

Jordan's Response to Covid-19

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Jordan's COVID-19 Response Measures:

- The Jordanian government responded to the outbreak of covid-19 early on and began imposing preventative measures as early as March 7. This included flight bans and halting trade from countries that had confirmed outbreaks.
- Subsequently, on 12 March, wider ranging preventative measures were imposed. This included school closures, flight bans, and the banning of mass gathering such as conferences, sporting events and prayers in places of worship. Various e-learning and remote learning educational platforms were used to ensure continued educational services for public and private schools.
- Jordanian citizens abroad were given a few days to return to Jordan before a full border closure was imposed. Citizens and other residents who managed to return to the country before the closure were transported and lodged at the expense of the government at hotels in the Dead Sea and Amman. The hotels were under lockdown and were effectively under government control with minimal hotel staff present to ensure business continuity. Periodic testing and health checks were being conducted regularly. After the two-week period, the government arranged for the individual transportation of residents to their homes and made them sign declarations to continue a self-imposed quarantine at home for another two weeks.
- When the government determined that social distancing measures were not being strictly adhered to by sizeable segments of the population, a strict curfew was imposed starting March 17, invoking a national defense act passed in 1992. The lockdown was extensive for the first two or three days and the government attempted to deliver basic food items to residents of different neighborhoods with mixed results. The private sector and non-essential governmental institutions were requested to work remotely.
- Recognizing the unsustainability and implausibility of this arrangement, the curfew was gradually lifted a few days later so that the provision of basic and vital services could be resumed by the private sector. This included food and medical home deliveries and the resumption of local manufacturing and other activities deemed to be necessary. Supermarkets, pharmacies, and financial institutions were open for a limited number of hours using skeleton staff each day of the work week, providing they observed best practices when it came to social distancing, hygiene, and disinfection. Furthermore, citizens were only allowed to come to these service providers by

foot. The purpose of this latter step was to ensure that there would be no hoarding of goods and that vehicle traffic would be prioritized for essential purposes.

- Specific concern and measures were extended to vulnerable communities such as the elderly, the disabled and refugee populations in addition to segments of the population that have subsistence livings (day laborers, those below poverty lines, etc.). Public relief campaigns were launched with a view to minimize the impact on all these communities.
- Special care was also given to ensure that those on the frontlines were protected and out of harm's way. This included public health and medical staff and personnel of the institutions imposing the curfew. Thus far, one member of the medical community was reported to be among the 278 confirmed cases in the country.
- Before the curfew was imposed, a wedding took place in the northern city of Irbid where at least one member of the bride's family was confirmed to have covid-19. Concerns that he had infected other attendees forced stricter measures and higher testing in the city and the governorate at large.
- A recent poll by the Strategic Studies Center found that 74% of Jordanians approve of the measures taken by their government. Key to managing the crisis was trust, credibility, and quick corrective action when policies were seen as unsuccessful. This was achieved by restricting public communication to only a few governmental representatives, streamlining public and internal communication, and quickly dispelling false information and rumors. Furthermore, the willingness of the government to act swiftly to intercept violators was important in imposing public order and raising public awareness about the seriousness of the threats. Citizens in violation have had their vehicles impounded at their own expense and issued fines. Repeat offenders were treated more seriously.
- The National Center for Security and Crises Management (NCSCM), a civilian-military hybrid organization, was designated as the lead entity in charge of the crisis and hosted the operations center overseeing all aspects of the crisis. Its ability to bridge between official civilian and military/security institutions was critical to the success of the response. As was the ability of the Center to bridge between scientific and policy communities.
- Challenges were plenty during the management of the crisis, especially in ensuring that the provision of medical and other supplies were not disrupted by global supply chain disruptions. The ability of the government to work closely with the private sector and professional associations was key in ensuring that the blunt of these disruptions were minimized. The government also worked closely working with researchers and academic institutions to test and validate alternative testing procedures, and produce medical and other equipment and material domestically that could be needed for the crisis.
- It is worth noting that Jordan has been working on organizing its biosecurity/biosafety sectors since 2017 and recently passed legislation in May 2019 calling for the formation of a National Biosecurity/Biosafety Committee to oversee the sector, which was subsequently formed in

September. The breadth of representation in the Committee perfectly captures the whole of government/whole of society approach needed to further biosecurity/biosafety objectives. It includes representatives of the following communities: public health, agriculture and zoonotic, military/security, academia, private sector and relevant non-governmental organizations such as the one that I am heading, the Middle East Scientific Institute for Security (MESIS).

Summary and Next Steps:

Jordan's primary objective has been to "flatten the curve" and contain the outbreak. Surely, there are significant economic and social costs and repercussions to bear from this action which the authorities do not deny. The thinking seems to be that these economic and social costs would have to be paid tenfold in the future if the outbreak was not contained. Likewise, it appears that now that the government is committed to this course of action, it has to see it through to fruition. This necessitates patience and excellent communication. It also necessitates that cases are identified quickly through widespread testing and contact tracing and that cases are treated quickly and effectively so that the health sector does not become overwhelmed.

A view of cumulative cases in Jordan since the first reported case demonstrates success of authorities for the time being in flattening the curve. This has largely been the case in most countries in the region where preventative measures have been imposed. It is hoped that this trend will be maintained going forward and that the country can start the long process of recovery.



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Al-Sharif Nasser bin Nasser is the managing director of the Middle East Scientific Institute for Security based in Amman, Jordan. In this position, he focuses on addressing chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear (CBRN) risks across the region. Mr. Nasser is also the head of the Middle East Regional Secretariat, the first of eight secretariats to be established globally under the European Union's Centres of Excellence initiative on CBRN issues.

He is also the founder of Infosynth, a strategic advisory firm offering guidance to corporate and governmental clients with interests and prospects in the Middle East.

Previously, Mr. Nasser worked in the office of His Majesty King Abdullah II of Jordan, where he last served as senior analyst in the Foreign Affairs Directorate. During that time, he managed several bilateral and thematic files and led analytical studies on Jordan's regional and international relations.

Mr. Nasser is also involved with numerous organizations. He served as the chairman of a leading insurance company in Jordan and currently serves as the vice chairman of a public national commission offering support to injured and disabled veterans, as well as the president of a charity that offers therapeutic riding services to children with special needs. He received his master's degree in Near Eastern studies from Princeton University and his undergraduate degree in environmental science and policy and business management from Clark University in Worcester, Massachusetts (2001). Nasser is also the chair of the Princeton alumni committee in Jordan since 2004 and mentor for Middle East alumni committees since 2017.

In 2015, Mr. Nasser was selected by the World Economic Forum as a "Young Global Leader," along with 187 candidates globally. In 2018, he became a non-resident scholar of the Washington-based Middle East Institute where he occasionally writes about regional security issues.

