



# CORONAVIRUS AND MEDITERRANEAN AS A SITE OF EPIDEMICS

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In Parag Khanna's [article](#), "Covid-19 Is Traveling Along the New Silk Road," for Wired magazine, he compares the 14th-century Black Death pandemic to the current COVID-19 crisis. Making its way westward via Silk Road merchants and caravans the bubonic plague took several years to reach Iran, where it killed half the population. By 1347, it entered Europe via the Italian peninsula. One legacy of its Mediterranean port of entry is the term "[quarantine](#)," coming from the Italian "quaranta giorni," meaning 40 days, developed in Ragusa in today's Croatia and Venice in mid-14<sup>th</sup> century to keep the bubonic plague from spreading from incoming ships. The modern-day coronavirus travels much faster but has hit the same geographical locations.

Khanna cites this historical precedent to set up a question: "What do Iran and Italy have in common today? They are two major anchors of China's Belt and Road Initiative—also known as the 21st century's new Silk Roads." He concludes, "Nor should we be surprised that Iran and Italy have emerged, once more, as waypoints for pandemic spread."

Khanna's comparison is by no means similar to another [article](#) entitled "Welcome to the Belt and Road Pandemic," which



representing Western anxieties about China's geopolitical rise. Rather Khanna's article sets up a geographic reimagining of the pandemic spread beyond the dichotomies of Europe, the Middle East, or Asia. Viruses don't recognize continental distinctions. Examining the spread of COVID-19 today allows for a reappraisal of what constitutes the Mediterranean as space of flows, whether it be faith, trade, or germs.

### *Bio-Security in the Mediterranean*

With the recent cases in Iran and Italy, COVID-19 appears to be emerging as a pandemic. As it has spread in the [Middle East](#) to Kuwait, Bahrain, Egypt, the UAE, and Israel, raises the question as well the Mediterranean region is prepared in terms of collective bio-security.

The coronavirus refers to a family of viruses shaped like a crown, including the "common cold," which is so old that there is even an [Egyptian hieroglyph](#) for it. [Seven coronaviruses](#) have made the jump from animals to human, however, in the 21st century, novel coronaviruses have made a new jump into the human population from bats on the three occasions causing a deadly pandemic: SARS (severe acute respiratory syndrome) in late 2002, MERS (Middle East respiratory syndrome) in 2012, and in 2019, COVID-19.

According to John Hopkins University interactive, live [update](#) of the COVID-19 outbreak, there have been 1,501 infections and 66 deaths so far in Iran.

Because of Western sanctions on Iran, the Islamic Republic had to depend on China for the construction of infrastructure, and Chinese laborers in the shrine city of Qom could have served as the vector of the disease.

The Iranian ministry health ministry [stated](#) that virus possibly originated from Chinese laborers in Qom who had come back from



China, but did not provide details if “patient zero” had been found. A Chinese company has been constructing a solar power plant in Qom. The fact that a Chinese company was given this tender is related to [China’s strengthening of ties](#) with Iran in the face of sanctions imposed by the Trump administration, with Beijing emerging as Tehran’s economic “lifeline.”

While the outbreak in Iran may be due to China’s greater role in the Middle East, it has then spread due to a pre-modern tradition: pilgrimage.

Qom is the site of the [shrine](#) of Fatima, brother of imam Ali al-Ridha. Lebanon’s first [case](#) of COVID-19 was from a pilgrim who visited the site, a 45-year-old woman who is in good health, according to the Lebanese ministry of health. The first three cases in [Kuwait](#) was allegedly from pilgrims returning from Iran’s north-eastern city of Mashhad, the where Ali Al-Ridha is buried.

Iran’s neighbor Iraq, which has reported no cases of the virus, has suspended visas for Iranian passport holders and direct flights between the two countries. This will affect the millions of Iranians who come to Iraq to visit the Shi’a shrine cities there.

As a result, the Iraqi economy, dependent on heavy pilgrimage traffic from Iran, will suffer, as well as the Iranian economy which depends on overland trade to Iraq, but also to Turkey and Afghanistan, which have also closed their borders.

The virus has not only affected the Shi’a pilgrimage routes. In Israel, a group of South Koreans on a [nine-day pilgrimage](#) to the country’s religious heritage also tested positive for the infection, possibly spreading it to other pilgrims who jostle in close proximity at the sites.

While fears of COVID-19 spreading in tandem with China’s modern geopolitical reach have been expressed, perhaps exaggerated, the



virus has travelled along the Mediterranean's pre-modern network of sacred heritage.

The new coronavirus, however, is a problem that is global in nature, which requires political solutions and transparency, based on international cooperation on the multinational, national and local level in the Mediterranean, ensuring the free flow of scientific information among these actors to the publics in this region.