Dossier: The Mediterranean in Times of Multi-level Crisis: Pandemics, Mobilizations and Hopes for Change

Social Unrest, Crises Aggravated by the Pandemic and Pending Revolutions in Arab Countries

Haizam Amirah-Fernández
Senior Analyst, Mediterranean and Arab World, Elcano Royal Institute, Madrid
Professor of International Relations, IE University, Madrid

The 22 Arab countries are very different from one another and each has great internal contrasts. However, together they form the most unequal region in the world (Assouad, 2020). The human development levels of most of their 435 million inhabitants are considerably below their countries’ potential, taking into account their material and human resources, their geographical position and their connections to the rest of the world. This underperformance has been consistent in comparison with other regions of the world since the 1980s (UNDP, 2016).

It is difficult to measure real levels of social unrest in authoritarian political systems, where opacity reigns and freedom of expression is scarce. However, two dynamics serve as a thermometer: 1) social protests motivated by economic and political demands, and 2) the repression exercised by regimes in various ways (intimidation, violence, abuse of the judicial system, stifling of freedom of expression, control of public spaces and cyberspace, etc.). Judging from the above, social unrest has continued to grow throughout the Arab region over the last decade, primarily affecting the most populous countries. Protests, riots, repression and authoritarianism indicate that the relationship between most Arab states and their citizens continues to deteriorate, despite the image of stability the former seek to project.

The anti-authoritarian uprisings that swept the region in two waves (2011 and 2019) brought to light the limitations of regimes seeking to impose a model of authoritarian stability, as well as the inability of opposition social and political actors to offer viable alternatives for governance. In the midst of this struggle between revolutionary and counter-revolutionary currents, the COVID-19 pandemic emerged, which has been shaking Arab countries since March 2020. In the first year and a half of the pandemic, it has proven to be an aggravator of problems and a multiplier of conflicts in the Arab region, which is likely to further destabilize this already volatile part of the world.

Another Lost Decade for the Arabs (2010-2020)

The second decade of the 21st century could have seen Arab countries take off towards development and democracy, but it did not. It began in the southern and eastern Mediterranean with a wave of revolts – starting in Tunisia in late 2010 – that sought to reform political systems and transform the region. Millions of Arab citizens aspired to have well-governed states with separation of powers and opportunities to prosper. In the wake of the “Arab Spring,” many believed that they could live with freedom, rights and dignity in their own countries. Those aspirations have yet to be realized. Instead, a sense of failure and growing frustration has set in. At the regional level, the setbacks in terms of freedoms and equality are greater than the advances.

While some were quick to write off the Arab Spring as dead within a few years of its emergence, the region saw a second wave of social mobilizations in 2019, with crowds of citizens once again mobilizing peacefully in the streets and squares of their countries to demand an end to their undemocratic systems of government (Hernando de Larramendi, 2020). In Algeria and Sudan, millions of people demonstrated against regimes dominated by the
military and opaque powers, while in Lebanon and Iraq they demonstrated against sectarian power-sharing systems considered by many to be corrupt and inefficient.

In the wake of the “Arab Spring,” many believed that they could live with freedom, rights and dignity in their own countries. Instead, a sense of failure and growing frustration has set in

Despite the differences between countries, the triggers of the protests have had much in common. Citizens mobilized to protest against deteriorating living conditions and the ineffectiveness of states unable to fulfill their functions and provide services and opportunities. The demands focused on ending economic orders and political regimes that allow a small ruling elite to live ostentatiously at the expense of the rest of the population. These regimes, clinging to power by all means, are reneging on the “social contracts” they imposed decades ago. Rampant corruption, relentless population growth, the depletion of the hydrocarbon-based rentier model, the lack of substantial reforms, armed conflicts and geopolitical shocks are leading to the increasing erosion of economic security and the deterioration of social protection systems in most Arab societies.

For decades, several Arab countries have behaved as rentier states. Their economies depend mainly on hydrocarbons (oil and gas), the financial and real estate sectors, remittances, foreign aid or a combination of these sources of income. These countries have lacked inclusive institutions for the redistribution of such revenue, leaving them in the hands of hereditary dynasties or institutions controlled exclusively by political elites and their allies in the private sector and in security and defence. Arab governments have used the income obtained to create public employment and fund obsolete education and health systems, in exchange for demanding submission from the citizenry.

