

The Coronavirus Pandemic: Dispatches from San Antonio, Lebanon and Syria

ESPERANZA

In the Time of COVID-19

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By Nadine Saliba in collaboration with Imane Saliba

As a family caregiver of my mother, and for years before that of both my parents, I've grown accustomed to being at home for long periods of time, working from home, not being able to leave whenever I want or even need to. In that sense, I feel as though the shelter-in-place directive brought about by Covid-19 has not had as much of a dramatic impact on me as it may have had on other people. And I certainly don't understand how being stuck at home means free time to binge watch shows on netflix or bake bread from scratch for fun. The assumption that staying home from work translates into free or leisure time stems from the continued invisibility and devaluation of the unpaid work of cooking, cleaning and taking care of loved ones done mostly by women. Well, I can report that I'm still as busy as I was before the lockdown. But, as this new disease has demonstrated, the very ability to confine oneself at home, while burdensome, is a privilege that many around the world and in this country can not afford, even when their health and that of their loved ones are at stake.

Covid-19 has certainly increased the level of anxiety and fear that my sister and I live with, especially that our elderly mother is part of the demographic most vulnerable to its ravages. Even the prospect that a non-Coronavirus related illness or accident might require her hospitalization is panic-inducing as hospitals are not allowing family members to be at patients' bedside. Or God forbid, our mother or any loved one would pass away during these wretched times with the restrictions on group gatherings, including funerals. This ruthless virus is not satisfied that we have abandoned celebratory social gatherings, it wants to deprive us even of the rituals of collective mourning and the last possible offerings of solace.

This antisocial virus, hater of the human touch, of intimacy, of hugs and kisses, potentially lurking behind every breath has turned me from a hospitable Arab woman to a guarded person, unwelcoming of guests, wary of strangers and friends alike. Take hospitality from an Arab and you take the heart of who we are. Even when our niece who's my God-daughter came over after a long absence, we visited with her in the front yard standing 6 feet apart. We couldn't hug her and squeeze her like we normally do.

One thing that has irked me from the beginning of this crisis are the declarations that the virus is helping nature to heal. I have enjoyed the sight of animals roaming empty city streets that were once their habitat as human beings are under a lockdown as much as the next person. I've even caught myself feeling moved to tears by the idea that Earth and the natural

world are getting some respite from the slow down of human "civilization". But, it is harder to celebrate these phenomena if you've lost your job, if you can't pay your rent or mortgage, if you don't know how long you will be able to put food on the table because of the economic decline.

It is somewhat disturbing to look for the silver lining in this situation, knowing that people are enduring unspeakable illnesses and terrifying, isolated deaths and that this virus disproportionately affects vulnerable populations. People of color, especially African Americans, the elderly, the sick, the unemployed, the uninsured, the impoverished, the homeless, the imprisoned and overcrowded everywhere, from detention centers in the United States to refugee camps in Syria.

As of the writing of this article, at least 986 immigrants have tested positive for Covid-19 while in US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) custody according to the agency's own count. ICE detention centers could be hotspots for the spread of Covid. Immigrant rights groups have warned that detainees at crowded ICE facilities don't have enough soap and sanitizers and have no measures in place to enable physical distancing, asking for their immediate release.

In Syria, the Coronavirus arrived in the midst of a 9-year old war, which has ravaged the country beyond recognition and decimated its infrastructure, public health system and economy, leaving Syrians, many of whom struggle to survive day to day, at a high risk of infection. The public health system is in shambles, there are acute shortages of medications and medical supplies and many hospitals and other health care facilities have been destroyed. The millions of refugees and internally displaced people living in overcrowded camps and shelters need to work daily to eke out a meager living. Even Syrians who have not been displaced have also been struggling under an already beleaguered economy that has now come to a stand still in many sectors. For example, my mother's second cousin in Damascus who owns a poultry and



Sisters, Nadine and Imane Saliba. Imane is a staff member of the Esperanza.

egg supply company has seen his formerly successful business go down the drain during the pandemic.

The Syrian government took measures against the spread of Coronavirus. They banned foreigners coming from countries hit by the virus and imposed a nighttime curfew. They ordered the closure of schools, parks, shops, public transportation, restaurants, cafes and other businesses except pharmacies. People seem to be taking protective measures seriously. At least in Damascus, pictures that Syrian Facebook friends are posting show empty streets and the usually bustling famous old souks looking like ghost towns.

The overpopulated, rebel-held northwestern region faces perhaps the most dire situation. It was already in the throes of a humanitarian crisis with nearly a million individuals displaced due to a military offensive by the regime and its Russian backers and are now living in makeshift camps. Rescue workers have been sanitizing classrooms and buildings amid fear that if the virus were to gain a foothold in the overcrowded camps there isn't much to stop it.

As of writing this article, the total number of confirmed Covid-19 patients in Syria, according to the World Health Organization (WHO), is 50, three of which died, 11 are still hospitalized and 36 have recovered. These figures sound relatively low, but we should keep in mind that testing is quite limited. Besides, a war-ravaged country like Syria, with vulnerable populations crowded in camps and slums without adequate sanitation will not be able to cope with a crisis that wealthier, more stable countries have found extremely challenging.

