Saudi Arabia’s RESPONSE TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC
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Disclaimer:
This report relies on data up to and including the 7th of April, 2020. Hence, all observations and conclusions made are valid up to that date, and may change in the future given the volatility of the COVID-19 Pandemic.
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The coronavirus first emerged in China during the end of 2019 as cases of pneumonia of an unknown cause started to accumulate between the end of December 2019 and mid January 2020; the Chinese authorities have since then identified a new strain of the coronavirus on the 7th of January 2020. The World Health Organization has classified COVID-19 as a pandemic on the 11th of March 2020.

Since then and until the 7th of April 2020, more than 200 countries and territories have recorded cases of the new virus. Total confirmed cases amount to more than 1.2 Million, and total deaths amount to more than 72,000. During the early days of the outbreak, confirmed cases were mostly concentrated in the Western Pacific Region, specifically China, as shown in Figure 1, and that began to change as the virus began spreading, making the two new centers of the outbreak the United States and Europe.

As the spread and evolution of the virus differ from one country to another, and based on the assumption that the main determinants of a country’s success in limiting the spread of the virus are the measures taken by the government along with their timings, we will review the measures taken by Saudi Arabia that aim to limit the spread of COVID-19 relative to other countries4, by comparing the measures taken and the resulting outcomes.

Actions that are taken by the government to mitigate the social and economic impacts of the virus will not be the focus of this report as they do not play a direct role in limiting the spread of the virus.

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1- Territories include territories, areas, overseas dependencies and other jurisdictions of similar status
2- Based on the World Health Organization (WHO) case definitions
3- Source: WHO
4- Four G-20 countries including US, South Korea, France and UK, in addition to Spain
Saudi Arabia was the 67th country to register a confirmed case of the virus, and it did so on the 2nd of March 2020. Since then, the number of confirmed cases in the Kingdom increased at an approximate daily rate of 25%, leading to a total number of 2,752 confirmed cases and 38 deaths, up to the 7th of April 2020.

Given the Kingdom’s unique situation—being the destination for Hajj and Umrah, where 1.7 and 6.7 Million individuals visit the Kingdom from abroad annually to perform Hajj and Umrah respectively5, this is in addition to having high population densities in certain locations, where a staggering 66% of the population reside in the provinces of Riyadh, Makkah, and the Eastern Province—6 it’s that much more of a challenge to contain such viral diseases from spreading. Thankfully however, in the past several years, the Kingdom has been developing its e-services infrastructure, which includes the majority of government services, as well as public schools and universities. The development of such infrastructure has proven to be vital in the continuation of services during the initial weeks of the outbreak.

As the outbreak unfolded, the government has implemented stricter measures and introduced new ones to limit the spread of the virus. We now take a deep look into a sample of these taken by the Kingdom:

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5 General Authority for Statistics - Hajj and Umrah 2018
International travel bans were partially introduced in the Kingdom on the 27th of February 2020. The measures first implemented include: suspending Umrah visits, suspending tourism visas for visitors coming from 26 different countries (including China, Iran, Italy, Korea, India, Singapore, Lebanon ...), suspending the use of national IDs to travel to and from Saudi Arabia (applies to Saudi and GCC citizens who are in their home countries and not those wishing to return to their home country) and banning passengers from entering the Kingdom if they entered Iran or China in the last 14 days.

The Kingdom then continuously increased the strictness of existing bans and introduced new bans between the 27th of February and the 14th of March, the date on which all international flights to and from the Kingdom were suspended, at an average rate of an update every other day. During this period and prior to the cancellation of all international flights, the most notable measures implemented were: suspending the travel permission for Saudi citizens and residents living in the Kingdom to specific countries and suspending all flights to and from specific countries.7

7: Source: WHO, Saudi Airlines
In addition to international travel, domestic air travel was also halted. On the 20th of March, the Ministry of Interior announced the suspension of all domestic flights, except those pertaining to medical aviation and private flights.

The travel restrictions were not only limited to aviation. On the 23rd of March, a decree from the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques was implemented, where a 7PM to 6AM curfew was put in place throughout the Kingdom’s provinces, aiming to further limit the spread of the virus by cutting down the amount of time individuals were outside of their homes.