The fall in oil prices since 2014 is threatening the governance model that underpins the power of several Arab regimes. With less disposable income, rulers can no longer afford to continue financing bloated budgets, co-opting elites, buying social peace through aid and subsidies, and delaying deep reforms of political systems sine die. These constraints, coupled with demographic growth, are making it much more difficult for regimes to fulfill their part of the “social contract,” which is eroding their main source of legitimacy. According to various projections, this scenario will not be temporary, as hydrocarbon prices are not expected to return to pre-2014 levels (Muasher, 2018).

The Great Pandemic Shock (2020-2021)

Since the World Health Organization (WHO) declared a global health emergency for the new coronavirus in January 2020 – upgraded to pandemic status two months later – the world has been monitoring the present and future consequences at all levels, its foreseeable duration, and what the recovery from the multiple crises generated by the pandemic will look like. Since the pandemic was declared, most Arab governments have imposed measures to limit mobility and contain the spread of infection (e.g. by closing borders, cancelling flights and travel, confining people to their homes, closing schools and places of worship, suspending work permits for foreigners and repatriating tourists to their countries of origin). Some regimes, especially monarchies, reacted swiftly, given the prospect that a health system collapse could seriously challenge the paternalistic figure of the head of state.

In some cases, confinement measures and curfews were drastic during the first few months, allowing some countries to dodge the first waves of the pandemic that hit other regions of the world, including nearby countries such as Iran, Italy and Spain. The imposition of tough preventive measures proved effective in the short term, although it came at a high cost (in terms of health, economy, and other factors). As the pandemic persisted, governments have had to adapt their strategies, balancing public health concerns with economic and social needs.
economic and social cost in the form of lost income, job destruction and increased economic precariousness for many citizens. The spread of the coronavirus worsened in several countries in the region following the relaxation of restrictions from autumn 2020, and especially during 2021, increasing pressure on health systems and delaying economic recovery in these countries.

Despite the great differences between Arab states in terms of their health systems, public service delivery capacity and material resources, the entire region was ill-prepared to deal with a pandemic such as the one caused by the SARS-CoV-2. It should be recalled that the COVID-19 pandemic swept the world at a time when the entire Arab region was under great pressure of various kinds (Amirah-Fernández, 2020).

Rulers can no longer afford to continue financing bloated budgets, co-opting elites, buying social peace through aid and subsidies, and delaying deep reforms of political systems sine die.

At present, it is difficult to accurately measure the dimensions of the pandemic shocks in Arab countries, starting with the health consequences. Most of these countries do not provide easily accessible recent or historical data on the number of deaths (coronavirus or otherwise). Levels of diagnostic testing in most countries – especially in the most populous ones – are very low compared to other regions of the world. By the summer of 2021, some countries (e.g. Oman, Lebanon and Egypt) had stopped publishing new infection diagnostic test data. Three countries (Syria, Algeria and Yemen) have consistently lacked testing data during the course of the pandemic (World Bank, 2021). All of the above indicates that the Arab region as a whole faces a challenge of efficiency and transparency, both in the availability of data and in assessing the authorities’ response to the crises caused by the pandemic.

Vaccination against COVID-19 is proving very uneven among Arab countries. According to the World Bank, by early August 2021, some states with small populations and high purchasing power such as the United Arab Emirates, Qatar and Bahrain had vaccinated about 70% of their populations. However, the four most populous Arab countries (Egypt, Sudan, Algeria and Iraq, which together account for 53% of the Arab population) had administered some dose of anti-COVID-19 vaccines to less than 2% of their citizens by the same date. In between these extremes are countries that have vaccinated between 20% and 30% of their nationals, such as Morocco, Saudi Arabia and Jordan (World Bank, 2021). Vaccination data in the Arab region still fall far short of what is needed to achieve herd immunity, especially after the appearance of more contagious variants of the coronavirus.

An immediate consequence of the emergence of the pandemic in the spring of 2020 was the suspension, due to health measures, of the broad social mobilizations that were taking place at the time in countries such as Lebanon, Iraq and Algeria. In the Algerian case, the popular mobilization (known as Hirak) had been peacefully protesting for 56 weeks, demanding profound reforms to build a secular state with separation of powers and good governance. The various regimes have taken advantage of this situation to divide the protest movements and increase repression against social actors demanding change. However, the appearance of calm in Arab countries from the outbreak of the pandemic until the summer of 2021 may be deceptive. As poverty, inequality and economic insecurity increase in these countries, it is not implausible to imagine that signs of social discontent and challenges to maintaining regime stability will grow stronger.

