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America amidst Coronavirus: Implications for the Future

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The United States' implementation of a mitigation strategy to combat the coronavirus has been slow and disjointed, and that stands to hinder its ability to cope with the pandemic. The results of the outbreak will likely be significant in the domestic arena, with combined public health-economic crises weighing heavily on political outcomes, changing the way electoral campaigns are run as well as how votes are cast. In the global context, the US is expected to turn inward as it seeks to cope with and then recover from the multi-dimensional crisis – that could have negative implications for Israel, including the potential for reductions in annual foreign assistance from Washington.

The United States approach to the coronavirus pandemic was noticeably halting until a March 16, 2020 press conference, when President Trump assessed, “It’s bad. It’s bad.” The President’s shift to a more somber approach reportedly occurred after he received the data regarding the damage to China’s economy in the first quarter of 2020 caused by the coronavirus outbreak. Though much remains uncertain regarding the infectious disease and how the US approach to the pandemic might evolve, the crisis will likely have a significant impact on the US in the domestic and international arenas.

The United States has several advantages in coping with the coronavirus compared with many other countries that have been overwhelmed by the crisis. First, the US is powerful by almost any metric – with an advanced economy that is the world’s largest, as a leader in technological innovation, with massive amounts of resources at its disposal, and with a proven ability to meet complex challenges successfully. Second, America’s at-risk population of those 65 years and older (16 percent) is significantly smaller percentage-wise than in Italy (24 percent) and Spain (19 percent).

However, Washington also faces formidable challenges that may hamper an effective response. These include the lack of adequate testing kits and protective equipment due to a delayed response and bureaucratic hurdles; the delegation of many responsibilities to state and local levels rather than a coordinated federal approach, which has [reportedly turned states into “competitors”](#) rather than partners; and mixed messaging from public officials regarding social distancing to slow the spread of the coronavirus. In addition, while the US

medical system is capable of providing some of the most advanced treatments in the world, it has also been [assessed](#) as “the world’s most expensive yet least effective” system, and tens of millions of uninsured Americans lack access to it at reasonable cost.

The outbreak of COVID-19 in the US appears to have accelerated in recent days, with figures of [over 50,000 confirmed cases, over 700 fatalities, and 300 recoveries](#). The number of confirmed cases in the US is increasing rapidly not only because the disease is spreading quickly, but also because more testing kits have only recently become available following an extended shortage. Thus far, around 300,000 people out of a population of approximately 330,000,000 have been tested.

Considering that President Trump has tied his political fortunes to the [country’s economic success](#), he likely sought to delay taking action that could severely hurt the markets for as long as possible. In retrospect, this made a strategy of containment, i.e., suppressing the spread of the disease as South Korea did, impossible; the US has since adopted an approach of mitigation to reduce the rate at which the infection spreads by taking measures such as social distancing to avoid overburdening the medical system.

The degree to which mitigation policies and measures are enforced throughout the US is determined on the state and local levels. For its part, the federal government has banned inbound flights from Europe and the UK, barred entry to foreign nationals who had recently visited China, declared a state of emergency, invoked the Defense Production Act, and passed measures to fund health agencies, coronavirus testing, and sick leave for employees of medium-sized businesses. Most recently, the White House and Congress, looking at forecasts of unemployment in excess of 20 percent, appear to be moving ahead on an economic stimulus packages of about two trillion dollars.

Implications

The ongoing health crisis in the US has, in turn, translated into an extremely volatile economic situation, which included both the largest stock market losses since 1987 and the biggest rallies since 2008. For the US President, who ran and is running for reelection on the platform of economic success, there is a strong incentive to balance between taking precautionary measures that minimize the health crisis and not stifling economic activity any more than absolutely necessary. Thus far, the policy appears to be a “self-inflicted recession” by slowing down the economic activity to reduce the spread of the coronavirus, which is coupled with a major economic stimulus to cushion the blow. But Trump’s concern about the political economic crisis may motivate him to change strategies. In late March, he began to echo the views of various conservative commentators to the effect that “the cure cannot be worse than the problem itself.” These and other comments are interpreted by some as a precursor to a call by the administration to end at least some forms

of social distancing to enable portions of the economy that are shut down to reopen. Even if Trump were to make such a call, various state governors and city mayors might maintain shutdown orders.

