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Pandemic, Protests, Paradoxical Reform, and Lingering Authoritarian in the Middle East

Mahmood Monshipouri, Ph.D.* - Javad Heiran-Nia, Ph.D.**



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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has strengthened the hands of authoritarian regimes. Unlike those who have claimed that the outbreak tends to accelerate the movement toward greater geopolitical competition, we argue that the pandemic has necessitated further cooperation between democratic and authoritarian governments, thus enhancing the longevity of the latter. This explains why the global pandemic has caused no fundamental changes in the regional security dynamics of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), in part because it has ironically prolonged the rule of authoritarian in the region in the name of providing public health. Despite the rhetoric of religious pluralism, moderation, as well as constitutional reforms, sentiments echoing narrow and virulent nationalism and right-wing populism have simultaneously prevailed. On balance, the persistent use of repression in liberalized autocracies in the region has manifested itself in the form of repressing protesters during tough economic times. For example, in protests against unemployment in Oman in 2018 or against tax reform in Jordan in 2019, and during Saudi Arabia's 2017-20 Qatif

* Chair/Professor International Relations Department San Francisco State University; and Lecture Global Studies/International and Area Studies University of California, Berkeley/Corresponding Author/ Emails: mmonship@sfsu.edu and mmonship@berkeley.edu

** International Relations, Director of the Persian Gulf Studies Group at the Center for scientific Research and Middle East Strategic Studies, Tehran, Iran.

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unrest or in Algeria's ongoing political protests, such patterns of behavior have been visible. Even in those regimes that have introduced constitutional reforms in the aftermath of the 2011 Arab Spring uprisings, when priority has been given to combating a global pandemic, a floundering economy, and other emerging threats, such as the campaign against terrorism, authoritarian regimes have wound up consolidating their rule, thus exploiting such crises in order to grab further power at home and seek geopolitical advantage in the region. However, it is short-sighted to underestimate the possibility of the spontaneous eruption of popular uprisings that could pose a destabilizing threat to authoritarian regimes at some point in the future.

Keywords

Protests, uprisings, COVID-19 pandemic, authoritarianism, populism, social media, monarchies, republics, the Middle East and North Africa

Introduction

Nearly a decade after the 2011 Arab Spring uprisings, we have witnessed the emergence of a second wave of protests in the streets of Algeria, Sudan, Lebanon, and Iraq, with protesters demanding income equality, social justice, structural reform, and good governance. The spread of the COVID-19 pandemic in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) has disrupted these protest movements, hitting these countries at a time when the region faces multiple crises and tighter social controls. The COVID-19 pandemic has posed daunting challenges to human rights and the activities of civil society organizations (CSOs) in the MENA region.

Many governments have responded by imposing coercive measures, including lockdowns, curfew orders, arrests, declarations of states of emergency, and bans on public gatherings. They have filtered and limited access to the Internet access and social media, while also regulating or even suspending

newspapers that have criticized government's lackadaisical performance to curb the spread of the coronavirus. Several governments have also employed various intrusive surveillance technology with the aim of tracking down the spread of pandemic—a development that has raised many serious concerns about the impacts of such activities on the people's civic freedoms in general and the CSOs in particular.

This essay's research question is: what impact did the COVID-19 pandemic have upon protest movements and the ongoing authoritarianism in the MENA region? We argue that the COVID-19 pandemic has strengthened the hands of authoritarian and populist regimes, as repressive economic and political measures have been implemented for the sake of public health. The disruption of massive riots and protests due to the outbreak has given considerable boost to authoritarian and populist regimes to impose further restrictions in the form of lockdowns and curfews on the open expression of public discontent. The ramifications of such policies—not yet fully explored by academics and policy makers—will be detrimental to the activities of civil society and social movements, and especially to the promotion of grassroots democratic trends across the region. That said, one should not downplay the possibility of the spontaneous eruption of popular uprisings that could pose a destabilizing threat to authoritarian and populist regimes. The haunting question that still lingers is whether the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the vulnerabilities of the authoritarian and/or populist regimes or fortified their grip on power. Before we build on this essay's conceptual framework, a quick glance at the MENA countries' responses to the COVID-19 pandemic is in order.

1- The MENA Region's Governmental Responses to the Pandemic

There are several ways to gauge government measures to the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic in the MENA region. Perhaps, one place to start is each

state's declaration of emergency (see Table 1). In some countries, including Palestine, Mauritania, Tunisia, Morocco, Egypt, Sudan, Lebanon, and Jordan, according to the COVID-19 Civic Freedom Tracker, declarations of emergency led these countries to expand their authorities to restrict movement, ban public gatherings, and impose curfews. (*International Center for Non-Profit Law*, 2021).

In some cases, governments have employed these emergencies to monitor communications, screen media content, or detain individuals who could allegedly pose a threat to the country's national security. Violators of these restrictions have often been subject to severe penalties ranging from prohibitive monetary fines to imprisonment. These severe consequences are an exacerbation of state policies that have increased the effects of an already suffocating political environment. Of these declarations, four states of emergency unfolded in rapid succession in Palestine, Mauritania, Tunisia, and Morocco (Ibid). Egypt saw an extension of its previously existing state of emergency and two declarations of public health emergencies were enacted in Sudan and Lebanon, furthering constraints on civil space and limiting the possibilities for deliberate and legitimate opposition to these regimes. An activation of a national defense law went into effect, as well, in Jordan as the pandemic progressed (Ibid).

In virtually all countries of the MENA region, a ban on public gatherings, a crackdown on opposition activism, and the prohibition of movement of people within the country was put into place. In some countries, such as Jordan, financial penalties and imprisonment for violators of the curfew were strictly enforced. In the case of Iraq, it is worth noting that the current economic and political crisis—not entirely unrelated to the pandemic—is likely to topple Iraqi populists who came to power during the 2018 election. Bans on domestic travel were also vigorously applied in the cases of Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, and Sudan (see Table 1). Arrests for spreading coronavirus-related rumors as well

as disinformation in this regard were pervasive in Iran, Jordan, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, and Tunisia (Ibid).

