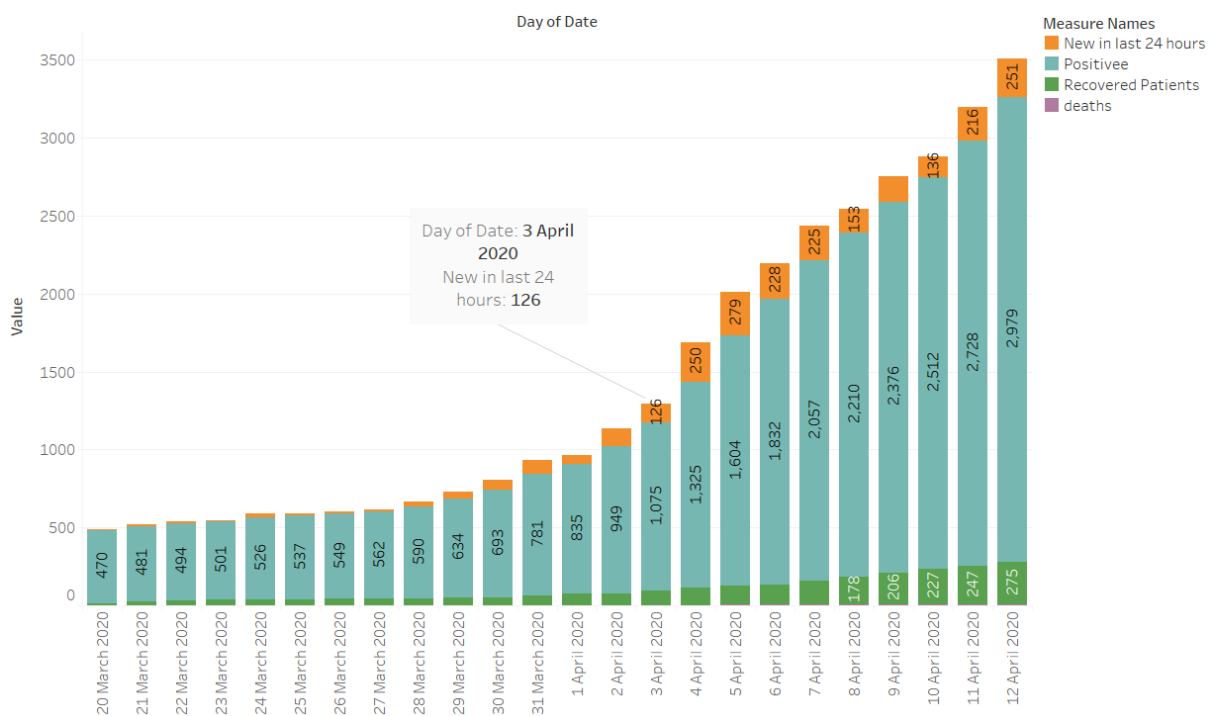
As of April 13th 2020, Qatar has 2979 positive cases of Covid-19. Like a number of other countries, Qatar was caught off guard by the novel respiratory virus. Initially assessed as posing a low risk to the country, the first limited spate of cases offered a false sense of security. These were mostly Qatari nationals arriving back from Iran, where the outbreak had already escalated considerably. [The first reported case](#) was a Qatari national who had been in Iran. He was quarantined on approximately the 27th February.

By 4th March, Qatar was still assessing the risk of Covid-19 spread as ‘low’, with only 8 confirmed cases, [all of whom](#) were Qatari nationals who had recently been to Iran. This all changed after employees in the central market and a hypermarket were tested positive

for Covid-19 around 8th March. This led to the almost immediate closure of all schools and universities, and ramped up contact tracing and testing.

The general ambivalent global response to Covid-19, which tended to oscillate between excessive zeal and trivialising the severity of the crisis, has led to a challenging environment for encouraging social distancing.

Qatar initially had some difficulty enforcing self-isolation demands on people, which led to the highly unusual action of naming and shaming 14 nationals [who had](#) violated their own pledges to self isolate after returning from abroad. The severity of the crisis was eventually made clear as the government closed mosques and suspended Friday prayers around the middle of March.



Figures

Despite these initial difficulties, death rates are low. The known mortality rate in Qatar based on government figures and those from Johns Hopkins University is 0.3%, and mirrors those of smaller neighbouring Gulf countries, which range from 0.1% (Kuwait) to Bahrain (0.6%). Saudi Arabia's death rate, by contrast, is around 1.4%. This places Qatar well below the World Health Organisation's 3rd March estimate of a 3.4% global death rate. Although such figures are highly formative, most Gulf countries have demographic characteristics with a relatively small elderly population. As Covid-19 is more deadly to those aged 70 and above, this could partly explain why Qatar has a relatively low mortality rate. In addition to social distancing measures, the affected demographics may have been abruptly isolated. The authorities have cordoned off sections of the industrial zones inhabited by large numbers of mostly Asian migrant workers [due to an outbreak](#) among some members of the community. The government's willingness to carry out strict isolation of certain communities will have also mitigated some of the potential spread, but not before [drawing criticism from](#) human rights organisations.

