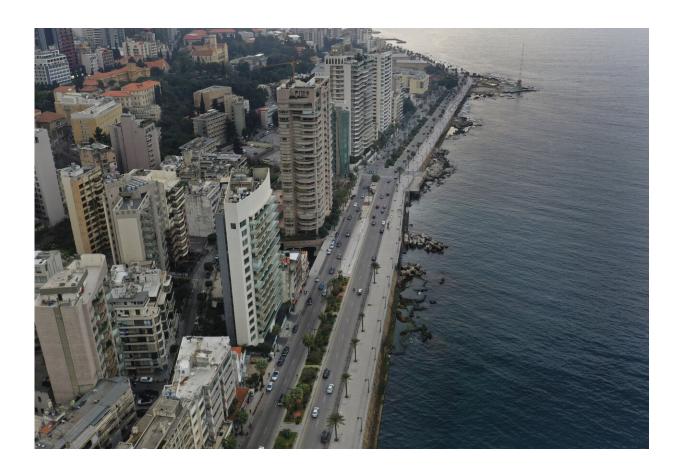# Virus toll in Iran climbs as lockdowns deepen across Mideast

March 16 2020, by Amir Vahdat and Samya Kullab

Beirut's waterfront promenade, along the Mediterranean Sea, is mostly empty after municipal policemen ordered people to leave, as the country's top security council and the government were meeting over the spread of the new coronavirus, in Beirut, Lebanon, in Beirut, Lebanon, Sunday, March 15, 2020. For most people, the virus causes only mild or moderate symptoms. For some it can cause more severe illness. (AP Photo/Hussein Malla)

Iran reported another 129 fatalities from the new coronavirus on Monday, the largest one-day rise in deaths since it began battling the Middle East's worst outbreak, which has claimed more than 850 lives and infected a number of senior officials in the country.

Businesses in Iran's capital remained open, however, even as other countries in the region moved toward full lockdowns, with Lebanon largely shutting down and Iraqis racing to prepare for a curfew set to begin later this week.

The divergent approaches adopted by local authorities reflect continued uncertainty over how to slow the spread of a virus that has infected around 170,000 people worldwide and caused more than 6,500 deaths.

Some have opted for an even more aggressive response. Israel, where the number of confirmed cases has more than doubled to around 250 in recent days, has authorized the use of phone-snooping technology long used against Palestinian militants to track coronavirus patients. Such practices will spark renewed debate over privacy issues as countries around the world confront the pandemic.

Most people experience only mild or moderate symptoms, such as fever and cough, and recover within weeks. But the virus is highly contagious and can be spread by people with no visible symptoms. For some, especially older adults and people with existing health problems, it can cause more severe illness, including pneumonia.

A man with a motorcycle helmet covers his face with a mask, as he watches municipal policemen order people to leave the corniche, or waterfront promenade, along the Mediterranean Sea, as the country's top security council and the government were meeting over the spread of coronavirus, in Beirut, Lebanon, in Beirut, Lebanon, Sunday, March 15, 2020. (AP Photo/Hussein Malla)

Iraq announced a weeklong curfew late Sunday. People raced to supermarkets and swiftly emptied shelves, while others stocked up on cooking fuel. The curfew, which is set to begin late Tuesday, includes the suspension of all flights from Baghdad's international airport.

Iraq's Health Ministry has reported 124 cases of coronavirus and nine

deaths.

In Lebanon, where the government ordered a lockdown, traffic was thin and some streets were completely empty on Monday, the start of the working week. Restaurants, cafes and bars have been closed since last week and most private businesses were shuttered Monday. The small country has reported 99 cases and three deaths.

Both Iraq and Lebanon have been largely in disarray since anti-government protests broke out last year, and Lebanon was mired in its worst financial crisis in years even before the pandemic began.

