

PERIPHERAL VISION

Views from the Borderlands



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OVERVIEW



Image: Paramilitary soldiers wear face masks as they stand in front of a closed gate, after Pakistan sealed its border with Iran as a preventive measure following the coronavirus outbreak at the border post in Taftaan, Pakistan.
Source: REUTERS/Naseer Ahmed

This special edition of *Peripheral Vision* examines the short- and medium-term impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on cross-border conflicts in fragile and conflict-affected states in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. It draws on the work of the X-Border Local Research Network, part of the broader XCEPT Program, in the borderlands of Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran, Libya, Myanmar, Pakistan, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen. While each conflict differs in its particulars, some common characteristics can be observed:

- ▶ In contested borderlands, weak states with fragmented authority have had to confront the global pandemic amid conflict, population displacement, and political violence. While the impact of the virus, the progress of the pandemic, and local responses have varied, common challenges have emerged.
- ▶ In some contested borderlands, state and nonstate actors alike have exploited the pandemic for military and political advantage, as emergency measures such as controlling the cross-border movement of people and goods have been co-opted into existing cross-border and conflict-related regimes.
- ▶ Although the pandemic has intensified conflict in some locations, it may also offer a point of engagement with armed groups who see themselves as legitimate alternatives to the state. Where armed groups have no stake or interest in local governance, on the other hand, the crisis is more likely to lead to escalation than accord.
- ▶ Even when they are remote, borderlands and peripheral areas often feel global economic changes most acutely, because of their dependence on trade, labor migration, and other cross-border movement. International anxiety to control the pandemic's spread at border chokepoints and transit corridors has had unintended consequences, whether through the secondary economic effects of lockdowns or by legitimizing greater border securitization, both of which exacerbate the structural drivers of conflict, including poverty and prejudice.
- ▶ COVID-19 has further strained the fragmented international order, which was already struggling to coordinate efforts to prevent and resolve conflict. But by exposing gaps and barriers in cooperation, not least in conflict-affected borderlands, this global crisis could lead to new ways of working. At the very least, the crisis has underscored the value of supporting local research capacity in hard-to-reach areas in order to assess impact and need and inform effective policy.
- ▶ COVID-19 has also shown how prevailing economic structures and political relationships depend on the movement of people, goods, and ideas through formal and informal networks and supply chains. External actors who want to reduce conflict and promote positive change in contested borderlands must look beyond conventional, state-based models to understand these rapidly developing systems and new social geographies.

PERIPHERAL VISION IS PUBLISHED TWICE A YEAR AS A TIMELY UPDATE OF DYNAMICS ON THE GROUND, WHILE ALSO HIGHLIGHTING THE LATEST NEWS FROM THE X-BORDER LOCAL RESEARCH NETWORK'S ACTIVITIES. THIS SPECIAL ISSUE LOOKS AT THE IMPACT ON COVID-19 ON FRAGILE AND CONFLICT-AFFECTED BORDER REGIONS IN ASIA, THE MIDDLE EAST AND AFRICA.

COVID-19 AS AN INSTRUMENT OF POLITICS AND WAR

From the early stages of the pandemic, it was clear that state authorities and insurgents alike were tempted to use the emergency as cover for military and political gains. Concern about the possibility of infection caused some state and nonstate armed actors to pull back from violence, but many conflicts have continued and even escalated, in spite of attempts in the UN to a call for a global ceasefire.

In Myanmar, during the first months of the pandemic, the government ramped up [aerial and ground attacks](#) on the Arakan Army, an ethnic armed group in a heavily populated area of Rakhine State. Elsewhere, Turkey tightened controls on the Syrian border, including territory in the northeast, that isolated the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which Ankara opposes. Iran has no direct border with Syria, but it has tightened controls at the Iraqi border with eastern Syria through its proxy militias.

Nonstate actors have used the pandemic for broader strategic ends. In Afghanistan, leaders of the Islamic State, or ISIS, exhorted followers to [exploit the global confusion](#) to launch attacks around the world. ISIS also stepped up its operations in western Iraq near the Iraqi-Syrian border, as large numbers of security forces were redeployed to the inner cities to enforce the partial lockdown. The pandemic also served as a mobilization opportunity for nonstate actors in Yemen, who presented fighters and soldiers with [two options](#): die from the virus at home, or in the field as a martyr.