In the case of Iran, several factors have reinforced populist response to the pandemic. These included, among others, the declining oil prices, exacerbated by the Trump administration's re-imposition of sanctions, the ensuing 2017-2019 nationwide economic protests, and the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic—with Iran as the region's epicenter, accounting for significant number of coronavirus cases. Iran's former President Hassan Rouhani came up with his own brand of populist economic policies (Monshipouri and Dorraj, 2021:219). The country's new president, Ebrahim Raisi, has pledged to not **link** the fate of economy to the nuclear deal and sanctions relief. Raisi appears to be largely sympathetic to the lower classes of society. His frequent rhetoric about "justice" in economic planning reflects his judicial background and a populist approach toward tackling corruption and mismanagement (Rome, 2021).

Jordanian authorities, according to Human Rights Watch, have arrested media workers and others, while issuing a murky emergency decree that could obstruct online discussion about the country's response to the pandemic. Under the April 15, 2020 decree, spreading the news that would "cause panic" about the pandemic in media or online can carry a new penalty of up to three years in prison. Jordanian authorities detained two leading media executives, a foreign journalist, and a former member of parliament, seemingly in response to public criticism, as well as three people for allegedly spreading "fake news" (*Human Rights Watch*, 2020).

In Kuwait, as well as in several other countries, the deployment of surveillance technologies and contact-tracing app raised privacy concerns. The suspension of newspapers became a frequent occurrence in several countries, but especially in the cases of Jordan, Iran, Morocco and Oman. On August 10, 2020,

the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) reported the temporarily closure of *Jahane Sanat* for publishing an interview with a member of Iran's National Coronavirus Task Force, who had pointed out that the country's officials were covering up the extent of the coronavirus outbreak. Government epidemiologist Mohammadreza Mahboubfar told *Jahane Sanat* that the country's virus figures have certainly been engineered since the start of the outbreak" and that this has been done largely "for political and security reasons" (*Committee to Protect Journalists*, 2020).

In the UAE, a federal law was passed to combat cybercrime and in Oman, the government engaged in drone surveillance to limit social gatherings. In Jordan, armed forces were deployed in anticipation of a nation-wide lockdown (*International Center for Non-Profit Law*, 2021). In Turkey, the government arrested, detained, and interrogated doctors and other medical professionals who criticized the state response to the pandemic. Turkey's Radio and Television Supreme Council (RTUK) imposed administrative fines on media outlets that were critical of the government's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic. According to one source, the government arrested more than 400 people for "provocative" posts concerning the outbreak on social media (Ibid). Turkey's Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, known for his cultural populist policies, supported authoritarian measures to successfully contain and mitigate the coronavirus *outbreak*, an approach that was consistent with his overall autocratic rule (Meyer, 2020).

Furthermore, while restrictions on digital freedoms are not new in the MENA region, authorities there have used the pandemic as an excuse to launch an all-out attack on the accessibility of websites, issuing harsh penalties for journalists and activists. As a result, new laws have been put in place that have restricted internet freedom under the cover of COVID-19. Bahrain, Egypt, Iran, Kuwait, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia, and the UAE have all introduced inordinately broad and somewhat hazily written laws, which are seemingly meant to ward off

the spread of COVID-19-related “fake news.” These laws have had serious repercussions for all online speech and activism. Turkish authorities arrested more than 400 people for publishing social media posts about COVID-19 in March 2020 as the virus spread throughout the country (Grothe, 2021).

In Sudan, prior to the pandemic, the state of the Internet freedom noticeably improved under a transitional government that was formed by military commanders and civilian protest leaders who replace the repressive regime of longtime president Omar al-Bashir. Hopes for the continuation of this trend, however, were dashed by renewed restrictions on digital freedom shortly thereafter, with the imposition of a 40-day shutdown following a brutal massacre of protesters by security forces in June 2019. These restrictions were further intensified during the pandemic era (Shahbaz and Funk, 2021). It should be noted, however, that many other actions taken by governments during the pandemic using existing legislation—for instance, prosecuting journalists and citizen reporters and protesters—require separate scrutiny, which is beyond the scope of this study.

State of Emergency	Bans on Public Gathering and Protests	Restrictions on the Internet Freedom	Bans on Domestic Travels	Arrests for Spreading Coronavirus-related News and Misinformation	Suspension of Newspapers
Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Mauritania, Morocco, Palestine, Tunisia, and Sudan	All of the countries in the MENA region	Bahrain, Egypt, Iran, Kuwait, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Tunisia, Turkey, and the UAE	Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, and Sudan	Egypt, Iran, Jordan, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia, and Turkey	Jordan, Iran, Morocco, and Oman

Table 1: The MENA Region’s Governmental Responses to the Pandemic Sources: An Overview from the COVID-19 Civic Freedom Tracker, see

International Center for Non-Profit Law (ICNL), “Middle Eastern and North African Government Responses to COVID-19,” available at: <https://www.icnl.org/post/news/mena-government-responses-to-covid-19> Accessed on November 20, 2021; also *Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ)*, “Iran Shuts Down Economic Newspaper over COVID-19 Reporting,” August 10, 2020, available at: <https://cpj.org/2020/08/iran-shuts-down-economic-newspaper-over-covid-19-reporting/>. Accessed on November 24, 2021.

Cathryn Grothe, “Internet Freedom is Under Attack in the Middle East and North Africa,” *Freedom House: Perspectives*, January 19, 2021, available at: <https://freedomhouse.org/article/amid-covid-19-pandemic-internet-freedom-under-attack-middle-east-and-north-africa>. Accessed on November 26, 2021.