Some Economic and Social Consequences

The spread of COVID-19, its mortality rates and the economic and social costs associated with the pandemic are very difficult to measure when there is little diagnostic testing for infection, data are hidden and transparency in governance is lacking. Official indicators available for Arab countries should therefore be treated with great caution. Indeed, the Arab region has long suffered from “data deprivation,”
with large gaps in data collection and production of reliable statistics to measure socio-economic trends. This widespread lack in the region has been accentuated by the COVID-19 pandemic, compromising the effectiveness of public policies and social services in responding to the needs of the population (Pagliani, 2020).

The various regimes have taken advantage of this situation to divide the protest movements and increase repression against social actors demanding change.

The pandemic hit an Arab region whose economies were already suffering from signs of stagnation and macroeconomic fragility during the second half of the 2010s. The effects of containment measures were compounded by the disruption of supply chains and a severe drop in tourism revenues and remittances from expatriate populations. The temporary collapse of oil prices in the spring of 2020 set off alarm bells in a region highly dependent on oil revenues. Although prices have recovered to pre-pandemic levels, uncertainties remain about the global economic recovery and the impact of the disruptions caused by the pandemic on the growing fiscal and macroeconomic imbalances in the Arab region as a whole.

According to the World Bank, expected economic losses due to the pandemic have increased since March 2020 in the countries of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), reaching a 7.2% drop in regional GDP in early July 2021 compared to 2019. The largest fall is projected for developing, oil-exporting countries (7.7% lower than December 2019 forecasts), followed by Gulf Cooperation Council members (7.3%) and developing oil importers (6.0%). These GDP declines can be interpreted as the expected macroeconomic costs of the COVID-19 pandemic and lower oil prices compared to the 2019 GDP. The most extreme case is Lebanon, where the cumulative fall in GDP expected in 2021 would be equivalent to 26.6% of that of 2019 in a context of economic and political collapse.

In addition, according to the data available for 2021, the economic recovery in the Arab countries will not be V-shaped, so the GDP losses that occurred during 2020 are not expected to be recovered during 2021. What is expected is that the GDPs in all these countries will remain well below projections for a non-pandemic scenario. However, with uncertain and changing global dynamics, many of the factors that will condition the exit from the crisis are beyond the control of Arab governments, as they depend on the global health and economic situation which, in turn, determines many of the sources of income for these countries (oil, trade, tourism, remittances, transport, etc.) and the employment opportunities that their young populations may find (Amirah-Fernández, 2020). Economic losses from the pandemic have increased poverty and inequality in a region that was already showing poor results before. Current projections of increases in the number of poor are likely to be understated, with growth occurring in large numbers at the regional level (World Bank, 2021). In addition to the above, there is a trend of rising food prices in different parts of the region, with food prices in some countries rising by more than 20% between February 2020 and the summer of 2021.

Against the backdrop of unprecedented economic contraction, job destruction and social costs unseen in peacetime, several Arab countries have launched programmes to try to alleviate the devastating effects of the pandemic. These have focused on measures to combat the health emergency, unemployment and falling incomes, and help the hardest hit economic sectors. To this end, some countries have launched campaigns to collect donations to finance anti-crisis measures (e.g. Morocco, Jordan, Iraq and Lebanon). During the pandemic, the percentage of the population in Middle Eastern and Maghreb countries receiving social assistance has increased from 20% to more than 70% (Dabrowski & Domínguez-Jiménez, 2021), although much of this assistance is in the form of subsidies that target the entire population, without differentiating between rich and poor. Most Arab countries have launched recovery plans that involve increasing their fiscal and macroeconomic imbalances. Those with large sovereign wealth funds have turned to them. Meanwhile, other countries have been forced into debt, seeking assistance from international financial institutions.
Given historical experience, such growing indebtedness will require painful adjustments later on. Moreover, the uncertainties associated with the pandemic prevent a clear picture of how recovery in Arab countries will unfold. Critical to this is combating the disease through vaccination, which should help reopen regional economies, especially the most vulnerable sectors such as tourism. For now, regional vaccination data leaves much to be desired in the majority of countries.

Authoritarianism and Stability after the Pandemic

One of the unknowns of the post-COVID stage in Arab countries is the effect on authoritarianism and the ability of current political regimes to maintain stability in their countries. The pandemic is testing both Arab states and societies. Civil society organizations – where they exist – have played an active role in mobilizing their members and resources to fight the coronavirus and its effects. In different countries, these organizations have carried out information campaigns, cleaned public spaces, delivered food and medicine to people in need, imported medical equipment, supported health centres and hospitals, and collected donations. Some of these organizations are religious in nature and used their activists from the outset.