In some borderlands, the pandemic's impact was more indirect, yet it still altered the security balance. This was evident in Sudan and South Sudan, two countries entangled in each other's transitional politics, including fragile ceasefires in their shared borderlands. The pandemic brought a pause to high-level dialogue in both peace transitions, but local state and nonstate armed actors continued to change the military facts on the ground. In Sudan, restrictions on travel and physical meetings slowed talks between Sudanese armed groups and the transitional government. In South Sudan, meanwhile, the formation of the Transitional Government of National Unity brought together long-term political rivals, but it also destabilized conditions on the ground, igniting new local conflicts. Although this escalation was probably exacerbated by COVID-19, past transitions from war to peace, in the Sudans at least, suggest that an increase in violence would have happened even in the absence of the pandemic.

CONTAINING COVID-19 ACROSS CONFLICT LINES

Although the pandemic has been exploited by some to press for advantage in the disorder of conflict in the borderlands, other state and nonstate actors have used the health emergency to build support and legitimacy by demonstrating their contribution to communal order. As many states have officially shut down their borders with their neighbors, local actors in those border regions have also locked down their zones of control as part of their pandemic response.

In the borderlands of northeastern Syria, the SDF used COVID-19 countermeasures to [demonstrate](#) its ability to govern, mostly by imposing a curfew in the region. The lockdown had unpopular economic effects, however, and slowed the delivery of humanitarian aid, which Turkey exploited by blocking supply routes and water sources.

In Iraq, the authorities' pandemic response was to [close](#) formal border crossings with Syria and Iran. This activated informal routes used by militias and smuggling networks—including people-smuggling—indirectly empowering nonstate actors such as Iranian proxies like Kataib Hizbulla, an Iranian-allied paramilitary group.

In [Yemen](#), the increase in military confrontation near the Yemeni-Saudi border pushed thousands of inhabitants to move to the internal governorates, especially to Marib, which hosts more than 1.5 million internally displaced people. In April 2020, armed forces in the Shabwa local authority blocked migrants enroute from the Horn of Africa to Saudi Arabia. Saudi authorities wanted to deter migrants from importing the virus. On the Yemeni-Omani border, the situation was somewhat better. The local authority and local NGOs in the border province of Mahra received medical assistance from the two bordering countries, Oman and Saudi Arabia. In general, the arrival of COVID-19 in Yemen's conflict has underlined deepening divisions and the government's limited reach.

On the Sudan–South Sudan border, despite the distance from the pandemic epicenters in the national capitals, COVID-19 countermeasures were rapidly co-opted into the conflict-ridden and [oppressive political economies](#) that already prevailed. Armed state and nonstate actors saw an opportunity for profit in the pandemic, and impeded the benefits flowing to the borderlands from agreements negotiated in the two capitals. Local regimes locked the borders—restricting the flow of goods and people—but did not truly shut them down, as they continued to incentivize smuggling and impose informal taxation.



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- ▶ Asia: [Peace and the pandemic: the impact of COVID-19 on conflict in Asia](#)
- ▶ Myanmar: [Covid and Conflict in Myanmar's Borderlands: A View from the Field](#)
- ▶ Myanmar: [The government and armed groups enforce a new border regime](#)
- ▶ Myanmar–Thailand: [COVID-19 closes a billion-dollar racket](#)
- ▶ Pakistan: [Podcast: The Crisis and the Cracks—Pakistan's Covid-19 Experience at Taftaan](#)
- ▶ Somalia: [Khat and COVID-19](#)
- ▶ South Sudan: [A view from Northern Bahr El-Ghazal](#)
- ▶ South Sudan: [Food imports in the time of COVID-19](#)
- ▶ The Sudans/Horn of Africa: [Epidemics in the African Red Sea Region: A history of uneven disease exposure](#)
- ▶ Horn of Africa: [COVID-19 in the Horn of Africa: How can aid help mobile populations cope with restrictions on movement?](#)
- ▶ Tunisia/MENA: [Living Off The Books](#)
- ▶ Yemen: [Catalogue of woes](#)



Image: Women traders in Awiel, South Sudan, wash their hands to protect against the spread of COVID-19. Source: RVI

This came at the height of the seasonal return of migrant labor from Sudan to South Sudan, and taxation, not virus testing, was clearly the main concern.