The occurrence of these combined economic and public health crises in advance of the November 2020 election will likely influence Trump's [chances of reelection](#), though in what way remains uncertain. The [state of the economy](#) is one of the primary indicators regarding the likelihood of reelection, so the recent downturn would appear to harm the incumbent at the polls. But [over 55 percent of Americans currently approve of Trump's handling of the coronavirus pandemic](#), significantly [higher than the President's general approval rating](#), indicating Americans may rally around their President at this time of crisis.

The outcome of the Democratic primaries could be affected by the outbreak as well. Some have ascribed Vice President Joe Biden's latest surge over rival Bernie Sanders as an indication that voters are now attributing greater importance to experience handling crises at high levels of government and the promotion of stability over "revolution." That trend could change if the crises worsen and extreme elements on both sides of the political spectrum seek to exploit them.

It is highly likely that the 2020 presidential campaigns as well as the voting process will be conducted somewhat differently than in years past. Large rallies are now public health risks, and so [Republicans](#) and [Democrats](#) have opted to forego these traditional campaign staples. Also, if the coronavirus has not yet subsided by November 2020, conducting in-person voting on election day would risk repeating the [mistake made by Tehran](#), which ultimately contributed to the ongoing public health catastrophe in Iran. But efforts to adapt may be complicated by the fact that each state maintains its own voting procedures — some enabling widespread vote-by-mail and early voting, others offering limited options for these procedures, and still others outlawing them altogether. There may not be time for states that lack such voting options to put in place the legal and logistical infrastructure, and overcome opposition to doing so, before the November ballot. There is no provision in US law for delaying the federal election, and indeed, the United States has never failed to hold a national election on time.

On the international level, the implications of the crisis could reinforce several preexisting trends, including: US retrenchment from its role as leader of the West; receding globalization; and the rise of China on the global stage. First, the US further strained transatlantic relations by not only failing to coordinate approaches with allies in Europe but announcing actions that directly affected them, including the ban of flights from the continent to the US, without any notice or consultation. Looking ahead, even if foreign policy traditionalist Joe Biden wins the 2020 presidential election, the US is likely to be

heavily preoccupied by coping with and recovering from the effects of coronavirus rather than foreign policy for years to come.

Second, with the massive disruption of global supply chains caused by the virus, it is probable that many companies will take more serious consideration of the vulnerabilities of international trade and seek to minimize exposure. The decline of globalization and free trade was evident on the political realm during the 2016 presidential elections, when both candidates renounced the Trans-Pacific Partnership; now the private sector, another primary driver of globalization, may follow suit.

Third, China appears to have played the role of both arsonist and firefighter in this pandemic, but it may yet benefit. Since the outbreak, Beijing has provided urgent medical supplies to Italy, Serbia, and Iran; this was complemented by a Chinese state-media campaign praising Chinese actions and decrying Trump as “irresponsible and incompetent.” As the US remains focused on its domestic affairs, China has seized the opportunity to present itself as the responsible steward of global affairs. However, it remains to be seen whether this narrative gains international credibility and successfully glosses over Chinese actions that contributed to the severity of the pandemic.

The implications of a more inward-focused US enduring a recession could be significant for Israel. First, drastic reductions in Washington’s foreign assistance are conceivable in such a scenario, and Israel might not be spared as it was from previous cuts under the Trump administration. Second, because the US is Israel’s largest trading partner and [source of foreign direct investment](#), an economic downturn in the US would presumably have negative consequences for Israel’s economy. Third, if “past is prologue,” the vacuum created by reduced US engagement in the Middle East could be filled by actors with agendas hostile to Israel’s interests.