

Blessing in disguise? The Middle East hopes for its young population in the fight against the corona virus

Wars, crises, low oil prices and now the corona virus: The Arab world is facing the perfect storm. And yet it has an advantage - its young populations.

For a week now, the Lebanese have only been allowed to leave their homes in urgent cases. Only grocery stores, pharmacies and financial institutions are allowed to open their doors. The international airport and the border to Syria are closed. The schools have been closed for three weeks. But as a short walk shows, the capital Beirut is not entirely extinct: a hairdresser is waiting for customers in his shop in the dark. A stationery has only half closed its roller shutter. If you knock, you get your goods. A few steps further the door of a perfumery opens, a badly shaved man quickly asks for it. He wants to buy dollars - 60 percent above the official exchange rate.

The question of why they are willing to break the law despite high penalties is similarly answered by everyone: «I have children. I have to pay my employees and my rent. I want to eat." Lebanon was already in a deep economic crisis before the outbreak of the pandemic and experienced mass protests for months. The highly indebted state is insolvent and the banking system has practically collapsed. For example, while the United Arab Emirates (UAE) provided over \$ 27 billion to mitigate the economic consequences of the corona crisis, the Lebanese government called for private donations.

Hardly any water to wash your hands

The health system is also in crisis: "Lebanon usually spends almost \$ 15 million a year on disposable protective equipment in hospitals, but since October we have only been able to use it for 4 million," an importer of medical products told the business newspaper ["Commerce du Levant »](#). Given this starting point, many observers expected the worst for

Lebanon. Two other factors are exacerbating: On the one hand, the Lebanese Shiites have close contacts with Iran, the epicenter of the epidemic in the Middle East, which has so far killed around 1,700 people. Until Wednesday, planes from Tehran regularly landed in Beirut. On the other hand, around 1.5 million Syrian refugees live in Lebanon - many of them in densely populated camps or neighborhoods. The virus would spread rapidly here.

What is true for Lebanon is especially true for the Arab states that have been battered by war, such as Syria, Yemen, Libya and Iraq. Syria alone has over six million internally displaced people. Especially in the rebel province of Idlib, where hundreds of thousands have been driven out again by the Asad regime in recent months, people live in completely overcrowded camps and apartments. "Social distancing is practically impossible here," says Rachel Sider from the Norwegian Refugee Council.

Because there is a shortage of water, it is often only a luxury for refugees to wash their hands several times a day. "We are extremely concerned," says Sider. The Syrian health sector was completely destroyed by the war. So far, there is officially only one confirmed corona case in Syria, not one in Yemen and Libya. The reasons for this could also be the lack of tests or cover-ups. In any case, Pakistan reported eight Corona people who had entered [Syria via Qatar](#) .

"Young population immune more quickly"

"There is not a single country that has no case," believes the Lebanese epidemiologist Salim Adib from the American University in Beirut. Nevertheless, he is relatively optimistic about the Arab world. "If we look at the world map, there is a clear difference between the northern and southern Mediterranean." While hundreds of newly infected people were counted in the north every day, there were only dozens in the south so far. Adib explains this above all with the age of the population: "Younger populations develop collective immunity faster."

In fact, the proportion of people over 65 in Arab societies is [only 4.5 percent](#) , while it is around [20 percent](#) in the [European Union](#) . However, Iran also has a young population of 6 percent over the age of 65. However, the country is a special cultural and religious case, says

Adib: "There are ritual events every week in which tens of thousands take part." So the virus was able to spread widely.

So far, the Arab states have reported relatively low numbers compared to Europe. Qatar is currently the leader with 470 infected, Lebanon has 230 infected with only 4 dead so far. Egypt reports 285 Corona cases and Saudi Arabia 344. Their hot climate could also be advantageous for the desert states. However, the epidemic also has painful economic consequences for them.

No pilgrimage and no world exhibition?

Because initially China in particular demanded less oil due to the Corona crisis, oil prices fell. Saudi Arabia therefore asked Russia to cut production. But Moscow waved it off. Since then, Riyadh has been flooding the world market with cheap oil to increase pressure on Russia. The barrel price has since dropped below \$ 30. The Saudi Ministry of Finance expects budget cuts of 20 to 30 percent.

The kingdom's second major source of income - pilgrimages to Mecca - is drying up. Saudi Arabia already closed its borders for foreign visitors to the holy sites at the end of February. The Hajj, the annual pilgrimage, may also have to be canceled at the end of July. Every Muslim should take him at least once in their life. Poor believers save for years to be able to afford the expensive trip.

Other Arab countries with an important tourism sector such as Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt or the UAE also have to accept major losses. Emirates, one of the largest airlines in the world, has cut [around two thirds of its connections](#) . The implementation of the world exhibition in Dubai from October also seems uncertain. The UAE spent \$ 7 billion on it.

Corona virus silences weapons in Libya

The next few weeks will show whether the young Arab populations are actually more resistant to the corona virus. A study from the USA concludes that many young people also have a severe course of the disease. According to this, [40 percent of the hospitalized patients were between 20 and 54 years old](#) . In recent days, the increase in the number of newly infected people in Lebanon has also accelerated.

Regardless, the epidemic in the war-torn countries could also have a positive impact, at least in the short term. In Libya, the so-called Khalifa Haftar's national army has been trying to capture the capital, Tripoli, for a year. On Saturday, his general staff was ready to put his arms on hold

to concentrate his forces on the fight against the corona virus: "We are ready to stop the fighting as long as the other parties stick to it."