Managing cross-border movement—a fundamental part of pandemic response—has depended in Myanmar on the interests of the many nonstate and semi-state armed groups that exercise authority in these contested zones. In some cases, armed groups have put their economic interests first, in spite of the risk of disease. In February, the government-affiliated [Kayin State Border Guard Force](#) (BGF) risked importing the virus as they smuggled thousands of Chinese nationals into Myanmar to work on the self-declared “special economic zone” of Shwe Kokko, a joint venture between the leaders of the BGF and Chinese interests of unclear legal status. In contrast, the most powerful nonstate armed group in Myanmar, the United Wa State Army, [closed their self-administered region to outsiders](#) and launched public health information campaigns. The United Wa State Army had assumed the role of de facto government of an autonomous region, and therefore had a greater incentive to act responsibly than groups motivated primarily by economic interests, such as the Kayin BGF.

SECONDARY EFFECTS AND CROSS-BORDER ECONOMIES

The long-term economic and social impact of a pandemic in a conflict context can also be [socially and politically transformational](#). COVID-19 has already increased dislocation, inequality, poverty, and unemployment in many countries and regions. These effects are especially severe in cross-border conflict areas, where changes in border controls and the closing of businesses, airports, and ports have disrupted supply chains, including humanitarian access, and significantly affected vulnerable populations.

South Sudan’s economy, which is heavily dependant on oil exports through a pipeline across its border with Sudan, was suffering from the sudden drop in global oil prices well before the pandemic reached the greater Horn of Africa. At the same time, South Sudan is a net importer of food from its nearest neighbors, Sudan and Uganda, and COVID-19 border controls drove up basic food costs by at least 20 percent. Meanwhile, violence connected to the ongoing peace process was most intense in the expansive periphery of Jonglei, one of the hungriest regions of South Sudan. The connection between South Sudan’s oil economy and COVID-19’s [secondary effects on food imports, hunger, and violence](#) in the periphery will put further pressure on an already fragile peace process.

Border closures have damaged regions whose entire economies, from the livelihoods of residents to the revenues of nonstate armed groups, depend on their role as places of transit and trade. One example is [Ben Gardan](#), a city along the Tunisia-Libya border that is a nexus of trade and smuggling. Tunisian government border closures in response to COVID-19 worsened the region’s existing socioeconomic woes, caused by the escalation of conflict in Libya in early 2020, and disrupted the supply of Libyan gasoline. The border closure played havoc with the movement of thousands of cross-border traders, small retailers, shopkeepers, informal fuel vendors, and currency dealers. In early September 2020, cross-border traders launched a protest movement in Ben Gardan urging the government to address the worsening economic situation and to negotiate the reopening of border posts.

The risk of COVID-19 transmission posed by the “wet market” trade in the plant-based stimulant khat—which is traded and chewed across Yemen, Somalia, and Somaliland—was clearly very high. A ban on the trade (now lifted), to help limit the spread of the virus, had [an immediate impact on livelihoods based on international khat imports](#), including those of the predominantly female khat-market traders. The revenues of national and local governments were hit hard, and the ban on khat also temporarily restored its contraband status, incentivizing informal arrangements between smugglers and security personnel.

The lesson from Tunisia’s Ben Garden, South Sudan and Sudan’s borderlands, and Somalia’s khat market is that governments need to treat informal economies with care, both in strong states and in fragile, post-conflict states. The impulse to control and lock down cross-border movement was encouraged by interested international actors. Yet these measures were not always in the best interests of precarious local economies and may end up increasing conflict and fragility.

IMPACT ON DISCRIMINATION AND PREJUDICE

The pandemic has also inflamed long-standing prejudices and intolerance in many countries, and conflict-affected borderlands, which often host large numbers of migrants along with indigenous minorities, are especially prone to these effects. In the tribal areas of Pakistan’s complex and troubled northern frontier, legacies of marginalization and distrust have complicated the delivery of public health guidance and compounded issues related to weak governance, poor health services, and weak infrastructure. Community leaders have voiced concerns that reporting COVID-19 symptoms to authorities might lead to further stigmatization. Indeed, Shia pilgrims returning from Iran through the Taftaan border crossing in the southwestern Balochistan province [were blamed for importing the disease](#) into Pakistan, and sectarian militants soon branded COVID-19 “the Shia virus.”

Many border regions have large refugee populations fleeing violence and persecution. They often belong to ethnic communities that straddle the border, and efforts to force them to “return” to one side of the border or to deny them access to the other can cause major local tensions. The living conditions in many refugee settlements—high-density, temporary housing with poor sanitation and limited access to information—are a source of great vulnerability at a time when the pandemic is also disrupting the delivery of humanitarian aid.

