

## International Organizations Are Not Free of Bias

### News:

Aljazeera reported that, "The idea that the coronavirus pandemic originated accidentally via Chinese laboratory workers has surfaced again", following a documentary by Danish TV on the 12<sup>th</sup> of August, 2021 in which Peter Ben Embarek, the head of the World Health Organization (WHO) team tasked with investigating the origins of the coronavirus disease, proposed the hypothesis that "An employee of the lab gets infected while working in a bat cave collecting samples. Such a scenario, while being a lab leak, would also fit our first hypothesis of direct transmission of the virus from bat to human. This is a hypothesis that we consider to be likely."

### Comment:

Peter Ben Embarek's comments have sparked controversy because the WHO team reported its findings in February saying that a laboratory origin was "very unlikely". Since then, the head of the WHO, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, has said that ruling out a lab leak was "premature." Embarek explained that the team's discounting of the lab-leak hypothesis was due to pressure from Chinese scientists on the WHO team who at first refused to allow discussion of a lab leak, but finally agreed to a compromise where the theory would be mentioned in the report as "very unlikely" rather than impossible, but "on the condition we didn't recommend any specific studies to further that hypothesis."

Those who are happy to discover a WHO conspiracy, as well as those who are shocked that the WHO could be influenced by a single country to water-down its findings, have both failed to appreciate what the WHO is and how it works. Yes, it is a multinational organization, but that does not mean it can be independent of the countries that subscribe to it. Every country has interests that conflict with those of other countries and these conflicts naturally play out in the teams and committees that conduct the work of a multinational or supposedly supranational body.

Despite the US being the world's number one economy and despite the threats of former president Trump, Chinese scientists on the team introduced a softening of the wording of the February report to prevent giving Trump ammunition to fire at China when he was blaming China for starting the pandemic. The WHO functions through consensus, which means that compromises based on half-truths are inevitable for the sake of harmony. Furthermore, consensus building is slow and multiple committees often feed into the organization's final wording, which is drafted to be cautious and with a desire to be offensive to none.

Therefore, while many countries have been helped by the support of an international organization with expertise and resources that poorer countries lack, individual governments should never abdicate their responsibility to a WHO report or committee and each must decide what is best for its citizens. In addition to being as fallible as the humans that perform its work, it is based under the umbrella of the United Nations, upon Western values and concepts that are proclaimed to be universal. However, as values cannot be proven from any universal axioms, there cannot be any truly universal values, and so deference to an organization that is built upon such values risks subjugation. As human health and well-being is considered a holistic matter in Islam and as the WHO also has a wide view of health beyond physiology and anatomy, Muslims should be cautious about value conflicts in some areas of health.

As for the origin of SARS Coronavirus-2, it is still an open question as to whether a laboratory accident or exposure of scientists collecting viral samples from bats in the forests of China introduced the virus to the Wuhan population and then the world, or whether the initial infection was independent of Chinese scientific enquiry. This is not the first example of a virus spreading from animals to humans, and causing a global pandemic, and it will probably not be the last.

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