

2020 - The year of COVID: a look at the Middle East

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The year 2020 has been dominated by the COVID-19 pandemic. The Gulf Co-operation Countries, despite their enormous wealth and power, are not immune but in many respects very fortunate in dire circumstances such as these to have the kind of governmental structures and financial resources to mobilise quickly and put in place measures for the health and welfare of their citizens. Since March 2020, the Gulf governments have issued in excess of 500 pieces of legislation, circulars, and guidance documents to fight the virus and ensure the safety of their respective populations.

In parallel, economic stimulus, and business relief packages were swiftly made available to protect the business community. A selection of links to helpful sources of information can be found in the accompanying table.

Table 1: Useful Links to COVID-19 health authority resources in the Middle East

| United Arab Emirates | State of Qatar |
|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• https://mohap.gov.ae/en/MediaCenter/Publication/Pages/default.aspx (The National Guidelines for Clinical Management and Treatment of COVID-19 (MOH))• https://www.dha.gov.ae/Covid19/Pages/home.aspx (Home Isolation and Quarantine Guidelines during Coronavirus (COVID-19) Pandemic (DHA))• https://doh.gov.ae/COVID-19 | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• https://www.moph.gov.qa/english/mediacenter/Announcements/Pages/default.aspx (Qatar Ministry of Public Health)• https://www.qchp.org.qa/en/Pages/AllCirculars.aspx (Qatar Council For Healthcare Professionals) |
| State of Kuwait | Kingdom of Saudi Arabia |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• https://corona.e.gov.kw/en (Ministry of Health - Kuwait) | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• https://moh.gov.sa/en/Ministry/MediaCenter/Publications/Pages/covid19.aspx - Ministry of Health (Saudi Arabia) |
| Sultanate of Oman | Kingdom of Bahrain |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• https://moh.gov.om/en/web/dgpadc/-11- (Ministry of Health Oman) | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• https://www.moh.gov.bh/HealthInfo/Publications (Ministry of Health - Kingdom of Bahrain) |

The ministries of health in each of the Gulf countries have taken the lead on pushing through urgent legislation, often in collaboration with other departments or sectors: for example, reaching through to overlap with employment regulations, enabling return-to-work for many; supporting other sectors, such as construction, enabling infrastructure projects to continue, thus fuelling the economy; and in recent times, issuing safety protocols enabling the aviation sector to recommence flights, and hotels to re-open allowing for 'staycations' for those still unable to travel. There are now 'drive-thru' COVID-19 testing stations for those who require regular tests to be able to return to the workplace or to catch a flight. Simply download the 'App' on a cell-phone and await the result.

It is said the necessity is the mother of invention. The healthcare sector has witnessed a tsunami of innovation and transformation this year on a scale not previously seen in the Gulf. To list a few examples: the world's largest COVID-19 testing laboratory built in Abu Dhabi in only ten days; the launch of research studies and clinical trials to find a vaccine, with huge resources being ploughed into these projects; and new fast-track procedures for registering and importing medical devices (ventilators) and pharmaceuticals that have COVID-19 treatment benefits, enabling quicker delivery times to hospitals.

Meanwhile, there has been a shift over to digital health, telemedicine, e-prescribing and delivery of

medicines to patients in their homes. The region had already been moving in this direction but the pace of change was slow and supporting regulation fragmented. The COVID-19 pandemic has been the catalyst for the issuance of new telemedicine laws and standards, and much quicker routes of approval (or temporarily lifting approval requirements) to enable operators to move to digital care delivery models.

The region remains hugely ambitious and committed to the development of world class healthcare delivery systems for the population. With the Arab Health Conference postponed until June 2021, it is expected that the world and the region will have made significant strides in tackling COVID-19 , to enable the event to take place safely and be the great success it has always been in connecting the region's healthcare sector. Our healthcare team look forward to connecting with our clients and friends at the next Arab Health Conference.

For further information, please contact healthcare@tamimi.com.