In southeastern Bangladesh, nearly one million Rohingya live in squalid settlements that include the world’s largest refugee camp. A government ban on internet access had [cut them off from family abroad, interrupting remittances](#) and news of the world, and depriving humanitarian actors of an [important channel for distributing pandemic information and guidance](#). In this information

vacuum, rumors and disinformation flourished. People suspected of carrying the virus were stigmatized, leading others to avoid reporting symptoms or seeking treatment.

In Lebanon, Jordan, and Iraq, lockdowns have included security measures to limit the movements of refugees. Several municipalities in [Lebanon](#) are implementing [discriminatory lockdown measures](#) against Syrian refugees that limit their access to healthcare. The prospect of forced returns also looms large in Lebanon, where an acute economic crisis has escalated demands for more aid to local communities. The reclosing of the Syrian-Jordanian [border](#) to noncommercial traffic, in March 2020, had wide-ranging effects, particularly on the relationships that Jordanians and Syrian refugees rely on for their economic resilience. The refugee camps, meanwhile, have been increasingly isolated by the new restrictions. Jordan has also prevented residents of the Rukban camp, in the no man's land between Syria and Jordan, from entering Jordan, for fear of increasing transmission.

CONCLUSION: COVID-19 RISKS AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR CROSS-BORDER CONFLICT DYNAMICS

Despite the likelihood that COVID-19 will exacerbate cross-border conflict, it presents two potentially positive opportunities. First, while most international relief efforts, both in general and for COVID-19, are directed towards states, it is clearly important to include border communities and local authorities, who often lie beyond the reach of the central state and of many humanitarian and health efforts. [Local bodies also have an important role to play in collecting information on the situation in otherwise hard-to-reach areas](#), covering issues ranging from the spread of the virus to the status of border closures and the availability of basic goods. The X-Border Local Research Network, which invests in local research capacity in fragile and conflict-affected states and borderlands, seeks to do exactly this.

In conflict-affected areas, where people often mistrust the government and its representatives, including health workers, local organizations can play a vital role in providing health services, dispelling rumors, defusing intergroup tensions, and enabling collaboration across conflict lines. Civil society groups and the Kachin Baptist Convention in Kachin State, Myanmar, have effectively coordinated between the state government and the ethnic armed groups that control territory along the Chinese border. Their volunteers and medical supplies have helped isolated communities and supported efforts by nonstate armed actors to prevent the spread of the virus. The response to COVID-19 is an opportunity for foreign aid agencies, which are obliged to operate remotely during the pandemic, to deliver on their [pledge to support local response capacity](#).

Second, crises can also precipitate unexpected breakthroughs in long-standing conflicts. The 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami helped to fast-track peace talks between the Free Aceh Movement and the Indonesian government, leading to a durable peace settlement after three decades of war. Similar change may emerge as the COVID-19 crisis unfolds. The pandemic has already led to a [minor breakthrough in the conflict between the Thai state and Malay Muslim insurgents along the border with Malaysia](#): an informal ceasefire, announced by the main rebel faction, until the pandemic is brought under control. Although this measure was not reciprocated and failed to halt violence entirely, it was still a positive step towards the long-term aim of ending a 16-year conflict. One potentially positive impact of COVID-19, then, is the opportunity to engage with other groups who wish to present themselves as legitimate agents of governance capable of doing the right thing for local populations.



Image: Volunteers dressed in coronavirus-themed costumes during a campaign to spread awareness and encourage safety amid coronavirus disease (COVID-19) fears, in the rebel-held city of Idlib, Syria. Source: REUTERS/Khalil Ashawi

The **X-Border Local Research Network** – a component of the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office's Cross-Border Conflict: Evidence, Policy and Trends (XCEPT) program – is a partnership between The Asia Foundation, the Malcolm H. Kerr Carnegie Middle East Center and the Rift Valley Institute. With support from UK aid from the UK government, the three organizations work with local research partners to improve our understanding of political, economic and social dynamics in conflict-affected borderlands, and the flows of people, goods and ideas that connect them. The project supports more effective policymaking and development programming, leveraging research to advocate for peaceful change. The views in *Peripheral Vision* do not necessarily represent those of the partner organizations or the UK government.