The curfew gradually became stricter, and on the 26th of March, individuals were banned from travelling between provinces. Additionally, the city borders of Riyadh, Makkah, and Medina were closed, and a 3PM curfew was imposed on these cities. These restrictions were also imposed on the city of Jeddah three days later.

The 3PM curfew was implemented on the rest of the Kingdom on the 7th of April. A 24-hour lockdown was first introduced in the cities of Makkah and Medina on the 2nd of April, the lockdown would restrict individuals to the premises of their homes, and would only allow the gathering of necessities from grocery stores and pharmacies within respective neighborhoods, from the hours between 6AM - 3PM. The lockdown was then imposed on the cities of Riyadh, Tabuk, Dammam, Dhahran, Hofuf, Jeddah, Taif, Qatif, and Khobar on the 6th of April.

8- Source: Ministry of Interior
Public Events Cancellation

On the 14th of March, all sporting events and competitions were suspended by the Ministry of Sport. Gymnasiums and training spaces were also closed to limit the spread of the virus.

Mosque gatherings, such as the Jumaa prayer and the five daily prayers, were also stopped by the Ministry of Islamic Affairs on the 17th of March, with exceptions granted to the two Holy Mosques.9

Workplace Closure

In Saudi Arabia, the closure of the workplace and the implementation of work-from-home policies was a gradual process. First, on the 16th of March, attendance at the workplace was suspended for 16 days in all government entities except for vital and sensitive sectors such as: the health, security, and military sectors, the Electronic Security Center, and the remote education system in the education sector.

One day later, on the 17th of March, the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development declared that all private entities, except for those in vital sectors and sensitive infrastructure sectors, must, and for a period of 15 days, suspend employees’ coming to main offices, and to minimize the number of employees working in branches, offices and other facilities such that the number does not exceed 40% of the total number of employees.

With the COVID-19 pandemic still an issue by the time the specified period was over, the Saudi government, on the 28th of March, extended the suspensions indefinitely. On the same matter, the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development issued the temporary guideline for remote work in the private sector. The guideline includes terminologies, rights, and duties of employees and employers in the private sector.10

9 – Source: https://www.argaaam.com
10 – Source: https://www.spa.gov.sa
Schools are considered a hotbed for the spread of viruses. This is due to the high population density of educational institutions compared to other places (e.g. workplaces). In addition, the demography of schools, especially the students of varying ages, tends to be less careful and aware when it comes to the virus, how dangerous it is and the guidelines to follow in order to minimize the risk of getting infected. Hence, governments usually take this measure (school closure) at an early stage in their combat against an infection, COVID-19 in this case.

For Saudi Arabia, the decision of closing schools and universities was taken very early, particularly on the 9th of March, almost a week after the first COVID-19 case appeared in the kingdom. Nevertheless, the Saudi government, through its Ministry of Education (MOE), made sure that educational activities are not to be interrupted, and thus adopted the concept of distance learning very effectively. As a matter of fact, MOE provides an integrated system consisting of 5 educational channels (varying from electronic portals to youtube channels) that considers the contrastive technical capabilities of the students and can be tailored to fit their daily schedules. Universities have also adopted distance learning with their students, with each university using its respective channel/portal, resulting in no disruptions in the education cycle and the final exams timings (up to the 7th of April).

11 - Source: https://www.argam.com
12 - Source: https://www.al-madina.com/
13 - Source: https://akhbaar24.argam.com/
In addition to managing the situation resulting from the spread of the virus domestically, the Kingdom is also responsible for supporting and providing solutions for its citizens abroad. As the Kingdom started implementing travel bans on the 27th of February 2020, and as the bans have since increased gradually to cover more countries and include new restrictions, the Kingdom announced on the 12th of March 2020 that the citizens abroad have 72 hours to return to the Kingdom before all international flights to and from the Kingdom are suspended.

During the period prior to the suspension of all international flights, as citizens were arriving to the Kingdom, the government was taking measures to limit the spread of the virus: Citizens arriving from countries highly affected by the virus (countries such as China, Egypt, France, Germany, Iran, Italy, Japan, South Korea, Spain, United States) were quarantined under the supervision of the Ministry of Health in high-end hotels used as quarantine spaces, with all costs covered by the Ministry. Citizens arriving from other countries were asked to quarantine themselves at home for a couple of weeks from the date of their arrival to the Kingdom.

