

Preface

After the first official cases reported in Iran in late February 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic has rapidly spread to all countries in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, affecting all areas of life and becoming one of the most significant factors affecting regional developments. The outbreak, whose devastating effects cannot yet be fully appreciated, could not have come at a worse time, as many countries remain engulfed in vicious internal conflicts, or must cope with structural socio-economic distress and popular dissent. In many respects, such a context and many of its problems resemble those that formed the backdrop of the Arab spring in 2011.

Ten years after those momentous events, much ink has been spilled about the drivers, dynamics and consequences of the uprisings, as well as their lasting legacy. Attention has been devoted in particular to the security and military developments that have unfolded since, either in the form of civil wars such as those in Libya, Syria, or Yemen, or in their worrisome evolutions into regionalized or internationalized conflicts, characterized by heavily entrenched zero-sum calculations. Notwithstanding the relevance of the security realm, however, some of the root causes of the Arab Springs pertain to the social and political spheres and remain to a large extent unaddressed in many countries of the region. Socio-economic inequalities, unemployment, weak governance, socio-political exclusion and ethno-religious discrimination are amongst the most relevant factors, and they all seem to converge into what could be generally defined as a “social contract”.

The erosion of this social contract not only underlies the persistent occurrence of social protests and anti-governmental mobilization across the region, but it also explains the (perceived or real) widening gap between common citizens and political elites, as well as the latter's failure to meet the former's demands. The cases of Algeria and Iraq, in particular, plainly illustrate the failure of the redistributive model of the social contract, with protesters and activists that for more than a year have been tirelessly calling for more jobs, better services, and a profound overhaul of a power system driven by corruption and cronyism. As a second wave of protests has again recently rocked parts of the Middle East and North Africa, the reaction of the authorities has been for the most part a repressive one (sometimes even leading to violence as in the case of Iraq), forestalling any significant change.

Against this backdrop, thus, the introduction of an unexpected variable such as a public health emergency due to a worldwide pandemic could potentially trigger an unprecedented reshuffle of both domestic and regional dynamics. In a nutshell, the virus has dramatically exposed the governance failures of many current administrations, as well as pre-existing vulnerabilities, exacerbating the same economic grievances that led to the recent string of popular protests in the first place. Although initially downplayed by many regional governments, the pandemic has soon made its effects felt on the economic and social spheres while pushing healthcare systems to the limit, especially in conflict-ridden or fragile countries such as Libya, Syria, and Iraq. To varying degrees, state authorities reluctantly decided to suspend economic activities, reduce trade relations, close national borders, and impose more or less severe quarantine measures to curb the spread of the disease and protect communities at risk. While some countries are faring better than others, the pandemic is expected to leave long lasting scars almost everywhere.

This report collects contributions from international experts and scholars on Middle Eastern affairs. The authors offer different perspectives on the consequences that the pandemic

is having on regimes and societies in the MENA region. By focusing on six case studies that range from North African countries to the Middle East and the Gulf, this volume aims to draw a detailed and updated picture of the evolving relations between state and society, paying specific attention to the variety of regime-oppositions dynamics. Notably, this analysis takes into consideration the challenges faced by governments and rulers in their attempt to maintain a hold on increasingly unstable societies and political systems, as well as how these efforts influence their interaction with other actors in the region.

As Emadeddin Badi argues, Libya has so far been overwhelmed by the Covid-19 outbreak, with healthcare structures and medical capabilities devastated by years of war and any form of public response impeded or delayed by both military operations and the country's division into two competing governments. Here, the pandemic has not halted the war, now in a low-intensity phase, nor has it prompted any significant change in the attitudes of Libyan political elites, rather amplifying the gap with local constituencies and setting the stage for what Badi describes as a situation similar to a "*tragedy of the commons*".

In other contexts, such as in Algeria and Egypt, the pandemic seems to have reinforced or augmented the tendency towards authoritarian rule, at least in the short term. As Yahia Mohamed Lemine Mestek recounts, Algiers and Cairo has exploited the Covid-19 emergency to enact severe – albeit temporary – social control legislations and weaken potential opponents and critics in order to cement their hold on power. In Algeria, several leaders and activists of the almost two-year-long protest movement known as *Hirak* have been imprisoned, while the government is using the pandemic to buy time and drive the country through a smooth political transition while trying to cope with a worsening economic situation. Yet, as long as the protesters' demands will be ignored or only partially recognized, buying time will only push the population to distance itself from the elite, postponing but not cancelling the need for the concrete change the people are asking for.

Turning to Egypt, Hafsa Halawa argues that for the Egyptian President Abdel Fattah Al Sisi the Covid-19 outbreak has provided a favourable context for his policies of state control. According to Halawa, Al Sisi can continue to expand the military's control over the state's institutions and the economy, while moving towards a *de facto* authoritarian system, oblivious to the fact that apparent political inactivity on the part of the opposition could actually conceal a higher degree of political awareness that may inspire anti-regime mobilization in the future.

In Baghdad, the government led by Mustafa al-Kadhimi, which was sworn in in early May, inherited from the previous administration months of violent popular protests against corruption and poor governance, tense relations with Turkey and the risk of a US-Iran confrontation on Iraqi soil. And then, the pandemic hit. As Abbas Kadhim recounts, the virus propagated and overcame an unprepared health-care system, popular mobilization receded, Iraqi streets emptied, and political elites enjoyed a temporary relief. However, most of the structural problems plaguing the country have not disappeared, and could instead worsen due to the pandemic, stoking new and stronger opposition and forcing the regime to either pursue reforms and mend fences with the political and social opposition, or continue along a path of reckless apathy.

Moving to the Arab Gulf, Gawdat Bahgat explains that these countries can count on overall solid and modern medical services. Arab Gulf countries were among the first to introduce partial or full lockdowns, together with stimulus packages aimed at sustaining domestic economies in the face of the economic slowdown and substantial financial losses caused by plunging oil prices. In fact, the combination of global supply-demand shocks and nosediving energy prices has put additional strains on even the region's wealthiest countries and may generate unprecedented tensions between governing elites and ordinary citizens.

Finally, turning to Iran, Nadereh Chamlou argues that the Iranian regime has tried to capitalize on the pandemic to

tighten its rule, in spite of the catastrophic impact the virus is having in terms of human losses and economic fallout. Indeed, as of mid-November 2020, the country recorded close to 40 thousand deaths and remains the hardest-hit in the region. Besides exposing the country's structural deficiencies on many fronts, the virus has put the spotlight on the growing popular discontent towards the regime when it comes to fair justice and institutional accountability.

Overall, a more in-depth analysis of how governments have reacted to the pandemic reveals that autocrats, besides implementing emergency laws to effectively slow viral transmission, have been similarly worried about silencing those who exposed the impact that the pandemic is having on deep-seated issues affecting their own countries. This, in turn, has justified the upsurge of securitization and the deployment of repressive tools against the opposition under the guise of managing the epidemic. By means of new technologies to track citizens, extraordinary authority to impose social control measures, and emergency laws, the pandemic has also laid the foundation for future repressions. As a result, highly securitized regimes of the MENA region have seized this opportunity to keep at bay what has previously been a robust and widespread wave of discontent, and actively seek to prevent its recurrence.

Nevertheless, the pandemic has also brought to the fore the utter untenability of the social contract existing in many regional countries, exacerbating structural problems and deepening the gap between political elites and ordinary citizens. By exposing the real nature of many political regimes, the virus has also opened new spaces of dissent and forced socio-political oppositions to rethink their engagement in the face of increased pressure from the authorities, likely spreading the seeds of future mobilizations.

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