In Lebanon, the Coronavirus pandemic arrived in the midst of months-old protests against the government and its austerity measures. The country has been beset by socio-economic problems for years. These problems came to a head last fall after foreign investment and remittances from Lebanese expatriates dried up, leading to dollar shortages and the devaluation of the Lebanese currency. Protests erupted all over the country. The sectarian political leaders (consisting of former warlords and businessmen) along with their business associates (largely from the banking and real estate sectors) - increasingly referred to by Lebanese protesters as *'al-oligarshiyya,'* 'the oligarchy' in Arabic - had adopted since the end of the civil war (1975-1990) neoliberal policies that impoverished the working and middle classes and weakened organized labor and unions.

When covid-19 cases began appearing in Lebanon, the government imposed a strict lockdown and curfew and closed



Imane and Nadine's paternal uncle, who is the priest of their village church in Lebanon pictured before Easter liturgy, holding olive branches.

the airport, borders and businesses. As of writing this article, the number of confirmed cases in Lebanon is 870, 234 have recovered and 26 have died. When we talk to our aunt and uncle back in Lebanon, they assure us that they don't leave their homes except for necessities and when they do leave, they wear masks and gloves. Thankfully, there's been very few cases in the area where they live. Family and friends from Lebanon have shared on Facebook and Whatsapp groups an endless supply of Coronavirus-themed memes not much different from the memes circulating on social media in the US, showing the universal nature of some of the experiences that people everywhere are going through.

The pandemic in Lebanon meant an involuntary end to the protest movement, at least temporarily, while putting further pressure on the residents of the country, which include in addition to the Lebanese, hundreds of thou-

sands of Palestinian and Syrian refugees. The economic crisis has been exacerbated by the coronavirus and the subsequent lockdown, which crippled public life and commerce.

As Covid-19 cases declined and the economic situation deteriorated even further, protests resumed across the country, defying the curfew and social distancing measures. Unable to put food on the table as prices on staple goods soared and with no solution in sight, protesters poured their anger, deservedly, at banks, firebombing cash machines in different cities and rallying in front of the Central Bank in Beirut, which is behind the failed financial policies.

This despotic virus wants us to succumb to its dictates and live by its rules. It may compel us to live in a physical and even social quarantine, behind a border separating our homes from the outside world, built by the bricks of our own vigilance, at least until it is ready to overcome its introversion and reveal its RNA. What we will not allow, however, is to live in an emotional or political quarantine.

The pandemic crisis feeds on the vulnerabilities that societies produce in how they structure their economies, in their standard of living and their political priorities. We desperately need to take collective action against the institutions and a system that requires constant growth, expansion, extraction, production and consumption while it destroys the planet and all living things, ruins our physical and mental health and turns us into alienated and disempowered cogs in the machine.

If social distancing takes hold, it will be a blow to citizenship and democracy, but will it make it easier for us to judge

As we celebrate Nurses and those working in the frontline, I think about family and friends whom I know who work in this field and haven't had a chance to ask them how they are doing during this pandemic. I want to take this opportunity to let them know that they are in my thoughts and I now understand why this profession chose them.

number four which is set to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all. Lack of Internet, smartphones and laptops has made it hard for students to access learning materials. In addition, the cost of data bundles and frequent power blackouts make it even harder to learn at home. The approach that the Ministry of Education is using for distance learning shows major disparities within the education system.

When we were in high school Miriam was determined to make it to the national championship, which she did. As she explained to me the challenges that she was facing, I could sense the same determination that she had as a table tennis player. I know she will continue to care for her patients and her family irrespective of the challenges that she is facing. As we celebrate Nurses and those working in the frontline, I think about family and friends whom I know who work in this field and haven't had a chance to ask them how they are doing during this pandemic. I want to take this opportunity to let them know that they are in my thoughts and I now understand why this profession chose them.

*I had to use alias to protect the identity of the subject.



In Nairobi, even before the pandemic, nurses were already facing challenges, for instance, lack of equipment and resources and poor pay. The average net salary of a nurse practitioner in Kenya is Kwsh 41,000, which is equivalent to \$400.



The National Council of Nursing of Kenya describes nurses as the backbone of healthcare and implores employers to ensure that nurses have personal protective equipment (PPE) and access to running water to assist them to safely execute their duties.

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those who find themselves in the best of possible worlds when fear and suffering are rampant? Like the companies profiteering from the pandemic as millions lose their jobs.

What gives me some hope is not how states deal with this crisis, but rather the transformations in ideas, organizing, activism and the imagination that can happen as millions of people interact with the crisis. The world had already been in the throes of a crisis characterized by loss of direction and lack of alternatives, as though we're imprisoned in an eternal present, as Syrian writer Yassin al-Haj Saleh puts it. Changing the model of how we organize work, the economy and knowledge should not be an impossible task. The more dangerous moment perhaps is not when the pandemic is at its

peak, but when it retreats and we ask ourselves now what—only to discover that we are back to business as usual. The emergence of new movements and ideas will create a political and moral turning point that we need to rescue ourselves.

BIO: Nadine Saliba, born in Lebanon, immigrated with her family to San Antonio. She has an MA in Political Theory and International Relations. Imane collaborated with her sister on this article about their family.



This meme translates as: Have you noticed how we've become like ants? We leave the house to get food and go back to hide at home.