Turkey emerges as key player in global COVID-19 fight

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Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, Turkey has proven itself as a key supporter of world efforts. State-run media say Turkey acted promptly and efficiently to curb spread of the coronavirus, and it's true the government closed schools and universities only one day after the first positive case was identified in the country, among other measures. This response was by far faster than that of some key European countries.

This Easter weekend, Turkey imposed two-days curfew for most of the major provinces, making sure that about 78 percent of its 64 million people would remain at home. Turkey faces over 61,000 identified cases and more than 1,200 deaths so far. The country has increased its production lines for medical protective gear and is distributing masks — free of charge — to its citizens in an effort to prevent further COVID-19 spread.

It comes to no surprise that Turkey is better prepared to deal with such pandemics when one considers that the country has a history of large-scale disasters, from devastating earthquakes to managing millions of refugees and migrants.

In early April, Turkey supplied masks and test kits to Balkan countries, Italy and Spain, answering the request-for-assistance call made through the NATO Euro-Atlantic Disaster Response Coordination Centre. The medical supplies crates read: "There is hope after despair and many suns after darkness," a famous quote by world renowned 13th century poet Jalaluddin Rumi.

So far, 88 countries have requested medical equipment from Turkey. Assistance has been sent to 30 countries so far, per the Turkish Ministry of Health. One of countries receiving medical equipment from Turkey is Israel.

Turkey was the first Muslim majority country to recognize Israel, back in March of 1949, but the strategic relationship between the two deteriorated in 2010 after a Turkish flotilla bound for the Hamas-run Gaza strip was raided by Israeli military, resulting in the death of 10 civilians. Israel has so far 10,000 cases and 93 deaths and claims it will develop a coronavirus vaccine within weeks. Ankara expressed expectation that the Israeli government will allow similar shipment of medical supplies to reach the Palestinians at the West Bank and Gaza, but not as a precondition. Turkey also sent 500,000 coronavirus tests to the United States. Turkish Minister of Health Fahrettin Koca told the parliament in Ankara that the country aims to test between 10,000 to 15,000 people in Turkey daily.

Turkey is also providing much needed medical assistance to Libya, a war-torn country plunged into chaos by warmongering Khalifa Haftar, who in his continued attacks on Tripoli has several times attacked Al-Khadra, a hospital designed to receive COVID-19 cases. The UN Humanitarian Coordinator in Libya Yacoub El Hillo described these attacks "as shocking and a violation of the International Humanitarian Law."

The United Kingdom is also receiving medical aid from Turkey, delivered by Turkish Armed Forces aircraft; this includes 100,000 hazmat suits to boost protection for medics at the hospitals that are on front line fighting COVID-19. This will certainly bring some needed relief for medics in UK following death from COVID-19 of Abdul Mabud Chowdhury, a 53 year-old consultant urologist at London hospital who earlier wrote a Facebook message to UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson outlining the urgent need for protective gear for medics. Italy and Spain, the two most affected European countries, are also receiving medical aid from Turkey. In order to manage complexities of meeting local demands and aiding other nations, the Turkish government has imposed export restrictions so companies must seek government approval before committing to export medical protective gear, currently the highest-valued commodity in the world.

In an effort to fight COVID-19, Turkey has also minimized its troop movements in Syria. This comes at a time when tensions between Turkey and Assad's regime runs high, following the attack on Idlib that killed 33 Turkish soldiers in late February. If Idlib province falls into Assad's hands, Turkey may face yet another 1.3 million refugees. Turkey already hosts 3.6 million refugees from Syria, along with 365,000 persons of concern. Earlier in March, the U.S. high level delegation that included U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Kelly Knight Craft, U.S. Ambassador to Turkey David Satterfield, and the U.S. Special Envoy for Syria James Jeffrey visited a refugee camp and Turkish border crossing, lauding what they characterized as Turkey's hospitality toward Syrian refugees in the country and its seamless coordination of cross-border humanitarian assistance.

The lack of protective medical equipment in many countries shows only how countries were unprepared for a major pandemic and how stock supplies were not enough to address needs of brave medical workers and of the population itself. However, as the countries and communities around the globe unite in radical measures to help beat the coronavirus, placing economies on hold, having people staying at homes and practicing social distancing, it is worth giving credit where credit is due: Turkey is rightly deserving.

Sasha Toperich is senior executive vice president of the Transatlantic Leadership Network. From 2013 to 2018, he was a senior fellow and director of the Mediterranean Basin, Middle East and Gulf initiative at the Center for Transatlantic Relations, at the Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies at Johns Hopkins University in Washington.