People wearing face masks exercise on the shore of an artificial lake, in Western Tehran, Iran, Sunday, March 15, 2020. Many people in Tehran shrugged off warnings over the new coronavirus as authorities complained that most people in

the capital are not treating the crisis seriously enough. For most people, the new coronavirus causes only mild or moderate symptoms. For some it can cause more severe illness. (AP Photo/Vahid Salemi)

One of the worst outbreaks in the world has unfolded in Iran, which has close ties to both Iraq and Lebanon. Authorities there have reported 14,991 confirmed cases and 853 deaths. Monday's jump in fatalities was the largest one-day rise since the epidemic began. The real numbers may be even higher, as some have questioned the government's reporting.

Many Iranians have dismissed fears about the virus and advice from public health officials to avoid social contact. Restaurants and cafes have remained open, though business has diminished.

On Monday, state TV said authorities closed the Masoume shrine, a major pilgrimage site in the city of Qom, the epicenter of Iran's outbreak. Authorities were already restricting access and barring pilgrims from kissing or touching the shrine, but it had remained open.

A municipal policeman, right, orders people to leave the waterfront promenade, along the Mediterranean Sea, as the country's top security council and the government were meeting over the spread of the new coronavirus, in Beirut, Lebanon, in Beirut, Lebanon, Sunday, March 15, 2020. For most people, the new coronavirus causes only mild or moderate symptoms. For some it can cause more severe illness. (AP Photo/Hussein Malla)

A member of the Assembly of Experts, which has the power to appoint or dismiss Iran's supreme leader, died from the COVID-19 illness caused by the virus, the semi-official Fars and Tasnim news agencies reported Monday.
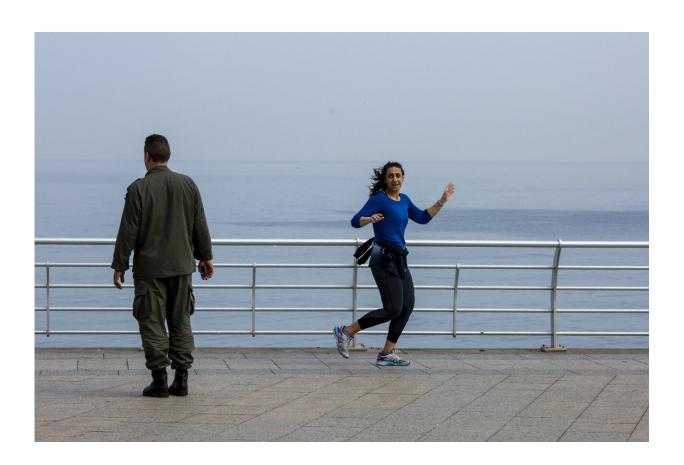
Ayatollah Hashem Bathaei, 78, is the latest of several Iranian officials to have died. Cabinet ministers, members of parliament, Revolutionary

Guard members and Health Ministry officials have caught the virus, compounding fears about Iran's response to the pandemic.

Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who is 80 years old and has been in power since 1989, wore disposable gloves at a recent public event, apparently as a precaution.

The official leading Iran's response to the virus on Sunday expressed concerns that health facilities could be overwhelmed if the rate of new cases continues to climb.

A municipal policeman orders a woman to leave the corniche, or waterfront promenade, along the Mediterranean Sea, in Beirut, Lebanon, Monday, March 16, 2020. For most people, the new coronavirus causes only mild or moderate symptoms, such as fever and cough. For some, especially older adults and people

with existing health problems, it can cause more severe illness, including pneumonia. (AP Photo/Hassan Ammar)

Mideast stock markets tumbled Monday, with the Dubai Financial Market closing down 6.14% and the Abu Dhabi Securities Exchange down 7.83%. Both have closed their trading floors over fears about the virus.

Egypt has reported 150 cases, including 70 foreigners, and three deaths. It suspended all flights in and out of the country starting Thursday, lasting until the end of the month.

Israel's Health Ministry said more than 1,000 doctors and a similar number of nurses have been quarantined. The health care system is already suffering from budget limitations linked to the prolonged political deadlock in Israel, which has not had a permanent government in more than a year.