	Active	Confirmed	Criteria Deaths	Recovered	Death Rate
Bahrain	341	823	5	477	0.607533414
Kuwait	743	855	1	111	0.116959064
Oman	345	419	2	72	0.477326969
Qatar	2,026	2,210	6	178	0.271493213
Saudi Arabia	2,260	2,932	41	631	1.398362892
UAE	2,408	2,659	12	239	0.451297480

Economy and Business

Qatar had reason to approach the corona crisis with a guarded, yet pragmatic outlook. The global nature of the pandemic has raised issued about

the long-term economic consequences of Covid-19. The ruler asked the Government to suspend \$8.2 billion in unawarded contracts related to capital expenditure projects. This was premised on fears that the coronavirus [could prompt](#) a recession. This bleak outlook has been underpinned by the recent oil producing wars between Russia and Saudi Arabia, which have resulted in low oil prices.

Despite this, Qatar has moved to provide financial support across multiple facets of the economy. The stock market is still functioning, and some banks have moved to [offer loan](#) deferment for SMEs due to the domestic economic downturn caused by the closure of many commercial premises. Other mitigation measures undertaken by the Qatari government include the issuing of [\\$10 billion](#) of Eurobonds in a deal. In addition to this, the Supreme Committee for Crisis Management set up to tackle the Covid-19 outbreak has asked Qatar Development Bank to [postpone instalments](#) for a period of six months. The government has also pledged a QR75billion stimulus package for the private sector, and a further QR10 billion of government investment in the Qatar Stock Exchange (QSE). QSE's chief executive, Rashid Al Mansoori, has also stated that two IPOS are [still in the pipeline](#) for 2020 and that QSE is operating as normal. Other large commercial centres such as the Mall of Qatar have exempted [tenants from rents](#) from March until May 2020, offering further relief for impacted businesses.

Since the Saudi-led blockade of 2017, Qatar has sought to expand its multilateralism in order to solidify alliances and relationships to ensure political and economic stability. As such, some of the country's flagship

businesses, such as Qatar Airways, have continued to provide services in order to fill in the gaps left by other carriers who have suspended services. Although Qatar Airways has [reduced daily flights](#) from 250 a day to 75, they have continued to operate a large number of cargo flights while [repatriating citizens](#) whose bookings on other airlines have been cancelled. In addition to this, CEO Akbar Al Baker has estimated around an 80% reduction in revenues. Despite this adversity, Al Baker also suggested that Qatar Airways was likely to come out of this crisis in an advantageous position, with the potential demise of other airlines.

Foreign Affairs: Between Infodemics and Pandemics

In addition to the economic and social impacts of Covid-19, Qatar has once again been targeted by Covid-19-related propaganda. The tentacles of the Gulf Crisis that began in 2017 have already seen the Covid-19 outbreak exploited by the Saudi-led quartet to attack Qatar. As early as February 2nd 2020, long before Qatar had officially confirmed its first case of Covid-19, anonymous Twitter accounts were spreading disinformation that Qatar had a large Covid-19 and scabies outbreak. Other Twitter accounts that have since been [suspended have accused](#) Qatar of spreading the virus as far as Argentina. Much of this disinformation has taken place on social media, with various commentators spreading conspiracy theories. Noura Almoteari, a Saudi-based Journalist claimed Qatar had known about Covid-19 since 2015, and had paid billions to China to grow the virus. She said that Qatar had intended to use the virus to undermine Saudi's Vision 2030 and the Dubai 2020 Expo.

Almoteari also coined the hashtag, "Qatar is Corona".

Despite the adversity presented by Covid-19, as well as the added variable of hostility from several neighbouring states, Qatar's recent experience in the Gulf Crisis has perhaps lent it some valuable experience in crisis management and social distancing. The government have been quick to offer financial stimuli, and have kept public opinion onside in dealing with the crisis, without overreacting. Healthcare and testing is increasing at a steady rate, and while the positive cases are still on the rise, Qatar is in a good position to weather the crisis in the near future.

About the author

Marc Owen Jones is an Assistant Professor of Middle East Studies at Hamad bin Khalifa University. He holds a PhD in Government and International Affairs from Durham University, UK. He researches disinformation on social media and Gulf politics. His upcoming monograph 'Political Repression in Bahrain' with Cambridge University Press is due out in June 2020. His second monograph on Disinformation in the Middle East published with Hurst will be out in early 2021.

About the Gulf Insights series:

The "Gulf Insights" series is published by the Gulf Studies Center on a weekly base with the aim to promote informed debate with academic depth. The Gulf Insights are commentaries on pressing regional issues written by the GSC/GSP faculty, staff PhD and MA students, as well as guest scholars, and they can be between 1,200 to 1,500 words.

All articles published under "Gulf Insight" series have been discussed internally but they reflect the opinion and views of the authors, and do not reflect the views of the Center, the College of Arts and Sciences or Qatar University.