The first batch of citizens quarantined under the supervision of the Ministry was sent home on Sunday the 29th of March 2020 and citizens expressed their thanks and appreciation to the Ministry for the care they received since their arrival to the Kingdom.

One personal story in particular stands out; a student returning from the US describes his experience of the hotel quarantine and the medical care provided by the medical staff from the Ministry of Health: the citizens were distributed brochures with apologies for any inconvenience and an explanation of the stay at the hotel (not to leave the hotel for 14 days and stay inside the room during that time, visit the clinic in the hotel in case of any symptoms...). The Ministry even provided psychological support to the citizens by making a psychiatrist available. The student was tested for the virus 3 days into his stay at the hotel and on day 13 to check whether he is clear to go home. He summarized his experience: “No words can describe how well we are being treated here and how special I feel. I have been to a lot of fancy places but I haven’t been treated this special. Saudi Arabia showed us and the whole world that its citizens and residents are its top priority”.

After all international flights have been suspended to and from the Kingdom, the Kingdom implemented measures to ensure that citizens abroad who wish to come back are accommodated in prestigious hotels with all costs covered, and is taking measures to provide a way for the citizens to come back.
Citizens wishing to return to the Kingdom should register on a platform launched by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA). Priority will be given to those in countries most hit by the virus, pregnant women and the elderly. Upon their arrival, citizens will be quarantined in readied hotels (with a current capacity of 11,000 rooms) across different regions of the Kingdom. As part of the joint effort, the General Authority of Civil Aviation (GACA) is preparing terminals in the Kingdom’s international airports and is working on scheduling the flights allocated, in cooperation with the national air carrier Saudi Arabian Airlines.

Registration on the Ministry of Foreign Affairs platform started on the 5th of April 2020 and preparation for the arrival of the first batch of citizens is ongoing.

To this end, a number of government agencies have joined forces to make possible the return of citizens to the Kingdom in a safe and organized manner as per the directives of the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques. The government agencies involved are the Ministry of Health (MoH), Ministry of Interior (MoI), Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA), the General Authority of Civil Aviation (GACA), the Ministry of Tourism (MoT), Ministry of Finance (MoF), Ministry of Communications and Information Technology (MoCIT), and the Ministry of Education (MoE).\(^i\)
Global Reaction to the Spread of COVID-19

As mentioned previously, measures taken by the government can be the reason, amongst other factors, as to why one country's response to the virus is much more successful than another's, and consequently, why both infection and mortality rates vary across different countries. Moreover, the timing of the adoption of such measures is a determining factor of their effectiveness and is therefore taken into consideration when comparing Saudi's response to that of other countries.

Naturally, governments’ responses to the COVID-19 outbreak vary in decisiveness and quality of execution, contributing to and shaping the current situation of the pandemic in different countries. Fortunately, the Saudi government’s response was one of the sharpest and most effective worldwide.

For instance, while the Saudi government was able to take sufficient measures at right timings, the US federal government wasn’t able to do so. This is likely due to current social, economic, and political constraints. To provide a wider view, Table 1 below shows whether the primary measures are taken by the selected countries (Saudi Arabia, United States, France, South Korea, United Kingdom and Spain) in response to the COVID-19 outbreak along with the dates on which each measure was taken and on which the first COVID-19 case was reported in the country.

Table 1 | Measures Adopted by Each Country along with the Date of Adoption, and the Date of Reporting the First Case in the Country15