Adrian Shahbaz and Allie Funk, “Freedom on the Net 2020: The Pandemic’s Digital Shadow,” *Freedom House*, available at: <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2020/pandemics-digital-shadow>. Accessed on November 26, 2021.

2- The Empirical Correlates of Authoritarian Trends

It is safe to assume that today, both specialists and laymen still have only an incomplete understanding of the COVID-19 pandemic. Although we have gained valuable, knowledge-based insights into the impact of this pandemic on the most vulnerable—the poor, women, elderly, migrant workers, and refugees—much remains unknown about its full range of consequences. Equally problematic is our inability to foretell exactly how this global pandemic will end; however, it is clear that the impact of this global pandemic has empowered authoritarian regimes, especially in the MENA region, who exploited the ensuing crisis to impose further restrictions on the public.

What are the factors that contribute to authoritarianism under such circumstances? To better understand these dynamics requires paying greater attention to the correlates of the pandemic. In this section, we first conceptualize

our study by focusing on three central concepts: *authoritarianism*, *interstate cooperation*, and *change* in the form of political and socioeconomic reform. We then proceed to examine the correlates (or their absence) between the regime type and the COVID-19 total deaths in the MENA region. The significance of this study lies in underscoring the importance of the way in which the pandemic has further intensified authoritarianism. The pandemic has correlated highly with the efforts of several governments in the MENA region to tighten their grip on domestic opposition and contestation, through the adoption of more stringent laws and deploying explicitly authoritarian practices and repressive measures.

In Algeria, the government swiftly turned the COVID-19 pandemic to its own political ends, jailing protesters who have been in the streets on a daily basis for more than a year calling for political reforms. In Egypt, the el-Sisi administration launched another clampdown on foreign reporters who had written about the coronavirus outbreak in the country. The Egyptian State Information Service (SIS) accused a *Guardian* reporter of “repeated intentional defamation” of Egypt and criticized alleged “professional misconduct” by a *New York Times* Correspondent (Dunne, 2021).

The pandemic has also exposed the weaknesses of many of these countries in terms of curbing COVID-19. The future remains uncertain as COVID-19’s ongoing damage could pave the way for yet another round of political uprisings in the coming years. Interestingly enough, however, the pandemic has led to further cooperation between different governments in the MENA region. Consider, for example, the case of the United Arab Emirates. Like many countries in the region, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) was adversely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Its measured and proactive policies, however, converted challenges into opportunities and spawned the development of trilateral collaborations involving the government, academic and industrial sectors (Alsuwaidi, Al Hasani, ElGhazali, and Al-Ramadi, 2021:1066-1067).

The UAE took strong and timely precautionary measures including complete lockdowns against COVID-19 to prevent its spread. The rules of “shelter in place” were remarkably well-enforced and few violations were reported throughout the lockdown period. Non-essential businesses were completely shut down. The end of the lockdown in the summer of 2020, still entailed a considerable number of restrictions, including enforcing curfews in consumer traffic from 10pm till 6am for several months, on the local businesses and industries.

The UAE was in fact among first nations that started a vaccination campaign of its nationals and residents alike by November 2020, making China’s Sinopharm vaccine available and free of charge to all. Following the signing of a joint venture with China, a firm based in the UAE started commercial production of the Sinopharm vaccine. The production of affordable COVID-19 vaccines has led to a close collaboration between the two countries in an attempt to export these vaccines to the rest of the region (Reuters, 2021). By early 2021, the governor of Dubai imported the Pfizer vaccine. Subsequently, the UAE donated millions of vaccines to several countries including Iran and Syria.

The notion of change—broadly understood in terms of political and socioeconomic reform—has been marginalized in the heat of the battle against the COVID-19 pandemic. The strict implementation of lockdowns has also effectively postponed such protest movements that led to unprecedented change a decade ago. While economic grievances were the primary driver behind the 2011 uprisings, political demands for reform, social justice, and freedoms were also among the key triggers of the protests. The ongoing condemnation of protesters toward an atmosphere of endemic corruption and their demands for greater accountability demonstrates that the desire for socioeconomic and political rights are intertwined, not sequential.

While the outlook for democratic trends in the MENA region before the

COVID-19 pandemic was grim, the after-pandemic era has seen comparatively far worse ramifications. In fact, the pandemic has intensified socioeconomic problems of the region, further exacerbating the pre-existing democratic changes. The forced relocation of civil society organizations (CSOs) and the scarcity of funding have presented serious challenges to the development of legitimate opposition or civic development spaces. Furthermore, migrant workers and internally displaced persons (IDPs) have been disproportionately affected by the pandemic. According to one report, *as of October 10, 2021, emigrants from the 20 countries with the highest number of COVID-19 cases accounted for more than one-third of the total international migrant stock and they had sent an estimated 41 percent of all remittances globally to their countries of origin in 2020. Immigrants accounted for at least 3.7 percent of the population in 13 of the 20 countries with the highest number of COVID-19 cases (Migration Data Portal, 2021).*

In the Arab countries of the Persian Gulf region, curfews and lockdowns have resulted in many migrants losing their jobs, rights to medical services and even repatriation of some groups and individuals. Migrants have also faced discrimination and loss of rights by being held in detention centers, in a dilapidated state, as part of the government's plan to contain the number of COVID-19 infections among citizens (*Institute for Democratic and Electoral Assistance, 2021*).

The UAE's key challenge has indeed revolved around retaining expatriate residents. There has been mounting pressure on UAE authorities to forestall a permanent exodus of expatriates. Emirati policymakers have responded with new visa arrangements and even a swift pathway to citizenship to maintain and absorb talented expatriates (*Middle East Political and Economic Institute, 2021*). The country's Federal Authority for Identity and Citizenship (ICA) and the National Emergency Crisis and Disasters Management Authority (NCEMA)

have announced the possibility for return for the fully vaccinated—with WHO-approved vaccines—who hold valid UAE residence visa coming from countries previously on the suspended list beginning on September 19, 2021. These countries included India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and others (*Gulf Today*, 2021).