A common reaction of regimes to such criticism has been to try to silence it, repressing those who aired it and imposing severe restrictions on freedom of expression through the judiciary and the police. Experience varies from countries such as Egypt, where civil society organizations are subject to very restrictive legislation and are persecuted by the regime, to countries in conflict such as Syria, Libya and Yemen, where needs are greater, non-state or para-state armed actors dominate territory and population, and transparency is conspicuous for its absence. In Iraq and Lebanon, for example, sectarian faith-based organizations have become involved in health response where states have been unable to do so.

As seen in a number of countries, civil society actors have been highly critical of their governments, whose inaction has had serious consequences for citizens. The main complaints have focused on poor governance, weak or non-existent public services, lack of preparedness for such a crisis, and the refusal to seek in-country support in the context of a national emergency. Among the most critical voices are those of health workers who have suffered directly from these failures, especially when their countries had some additional time to prepare because they were not affected on a large scale by the first global waves of the pandemic. There have also been critical voices among journalists and social media users. A common reaction of regimes to such criticism has been to try to silence it, repressing those who aired it and imposing severe restrictions on freedom of expression through the judiciary and the police.

In countries with fierce security apparatuses, the latter have seemed to be more focused on exercising their tight control over civil society than on enforcing the health measures decreed by the government to curb the spread of coronavirus (Cherif et al., 2020). A case in point is Egypt, where legislative changes were introduced to give more administrative power to the presidency and exert tighter control over public spaces and cyberspace. Despite the relative success of several regimes in silencing critical voices and putting an end to the widespread social mobilizations taking place prior to the pandemic, these measures have failed to curb the health crisis and prepare their countries for a rapid and robust economic recovery.

The Pending Revolutions

The health, economic and social effects of the COVID-19 pandemic are exposing the institutional weaknesses, limitations and failures of public health systems and the fragility of the economies of several countries in the region. The consequences of confinement, mobility restrictions, economic slowdown and the international context are already being felt in Arab countries. Social unrest can be expected to
grow as citizens suffer from the long-term impacts of the pandemic and the uncertainties of large-scale regional and global recovery (Cherif et al., 2020). The population of Arab countries has grown by over 80 million since the uprisings began in 2010, and is projected to reach 600 million by 2050 (240 million more than in 2010). Ten years ago, much of the Arab world believed in the possibility of reforming governance systems in order to successfully manage the challenges facing the region, starting with demographic factors. A decade later, many of those hopes have faded, although the root causes that triggered the uprisings are just as present as in 2011, if not more so. Even in countries that are not at war, more Arabs live in poverty, are unemployed and are in prison for their political views than a decade ago (Sly, 2021).

Arab governments must profoundly revise the existing social contract in which states play a distorting role that holds back the development and prosperity of their societies.

Without the support that the rentier model has provided in preserving authoritarianism for decades, Arab governments must profoundly revise the existing social contract in which states play a distorting role that holds back the development and prosperity of their societies. A sine qua non condition for such change is to create productive economies based on knowledge and merit, rather than loyalty to obsolete systems that are incapable of fulfilling many of their functions, beginning with training human capital, who are offered opportunities to be constructive actors in their societies.

It is estimated that by 2050, the 22 Arab countries will need to have created 300 million new jobs to absorb the people seeking to enter the labour market. The task seems daunting, but not impossible, although a number of revolutionary changes in political, economic and social systems are needed to get on the right track. Transparency, accountability and good governance are essential factors in unleashing the constructive energy of youth in Arab countries to meet today and tomorrow’s challenges. Some of these challenges will be exacerbated by the effects of climate change, water and food insecurity and demographics (Yousef et al., 2020), and will need to be addressed sooner rather than later if adequate responses are to be found.

For their part, international actors that have so far supported authoritarian Arab regimes from the perspective of security and stability face a paradox: their action based on the pursuit of these two objectives has turned into support for unstable and insecure power systems (O’Driscoll et al., 2020). There is every reason for the European Union and its Member States to revisit the supposed “dilemma between values and interests” that has guided its external action in its Southern Neighbourhood. Without good governance, stability is increasingly difficult to achieve, and there will come a time when it may be impossible. The EU would do well to abandon this false dilemma and begin a long overdue course correction in its relations with the southern and eastern Mediterranean. The risk of not doing so is that it may soon have to deal with a more fractured, conflictual and unstable neighbourhood.

References