Israel swore in its new Knesset, or parliament, after elections earlier this month. The 120 members took the oath of office in groups of three, in keeping with bans on large gatherings.
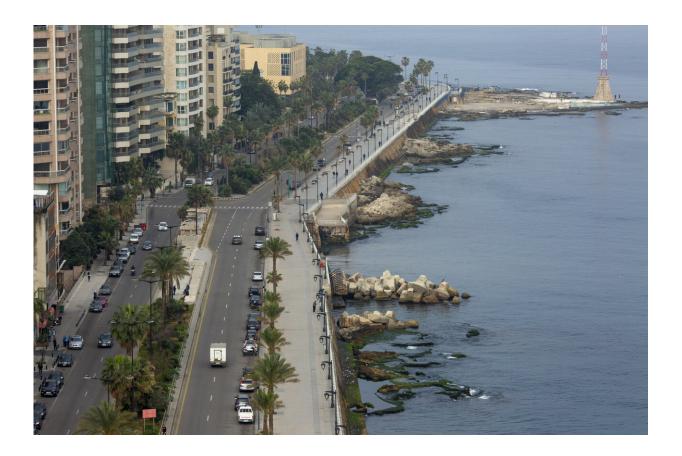
A municipal policeman, center, orders people to leave the waterfront promenade, along the Mediterranean Sea, as the country's top security council and the government were meeting over the spread of the new coronavirus, in Beirut, Lebanon, in Beirut, Lebanon, Sunday, March 15, 2020. For most people, the new coronavirus causes only mild or moderate symptoms. For some it can cause more severe illness. (AP Photo/Hussein Malla)

A woman wearing a face mask walks through a store in Bamland shopping mall, in Western Tehran, Iran, Sunday, March 15, 2020. Many people in Tehran shrugged off warnings over the new coronavirus as authorities complained that most people in the capital are not treating the crisis seriously enough. (AP Photo/Vahid Salemi)

An aerial view shows the waterfront promenade along the Mediterranean Sea being mostly empty after police order people to vacate it in Beirut, Lebanon, Monday, March 16, 2020. For most people, the new coronavirus causes only mild or moderate symptoms, such as fever and cough. For some, especially older adults and people with existing health problems, it can cause more severe illness, including pneumonia. (AP Photo/Hassan Ammar)

People shop at a grocery in Bamland shopping mall, in Western Tehran, Iran, Sunday, March 15, 2020. Many people in Tehran shrugged off warnings over the new coronavirus as authorities complained that most people in the capital are not treating the crisis seriously enough. (AP Photo/Vahid Salemi)

A shopkeeper explains on a toy for customers at a store in Bamland shopping mall, in Western Tehran, Iran, Sunday, March 15, 2020. Many people in Tehran shrugged off warnings over the new coronavirus as authorities complained that most people in the capital are not treating the crisis seriously enough. (AP Photo/Vahid Salemi)

A man shops at a grocery in Bamland shopping mall, in Western Tehran, Iran, Sunday, March 15, 2020. Many people in Tehran shrugged off warnings over the new coronavirus as authorities complained that most people in the capital are not treating the crisis seriously enough. (AP Photo/Vahid Salemi)

A woman wearing a face mask shops at a store in Bamland shopping mall, in Western Tehran, Iran, Sunday, March 15, 2020. Many people in Tehran shrugged off warnings over the new coronavirus as authorities complained that most people in the capital are not treating the crisis seriously enough. (AP Photo/Vahid Salemi)

The Palestinian Authority, which governs parts of the Israeli-occupied West Bank, said anyone entering the territory would be placed in quarantine for 14 days. The Palestinians have reported nearly 40 cases, most linked to an outbreak in the town of Bethlehem.

Jordan has announced similar measures, saying travelers arriving in the country will be quarantined at hotels on the Dead Sea and the southern Red Sea city of Aqaba. Health Minister Jaber Saad said the popular

tourist area along the Dead Sea would be isolated and administered by the military.

Jordan has reported 19 cases, one of whom recovered.

Bars and pubs were closed in Dubai through the end of the month, and authorities ordered people not to hold weddings or parties in their homes. Community pools were also locked down.

Saudi Arabia closed malls, cafes and parks, allowing only grocery stores and pharmacies to stay open and limiting restaurants to delivery.

Pakistan meanwhile reported a surge of new cases, bringing its total to 136. It said most of those who tested positive had recently returned from neighboring Iran.