A comparison of the performance of monarchies and republics in the MENA region in the face of pandemic has renewed the debate over the relevance (or lack thereof) of regime type (see Table 2). Throughout the Arab world, in both monarchies and republics, the pandemic has also exacerbated enduring problems, including military violence, unemployment, inequalities, poverty, and deficient social safety nets. Many experts, such as Lina Khatib, head of the Middle East program at Chatham House, have drawn our attention to how the coronavirus has revealed the frailty of the safety net systems throughout the region, arguing that “COVID-19 has postponed the inevitable unrest to come” (Ibid). For example, the healthcare systems in Yemen, Syria and Libya, which were already shaky, have been severely debilitated or demolished in large part because of ongoing civil wars. Lacking health insurance and income, workers’ economic conditions have significantly deteriorated.

The most serious instances of the spread of coronavirus unfolded in Iran. The country saw not only the highest number of cases in the region but also the highest number of deaths (*Worldometer*, 2021). By mid-November 2021, the number of total COVID-19 fatalities exceeded 128,000. Table 2 shows that the largest numbers of coronavirus-related cases and deaths in the MENA region occurred in Iran. Internal divisions within Iran, between the populist clerical regime and the moderate-pragmatist President Hassan Rouhani, as well as some political concerns hindered the response of the regime. Iran’s Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, and the Revolutionary Guards were initially unwilling to announce the closure of mosques and pilgrimage sites. Moreover, facing the

consequences of harsh US sanctions and a 10 percent plunge in GDP, the government delayed the lockdown. Eventually, however, the government had to face the country’s poor healthcare and paramedic infrastructure, in addition to insufficient hospital beds and medical equipment (Duclos and El Karoui, 2020).

On balance, as shown in Table 2, factors such as level of economic development and the presence of a viable public health system—not the type of political regime—appear to have directly affected the ability of these countries to effectively contain the spread of the pandemic.

Country	Regime Type	Freedom Status	Government Type	COVID-19 Total Deaths
Algeria	Republic	Not	moderate autocracy	5,997
Bahrain	absolute monarchy	Not	hard autocracy	1,393
Egypt	presidential republic	Not	moderate autocracy	19,567
Iran	Islamic republic	Not	moderate autocracy	128,406
Iraq	parliamentary republic	Not	moderate autocracy	23,562
Israel	parliamentary republic	Free	working democracy	8,148
Jordan	constitutional monarchy	Not	hybrid regime	11,279
Kuwait	constitutional monarchy	Partly	hybrid regime	2,462
Lebanon	parliamentary republic	Partly	hybrid regime	8,588
Libya	transitional republic	Not	hard autocracy	5,319
Morocco	absolute monarchy	Partly	hybrid regime	14,747
Oman	absolute monarchy	Not	moderate autocracy	4,113
Palestine	semi-presidential republic	--	hard autocracy	4,496
Qatar	absolute monarchy	Not	hard autocracy	611
Saudi	absolute monarchy	Not	hard autocracy	8,818

Arabia				
Sudan	presidential republic	Not	hard autocracy	3,099
Syria	presidential republic	Not	hard autocracy	2,672
Tunisia	presidential republic	Free	deficient democracy	25,320
Turkey	presidential republic	Not	moderate autocracy	73,973
UAE	federal constitutional monarchy	Not	hard autocracy	2,149
Yemen	provisional presidential republic	Not	hard autocracy	1,926

Table 2: Regime Type, Freedom Status, Government Type, and COVID-19 Total Death

Regime Type: available at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Middle_East. Accessed on November 16, 2021. Government type: Ranking of Countries by Quality of Democracy, available at <https://www.democracymatrix.com/ranking>, Accessed on November 16, 2021. Freedom House: available at: https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2020-02/FIW_2020_REPORT_BOOKLET_Final.pdf. Accessed on November 16, 2021. Total death as a result of COVID-19: Worldometers: Coronavirus Cases: Available at: <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/>. Accessed on November 16, 2021.

3- Conceptual Framework

These empirical results suggest that the limitations imposed by the governments in the MENA region on street demonstrations and riots in the name of coping with the COVID-19 pandemic appear to be strongly associated with

the decision to further restrict individual freedoms. By linking this study's research questions to the larger conceptual framework, we attempt to provide a systematic pathway toward explaining and distinguishing among several critical variables. To meet this goal, we aim to demonstrate that the pandemic (independent variable) has increasingly led to more cooperation between different regimes and governments in the MENA region (intermediate variable), thus strengthening the hand of authoritarian and populist regimes that continue to rule in the name of political stability, which is widely regarded as a precondition for promoting public health and the collective good (dependent variable).

While there is no denying that the pandemic has accelerated efforts by authoritarian government to tighten their grip at home, it has simultaneously opened up an opportunity for the cessation of fighting in territories engulfed in armed conflicts, such as Libya, Yemen, and Syria. This situation could potentially alter the course of conflict, ending many of them in the near future—if not over the longer term—while also curbing the spread of the coronavirus. The region also faces a health catastrophe in addition to years of destruction from regional wars. Increasingly, refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) have become particularly vulnerable to the COVID-19 infection (Dassa Kaye, 2020). It is also worth noting that “pressure to release political prisoners is mounting across the region, particularly in Iran, given the risk of widespread infection in crowded prisons with poor sanitary conditions. Iran has temporarily freed approximately 85,000 prisoners, including political detainees, and Bahrain has released approximately 1,500 detainees for humanitarian reasons” (Ibid).