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measures</th>
<th>Saudi Arabia</th>
<th>US</th>
<th>France</th>
<th>South Korea</th>
<th>UK</th>
<th>Spain</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Date of First Case</td>
<td>02-Mar</td>
<td>23-Jan</td>
<td>24-Jan</td>
<td>20-Jan</td>
<td>31-Jan</td>
<td>01-Feb</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International Travel Ban</td>
<td>14-Mar</td>
<td>14-Mar</td>
<td>17-Mar</td>
<td>03-Feb</td>
<td>Not Yet**</td>
<td>10-Mar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internal Movement Restriction</td>
<td>20-Mar</td>
<td>Not Yet*</td>
<td>17-Mar</td>
<td>23-Feb</td>
<td>22-Mar</td>
<td>14-Mar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public Events Cancellation</td>
<td>14-Mar</td>
<td>17-Mar</td>
<td>29-Feb</td>
<td>31-Jan</td>
<td>23-Mar</td>
<td>10-Mar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Workplace Closure</td>
<td>16-Mar</td>
<td>Not Yet*</td>
<td>14-Mar</td>
<td>23-Feb</td>
<td>23-Mar</td>
<td>08-Mar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schools Closure</td>
<td>09-Mar</td>
<td>17-Mar</td>
<td>16-Mar</td>
<td>23-Feb</td>
<td>23-Mar</td>
<td>08-Mar</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* - The implementation of the measure, up to and including 7th of April 2020, varies by state
** - Measure not implemented up to and including the 7th of April 2020
Table 1 shows that the majority of the selected countries took the necessary measures, some earlier than others, mainly due to the difference in the dates on which the first case appeared in each country, as that event is normally the main trigger for such measures to be taken. Therefore, in order to convey the full picture, we need not only to consider the absolute dates on which the measures were taken, but also to relate them to the date of the first reported case. To this end, a new parameter is introduced: Days from First Case. The parameter defines the number of days each country has taken to adopt the measure since the date of the first reported case in the country, and is plotted for the selected countries for each measure in Figures 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6.

One major takeaway from the above figures is the decisive and quick response of Saudi Arabia to the virus outbreak, as it topped the list in all the measures, except for Public Events Cancellation where it ranked second to South Korea with a lag of only 3 days. This, to a large extent, explains the relatively low number of confirmed cases in Saudi compared to other countries globally, as will be shown next in this report.

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**Notes:**
- * - The implementation of the measure, up to and including 7th of April 2020, varies by state
- **- Measure not implemented up to and including the 7th of April 2020
While several factors contribute to the current situation of the pandemic in a certain country, the preventive measures a country adopts along with their timings are the most crucial factors in determining how well the country is performing in regards to the virus outbreak.

**Figure 7 | The Evolution and Spread of the Virus in the Selected Countries**

In Figure 7, we plot the number of cases per a population of 1M versus the time between the first case detection date and the 7\textsuperscript{th} of April 2020. We can clearly see that even though South Korea has been in the outbreak the longest, it records the second smallest number of cases per a population of 1M (only larger than Saudi). When it comes to Saudi, we cannot simply compare the number of cases per a population of 1M to the same figure in other countries since Saudi has been in the outbreak for 35 days compared to an approximate 70 days for the other countries. To this end, we use a different measure that compares the average rate of increase in the number of daily cases in Saudi in the last 7 days (from day 28 to day 35) to the average rate of increase in the number of daily cases in Saudi since the first case detection date (day 1 to 35). We do the same for the other countries (day 28 to 35 versus day 1 to 35) and the bubble represents that ratio. We can clearly see that Saudi has the smallest ratio as indicated by the size of the bubble which suggests the Kingdom is managing the virus better than other countries when looking through the lens of the first 35 days and comparing comparable figures. The better outcomes noted in both Saudi Arabia and South Korea and the similar measures taken by both countries further indicate that both countries took the appropriate measures at the right time.
Furthermore, Saudi Arabia is in a very good state compared to most countries. For example, the number of cases per 1M of population in Saudi Arabia is 80, where the global average is 182 cases per 1M of population. Figure 8 plots the number of cases per 1M of population for the top 40 countries in number of cases (these countries reported collectively around 96% of the COVID-19 cases worldwide). It shows that Saudi Arabia came in the last quarter (fewest) as it ranks 33, which indicates a low number of cases/1M of population compared to other countries, which, to a large extent, is a sign of a very good response by the Saudi government to the COVID-19 outbreak.15

Figure 8 | Normalized Number of Cases for the top 40 Countries (in Terms of Number of Cases)

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15 - Source: https://www.worldometers.info
Based on the results of this study, the Saudi government has proven its readiness and agility by executing all the necessary measures in a timely manner which helped limit the spread of the COVID-19 within the Kingdom so far.

This decisive response has put the Kingdom in a very good position in its fight against the virus, which grants it the possibility of containing the virus and overcoming it in a relatively short amount of time. That being said, measures taken by a government can’t solely contain the virus without proper reception and compliance from the public. In fact, the future state of the virus in Saudi Arabia will be heavily determined by the compliance of its society, from government and private entities, to specific individuals, as every decision they make will have an impact on the effectiveness of the measures put in place by the government.
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