Similarly, Israeli-Palestinian cooperation, rare as it may seem though, illustrates the fact that pandemics cross political and geographic demarcations. Not surprisingly, there appears to be high-level cooperation between Israeli and Palestinian officials, including a joint operation room to contain the spread of the

infection. Israeli President Rivlin, according to one source, “even called Palestinian Authority leader [Mahmoud] Abbas to thank him for the high-level cooperation to confront the pandemic” (Ibid). Gaza, which has been under dire humanitarian and health conditions from many years of blockade and embargo by Israel, presents a real concern for new outbreaks of the virus. The World Health Organization has cautioned that Gaza’s health system would be unable to effectively deal with an outbreak in a 25-mile enclave with 2 million people. These risks are likely to present openings to ease the blockade and possibly lead to a ceasefire (Ibid). The result, if the ceasefire stands, is unlikely to undermine Hamas’ hold on power.

By facilitating shipment of medical supplies to Iran, the UAE has signaled that the existing vulnerabilities to the COVID-19 pandemic across the region present perilous and problems for all. As Iran’s struggle indicates, despite dire consequences of a poorly managed public health, such mutual responses also contain the seeds of future cooperation, if given the proper soil to grow. Further evidence of this can be found in Syria, when on March 27, 2020, the UAE offered to help Syria battle the coronavirus pandemic during a phone call between Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed, Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi and Deputy Supreme Commander of the UAE Armed Forces, and Syrian President Bashar Assad: Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed told the Syrian President that their countries needed to “place humanitarian solidarity over political issues during this common challenge we are all facing” (*Middle East Political and Economic Institute*, 2021)

To be fully appreciated, that offer needs to be placed in the context of other acts of bolstering bilateral relations with Syria that are likely to further boost the stability of the Bashar Assad regime. On November 10, 2021, Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed, UAE Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, met with President Assad in Damascus as part of an effort by five Arab countries to reconcile with Syria. Following this meeting, UAE firms signed an agreement

for the construction of a solar power plant in the suburbs of Damascus (Jansen, 2021). Jordan, Lebanon, Egypt, and Algeria have also followed suit, calling for Syria to return to the Arab League. Thus, “uncertainty,” amplified as a result of the pandemic, has led countries of various regime types and levels of autocracy to aid each other. We next explain how this has further intensified the level of authoritarianism in the MENA region—a region of the world that has been home to various forms of authoritarianism even before the outbreak.

4- Economic Uncertainty-Authoritarianism Link

Our theoretical contention is further amplified by a broader inference drawn from the evidence presented in Table 2: that the pandemic has led to *no* fundamental change in regime dynamics. Arguably, it has reinforced these regimes’ stranglehold on power. We contend that the pandemic has led to more authoritarianism because it has generated a high degree of economic uncertainty that has dramatically altered the calculations of local actors and has in fact discouraged them from engaging in call for change. This has led to the erosion of mobilization by local actors and NGOs. Following the outbreak of the coronavirus, many occupations were shut down, and thousands of workers lost their jobs. For example, in Iran, the service sector, the nation’s largest industry comprising nearly 70 percent of the country’s workers, was among the hardest hit segments of the economy, leaving many unemployed and without health insurance (*Industry, Mines, and Trade*, 2021).

In 2020, the average income of a worker in Iran was approximately \$80 per month, well below the country’s poverty line of \$400 per month (Ibid). Across the MENA region, job losses have also been prevalent in the informal sector, where women workers suffered a disproportionately large share of the losses. Informal sector jobs often fail to comply with labor laws and thus offer little job security, especially during a dramatic challenge such as the COVID-19

pandemic (*Tasnim News Agency*, 2020).

Religious pilgrimages, a core source of revenue for some Middle Eastern economies, have also come to a halt. Iraq's economy, which has already lost billions in oil revenue, relies on millions of Shia pilgrims, mainly from Iran. The Iraqi government has imposed a ban on these pilgrimages, mirroring the Saudi government's ban on international visitors making the hajj, the annual Islamic pilgrimage to Mecca, in order to curb the spread of the coronavirus (Brown, 2020). In Iran, pilgrimage destination cities such as Mashhad saw many workers laid off due to travel bans and the closure of religious sites. Elsewhere, the economies of Egypt, Jordan, Tunisia, and Morocco have been hit hard by the freeze in tourism, a significant source of jobs and foreign currency earnings (England, 2020).

As local economies shut down and the global economic meltdown took its toll through the lost jobs and incomes of many millions of people in the MENA region, street protests reminiscent of the 2011 Arab Spring uprisings have faded away for now. In Lebanon, Yemen, and Iraq, many now live below the poverty line. The surge in the numbers of unemployed and homeless people as well as small businesses that have gone bankrupt has practically drained the energy necessary to mobilize public protests. In Iran, the impacts of the virus have further challenged an economy already suffering under draconian US sanctions. It is worth noting that these sanctions have dramatically weakened the Iranian middle class that has consistently been a force for political moderation, reform, and globalization. This suggests that democratic values are less likely to thrive in hard economic times (Salehi-Isfahani, 2021).

Yet in the region's economically weak and exposed monarchies, such as Jordan, Morocco, and Oman, unrest prior to the pandemic was already precipitated by high unemployment rates, subsidy reforms, and spiking food and fuel prices (Abouzzohour, 2021). The economic recession resulting from the

COVID-19 pandemic combined with a consequential sharp decline in oil prices has also forced some oil-rich Arab states to implement strict economic measures, with Saudi Arabia considering putting in place value-added taxes and Jordan, Morocco, and Oman prolonging austerity measures (Ibid).

Measures such as those imposed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), which led to cuts in fuel and food subsidies, have a history of prompting widespread protests in the MENA region, especially in Egypt, Sudan, and Jordan (Monshipouri and Dunlap, 2021:27), but most notably in Jordan, where between 2018 and 2020 a new tax law and IMF-imposed austerity measures fueled several general strikes. The unrest was met with harsh security measures, including provincial detention, home incursions, suspension of unions, arrests, and severe internet regulations (Ibid). Ultimately, however, the underlying aspects of their regime's survival and political stability will remain intact as long as there is global demand for oil (O'Driscoll, Bourhrous, Maddah, Fazil, 2020:46-47).

While in some of countries in the region, such as Egypt, Syria, Sudan, and Iran, the pandemic has led to the deployment of new surveillance practices, in oil rich monarchies of the Persian Gulf, the pandemic has led to more governmental legitimacy. This stability has encouraged the extension of other politically repressive measures. In Saudi Arabia, for instance, the Kingdom has halted its court system, apparently to prevent the spread of the pandemic, which has resulted in the postponement of trials for activists such as women's rights advocate Loujain al-Hathloul. However, the COVID-19 crisis is likely to provide enough of an excuse to entirely abandon due process, freedom of expression, and criticism of the government and lead to quicker arrests of opponents (Dunne, 2021).

5- Consequences of COVID in North Africa

In North Africa, coping with the coronavirus has been full of twists and turns. More specifically, in Tunisia, since January 2021, there have been several waves of protests against economic inequality, unemployment, and police brutality.

The unemployment rate has risen to 18 percent. Infection rates have dramatically increased, leading to a near disintegration of the public health system. Attempts by many refugees to reach Europe via sea have escalated. Moreover, a few months after President Kais Saied replaced Prime Minister Elyes Fakhfakh with Hichem Mechichi, the latter fell out of favor by Saied, setting in motion a series of bickering and deadlock that deepened the ensuing political turmoil in the country (Ebel, 2021).

On Sunday July 25, Tunisian President Saied invoked emergency powers, fired the Prime Minister Mechichi's government, and suspended parliament for 30 days, as the country faced a nationwide protest. Saied noted that he would run the country alongside a new prime minister. In a televised address to the nation, he made clear this situation would continue "until social peace returns to Tunisia and until we save the state" (Todman, 2021). Long praised as the only success story of the Arab Spring uprisings, Tunisia now faces its most perilous political crisis since the revolution a decade ago. Saied said he invoked such measures in order to remove an impotent government that had lost popular support amid growing crises. Polls showed that Saied remained the most popular politician in Tunisia, as many Tunisians took to the streets to support his actions (Ibid).

The ongoing displays of public rage resulted from an ailing and neglected economy, a devastating surge in the COVID-19 pandemic, high unemployment rates, and widespread anger at the government. As of late July 2021, according to one source, despite early attempts to curb the coronavirus, only 8 percent of the population was fully vaccinated. On July 15, 2021, some 205 people died from COVID, which meant Tunisia had the highest per capita mortality rate for the pandemic in the world that date (Ebel, 2021).

Meanwhile, the government has been crippled by debt as it has continued to negotiate its fourth loan from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) since the 2011 uprisings. Saied, who won the 2019 election with 70 percent, largely

supported by the youth vote, running on a populist, anticorruption platform, now faces a deeply polarized society over issues having to do with the absence of Tunisia's constitutional court, an economic uprising, and a coup essentially against Islamists. At the same time, many civil society organizations, including the nation's influential trade union, Tunisian General Labor Union (UGTT), appear ambivalent and indecisive under these circumstances (Ebel, 2021).

In response to this coup, Rached Ghannouchi, who became Speaker of Parliament in Tunisia in 2019 and is currently the leader of Ennahda Party, wrote an op-ed piece for the *New York Times* (July 30, 2021) in which he noted: "Today's unrest is not a quest for freedom but dissatisfaction over economic progress." (Ghannouchi, 2021). Economic reform and progress, Ghannouchi went on to argue, can be done without throwing out democracy. "Tunisia has overcome its problem through national dialogue in the past, and we are capable of doing it again" (Ibid). A primary and strong backlash in the Muslim world to the developments in Tunisia came from the Islamist-led government of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in Turkey, which has consistently supported Ennahda Party and other movements associated with political Islam during and in the aftermath of Arab Spring uprisings (Parker, 2021).

In contrast to Turkey, Egypt and the United Arab Emirates supported the actions of Tunisian President Saied (*Al-Alam*, 2021). Tunisia is located between Algeria and Libya and is of great importance for the implementation of Turkish policies on the African continent as well as on the Mediterranean coast. The volume of trade between Turkey and Tunisia has reached \$5 billion during 2020-2021, a balance that is in Turkey's favor by a wide margin, and given the Tunisia population of 11 million, such a volume of trade and exports for Turkish producers is not negligible by any metrics (*Tasnim News Agency*, July 27, 2021). It is worth noting that Ghannouchi is Turkey's most important hope for continued political and social influence on the African continent. Ghannouchi has become

more important to Turkey after the death of former Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi. Ankara would like to make sure Ghannouchi avoids suffering the same fate as did Morsi.

Turkey is seeking a foothold in North Africa, while the United Arab Emirates, Egypt and Saudi Arabia, along with some European countries, such as France, are determined to limit Turkish influence in North Africa, especially in Libya and Tunisia. One of the main reasons for this competition is the huge gas reserves in the Eastern Mediterranean, which Turkey is trying to control by settling its maritime boundaries. Ankara has signed a Maritime Boundary Treaty in 2019 on its maritime territory with Libya's Government of National Accord (GNA—also known as Tripoli-based government), which has been vehemently opposed by countries such as Greece, Southern Cyprus and Egypt. According to the agreement, Ankara developed a monopoly economic zone in the Eastern Mediterranean (Golkarian, 2019). In return, Greece signed a joint agreement with Egypt, in which the two sides were allowed to make maximum use of the waters of the exclusive economic zone and the continental shelf of the Levantine (Masoumi, 2021).

In Morocco, the spread of coronavirus exposed not only the country's healthcare structural complexities, but, perhaps more markedly, emphasized the sharp inequalities among citizens and regions. At the regional level, fear of the COVID-19 outbreak temporarily halted anti-government protests that have erupted in countries like Algeria, Iraq, or Lebanon during 2020. While King Mohammed VI's pro-actions revealed an expeditiousness with which he responded to the pandemic, this was achieved at the expense of other political actors nevertheless. King's approach significantly diminished the importance of the discourses of accountability, transparency, and democratization. Few people, for example, questioned the ramifications that rampant corruption has had on the disparities and inconsistencies of the health system (Cimini and Chalfaouant,

2021).

On balance, the persistent use of repression in liberalized autocracies such as Morocco demonstrates that repression remains a strategic choice employed by most regimes to maintain power and stability. This has been especially true in the MENA region in recent years. Regimes have repressed protesters during tough economic times, for example, in protests against unemployment in Oman in 2018 or against tax reform in Jordan in 2019, and during Saudi Arabia's 2017-20 Qatif unrest or in Algeria's ongoing political protests. The case of Morocco is no exception to this trend (Abouzzohour, 2021:265). Liberalization in Morocco has yet to ensure the reduced use of repression, even as the regime has introduced constitutional reforms in the aftermath of the 2011 Arab Spring uprisings and continues to face new challenges in the face of the COVID resurgence.

In virtually all cases cited above, when priority has been given to combating a global pandemic, a floundering economy, and other emerging threats, such as the campaign against terrorism, authoritarian regimes have wound up consolidating their rule, thus exploiting such crises in order to grab further power at home and seek geopolitical advantage in the region. It is safe to conclude that the pandemic has spurred no fundamental shift in the regional balance of power and security dynamics (Duclos and El Karoui, 2020).

Recently this global trend has taken a more complex and worrying turn. There are many ways for political leaders to try to exploit the COVID-19 pandemic, either to cement power at home or pursue their interests abroad. While employing measures to restrict mass gatherings and protests in the name of public health makes sense during the peak of the epidemics, such measures in the hope of suppressing dissent once the disease declines raise serious questions about such attempts and ensuing trends (*International Crisis Group*, 2020).

6- Civil Society Organizations

Protecting and promoting civil liberties and political rights amid the global pandemic has become more difficult than ever, and under such circumstances demands for economic stability and security have come to supersede demands for liberty. Yet stability cannot be sustained for long if it is achieved to the detriment of the most vulnerable sectors of the population. The current authoritarian trend cannot obscure the reality that spontaneous uprisings may pose unpredictable

but destabilizing threats to autocratic regimes over the longer term.

Outside of the broader campaign to contain the spread of the coronavirus pandemic, US criticism of authoritarian regimes has been selective at best. The Biden administration has castigated countries such as Russia and China by reiterating the language of democracy and human rights, yet it has refrained from directly criticizing the Saudi's Crown Prince, Mohammad bin Salman, who ordered the egregious killing of the dissident journalist Jamal Khashoggi in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul. Exercising strategic restraint toward traditional allies in the name of geopolitics and maintaining the current regional balance of power will most likely further embolden these authoritarian leaders.

In response to the pandemic, it can be said that civil society organizations throughout the MENA region have mobilized in many collaborative and constructive ways. Yet, their enhanced activities and activism have not been robust enough to debunk existing authoritarian trends and dynamics, which have been heightened as a result of the pandemic. In Tunisia, CSOs staged campaigns to raise awareness about the virus, imported medical equipment from abroad or distributed it to public health centers across the country, and raised funds for charities and social services for families in need. While ambivalent toward these CSOs, the Tunisian government accepted their cooperation, even as some of these organizations were traditionally hostile to the government

(Cherif, Halawa, and Zihniođlu, 2020). In Turkey, new civil volunteer networks, organizations, and initiatives, such as the Citizen Solidarity Network, emerged that connected those in need directly with potential donors (Ibid). In Iran, the activities of civil society organizations were far more restricted. In countries in conflict, such as Libya, Syria, Yemen, and Iraq, many of CSOs are seemingly ill-equipped to manage the public health crisis owing to fallout from civil wars (Ibid).

More crucially, social media have become an important part of protests, especially in the post-Arab Spring uprisings, which have had the unintended effect of strengthening authoritarian regimes. That has set the stage for the emergence of more control mechanisms on the Internet. This has led to the larger question of whether the online activities and protests could be as effective as kinetic presence of oppositional forces on the ground. Absent their presence on the ground and their ability to physically organize, coordinate, and plan, civil society organizations (CSOs) have transferred their activities to social media.

While social media platforms and the virtual world have indeed provided a supporting umbrella for CSOs by shifting power from authoritarian regimes to ordinary citizens, they have equally afforded an opportunity to authoritarian regimes to spy on their citizens, thus giving rise to digital authoritarianism online (Sherman, 2019). In many cases, CSOs have either stopped their planned activities due to the lockdowns and social distancing caused by the COVID-19 pandemic or have sought to entirely shift their work online. In Egypt, according to one study, widely known for being one of the most difficult places in the world to organize civic activities due to highly restrictive laws regarding CSOs operations, citizens created their own spaces and discussions on social media. Ordinary citizens utilized online platforms, including Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter to express their dissatisfaction and discontents with the public health sector during the crisis (Cherif, Halawa, and Zihniođlu, 2020).

Yet, the crackdown has continued social media users, journalists, and even healthcare officials. Several doctors have been arrested during the pandemic for openly castigating the government's ineffective response to the coronavirus infection. The Egyptian government has in fact extended several laws, giving more administrative power to the presidency (Ibid). The coronavirus has in fact provided authoritarian regimes with a cover to tip the balance of power in their favor (Lamond, 2020). As the likelihood of deteriorating economic conditions enhances over time, especially if the attempts to curb the pandemic fail, it is not unreasonable to assume that the risk of unrest and political protests looms large over the horizon.

7- A Post-COVID-19 MENA Region

International relations experts argue that populist politicians will exploit this pandemic as yet another opportunity to promote anti-globalist, anti-liberal, and anti-democratic perspectives. It is evident that these political leaders are pushing for authoritarian measures in the name of narrow nationalism and protectionism and that political opportunism and fear of a new pandemic will lead many governments across the world to leave some of the newly-established powers over the population in place (Walt, 2020).

There is no denying, however, that this crisis has also exposed underlying causes of discontent, including the lack of transparency, the archaic modus operandi of authoritarian states, pervasive corruption, and most importantly the lack of an effective connection between the government and civil society. In some countries, experts remind us, governments' ability to work in lockstep with civil society has been crucial to an effective crisis response. Demonstrations during 2019 and 2020 in Lebanon came to an end due in large part to the public health crisis and lockdowns. A blast at Beirut's main port, followed by daily spikes in COVID-19 cases, crippled the Lebanese economy. Today, more than

55 percent of Lebanon's population is living below the poverty line (OECD, 2020). Additionally, new laws and regulations put in place to contain the pandemic have further restricted the larger context within which civil society can operate. People's ability to mobilize and feel empowered in cooperating with the state to contain the spread of the coronavirus has remained increasingly constrained (Ibid).

In general, the post-pandemic conditions bode ill, particularly for the region's most vulnerable. The return to austerity measures will prove demoralizing for countries already burdened with high poverty and unemployment rates; it is not difficult to predict that the disaffected youth and disenchanted public will erupt in yet another wave of rebellion. The example of Algeria is typical. In 2019, the city of Kherrata was the site of massive protests against President Abdelaziz Bouteflika's bid for a fifth term in office. Initially known as the Hirak protests, these anti-government demonstrations gave rise to a new movement that demanded far-reaching reform in a political system that had been in place since the country's independence in 1962. By mid-February 2021, hundreds of Algerians poured into streets, defying coronavirus restrictions and a ban on demonstrations, to mark the second anniversary of the Hirak protests that led to the ousting of Bouteflika (*Middle East Eye*, 2021).

In Lebanon and Iraq, protests have forced two prime ministers to step down in recent years. Iraqi Prime Minister Adel Abdul Mahdi resigned on December 2, 2019, a day after more than forty demonstrators were killed by anti-riot police forces amid continuing anti-government protests in Baghdad and in southern Iraq (*AlJazeera*, 2019). In Lebanon, after an initial hiatus due to lockdown protocols, protesters took to the streets on several occasions as the country grappled with both the pandemic and one of the worst economic crises in its history, compelling the resignation of Prime Minister Hassan Diab on August 10, 2020 amid popular outrage over the deadly Beirut port explosion (Tawi and Karam, 2021).

In Syria, by contrast, the Assad regime has in some ways been a beneficiary of this unfolding crisis, as other Arab countries have offered medical assistance and remedies to help Damascus better contain the spread of the virus. The United Arab Emirates (UAE) has called on the UN to provide the assistance in ensuring a ceasefire in Syria in order to aid efforts aimed at preventing the spread of the coronavirus pandemic.

Conclusion

The evidence presented in this essay demonstrate that the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic has both accelerated and necessitated the need for cooperation between/among democratic, authoritarian, and populist regimes to successfully combat its devastating effects. Ironically, but understandably, the pandemic has simultaneously created an opportunity for the halting of fighting in territories so swamped by armed conflicts, such as Libya, Yemen, and Syria. This situation could potentially alter the course of conflict, terminating many of them in the immediate future—if not over the longer term—while also curbing the spread of the coronavirus.

For the time being, authoritarian and populist regimes in the MENA region have taken advantage of the coronavirus to tighten their grip on power, while their citizens have had to surrender or delay, however temporarily, their protests against the failed responses of their governments. This has given authoritarian and populist governments even more latitude to use the virus as a way of deploying emergency measures such as curfews, surveillance, bans on public gatherings, and the securitization of public spaces to demoralize protesters.

Lockdowns and social distancing measures have confined people to their homes, limiting their ability to meet, mobilize, organize, and advocate. Many civil society organizations have either relinquished their planned activities or attempted to shift their work online. Meanwhile, authoritarian regimes have

taken advantage of this ongoing health crisis to reinforce their political grip by suspending civil liberties and political rights of their people. In short, as some experts have reminded us, the pandemic has provided “a convenient cover for governments to further tilt the balance of power in their favor” (Brechenmacher, Carothers, and Young, 2020). It should come as no surprise that disinformation and false narratives about the COVID-19 pandemic have been increasingly used, especially by political leaders, to muddy the waters.

The ongoing global economic disruption and loss-of-life, however, are likely to open the door to much deeper socioeconomic and political reforms by underlining the need for sustainable social safety nets, more sturdy and resilient healthcare investments, greater equity, and more legitimate and effective governance—both globally and from a national standpoint (Ibid). Authoritarian and populist regimes may see their powers wane given the possibility of an eruption of spontaneous protest movements at any given time. Political protests and unrests—albeit intermittently—in Algeria, Lebanon, Sudan, and Iraq attest to this reality.

While these authoritarian regimes seem to be in full control for the time being, no dictator should feel safe for too long. In Algeria, the Hirak protest movement has continued to focus on organizing food and medical supplies for areas affected by the outbreak, as civil society activists have also debated how to convert this crisis into an opportunity to enhance the movement’s support base and articulate new demands (Ibid). Authoritarianism, in this case, seems to beget a coming flashpoint for an expansion of civic power once the viral emergency passes. As ever, the notion that the state can control the public sphere is under constant contestation, and the broad failure of authoritarians to redress the seemingly legitimate claims of protestors can only bode ill for long-term stability.

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