Trust is a recurring theme in social-science literature for disciplines as diverse as psychology, political science, anthropology, sociology, and management. Recently, the concept has even been studied in neurobiology, behavioral economics, and computer science. In discussing the impact of state responses to Covid-19 on trust in government, one should distinguish between two types of trust: political and social. Political trust refers to the extent to which people have trust in institutions; social trust refers to trust in other people within the community and beyond. While some studies suggest that political and social trust tend to correlate with each other, most studies examine these concepts separately. This article focuses on the impact of Covid-19 on trust in government in the Middle East: political trust in the context of the pandemic.

In the broadest sense, political trust refers to citizens’ assessments of the core institutions of their polity and entails an evaluation of the relevant attributes that make each political institution trustworthy: credibility, fairness, competence, transparency, and openness to competing views. As a conceptual device, political trust is conceived as a midrange indicator of support between political actors in charge of each local institution in which specific institutions are embedded. It refers to people's trust in the political system within their own countries and internationally. This subjective concept is always relational: “the ratio of people's evaluation of government performance relative to their normative expectations of how government ought to perform.”

1 Marc J. Hetherington and Jason A. Husser, “How Trust Matters: The Changing Political Relevance of Political Trust,” American Journal of Political Science 56, no. 2 (2012): 313.
scholars define political trust as a basic evaluative orientation toward the government, founded on normative expectations. Political trust can also be shaped by experience. Cammett, Diwan, and Vartanova, therefore, argue that “political trust may arise from perceptions rather than objective realities and may be shaped in part by an individual or at least group-level experiences.”

Taking a wider approach, other scholars define it as an orientation people have toward political institutions: trust in their state-wide legal-political institutions and actors.

Berg and Hjerm include in political trust the country’s parliament, legal system, political parties, and politicians. As in most of the literature on political trust, their study examined a Western context. However, when studying political trust in the Middle East, it would be relevant to include the king or supreme leader, as the principal decision maker is often seen as an entity distinct from the government and political parties. This point is especially relevant to an analysis of monarchies in the Middle East (as well as the Islamic Republic of Iran), where the real decision-making power lies in the king or the supreme leader, and not elected officials or political parties. In Morocco, for example, protesters made the distinction between government and monarch: “People lost their trust in politicians and government institutions, but they did not lose their trust in the King.”

Pandemics have the potential to severely test people’s trust, both in each other and in government. While pandemics may differ from natural disasters in their cause, their risks to public health, disruptions of daily life, and economic impact may pose similar challenges for governments trying to mitigate their effects. Uslaner argues that major and even “minor” disasters can lead to a loss of trust in government, for three reasons: the public may come to believe that leaders and public officials are not competent to handle crises, that they do not have enough sympathy for victims, or that corrupt dealings either led to the disaster or made recovery more difficult. In the same vein, Albrecht argues that “poorly perceived disaster management could lead to decreasing political trust. Disasters that are managed successfully, however, could lead to stable or increasing levels of political trust.”

Research following disasters seems to confirm these claims. Studies on political trust after Hurricane Katrina in 2005, for example, identified a negative effect on trust in government and

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2 Donald E. Stokes, “Popular Evaluations of Government: An Empirical Assessment” in Ethics and Bigness: Scientific, Academic, Religious, Political, and Military, eds. Harlan Cleveland and Harold D. Lasswell (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1962), 61-72.

3 Arthur H. Miller, “Political Issues and Trust in Government, 1964-70,” American Political Science Review 68 (September 1974):951-72.

4 Melani Cammett, Ishac Diwan, and Irina Vartanova, “Insecurity and Political Values in the Arab World,” Democratization (2020): 3.

5 Linda Berg, and Mikael Hjerm, “National Identity and Political Trust,” Perspectives on European Politics and Society 11, no. 4 (2010): 391.

6 Berg and Hjerm, op. cit., 396.

7 Sylvia I. Bergh, and Salima Ahmadou, “Claiming Spaces for Acts of Citizenship: Recent Experiences of Activists in Morocco,” in The Middle East in Transition (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2018), 104.

8 Eric Uslaner and Eiji Yamamura, “Disaster and Political Trust: The Japan Tsunami and Earthquake of 2011,” Munich Personal Research Papers in Economics, April 5, 2016, https://mpra.ub.uni-muenchen.de/70527/1/MPRA_paper_70527.pdf, 187.

9 Frederike Albrecht, “Government Accountability and Natural Disasters: The Impact of Natural Hazard Events on Political Trust and Satisfaction with Governments in Europe,” Risk, Hazards & Crisis in Public Policy 8, no. 4 (2017): 26.
satisfaction with the federal authorities. On the other hand, disasters can also have a positive effect on political trust. Studies have identified increasing support for the government following the 2002 floods in Germany, and increasing political trust in the national government after an earthquake in China, as well as higher support for the Russian government at all levels in areas hit by wildfires. While research on political trust following pandemics is relatively limited, these examples show that disasters can have a negative as well as a positive impact on citizens’ political trust, depending on how the authorities are perceived to manage the crisis.

Recent commentary on the coronavirus has also highlighted the importance of trust in dealing with the pandemic. One commentator argued that “trust, or the lack thereof, informs every part of the response to the coronavirus situation both individually and on the part of the government.” Another claimed that “trust is probably key to containing the pandemic,” and argued that “in the absence of immediate trust-building measures by civil society and the government, the United States may find the pandemic exceptionally difficult to contain.” Furthermore, recent research on political trust and Covid-19 has found that the pandemic impacts individuals’ trust in government and confidence in democracy. While one study found that trust (either political or social) does not seem to result in lower infection rates, another found that lockdowns have increased support for the status quo decision makers, institutions, and regimes in Western European democracies. The result was an increase of about 3 percent in trust in government and satisfaction with democracy. While these findings inevitably measured only short-term effects, they confirm the findings of earlier research on government responses to disasters and their impact on political trust.

POLITICAL TRUST IN GOVERNMENTS

The question of trust in government in the Middle East is a constant cause for leaders’ concern, during times of quiet as well as crisis. Despite this, the structural differences among states in the

10 Keith Nicholls and J. Steven Picou, “The Impact of Hurricane Katrina on Trust in Government,” Social Science Quarterly 94 no. 2 (2013): 344-361; Richard Forgette, Marvin King, and Bryan Dettrey, “Race, Hurricane Katrina, and Government Satisfaction: Examining the Role of Race in Assessing Blame,” Publius: The Journal of Federalism 38, no. 4 (2008): 671-691.

11 Michael M. Bechtel and Jens Hainmueller, “How Lasting is Voter Gratitude? An Analysis of the Short-and Long-Term Electoral Returns to Beneficial Policy,” American Journal of Political Science 55, no. 4 (2011): 852-868; Evelyn Bytzek, “Flood Response and Political Survival: Gerhard Schröder and the 2002 Elbe Flood in Germany,” Governing After Crisis: The Politics of Investigation, Accountability and Learning (2008): 85-113.

12 Han Ziqiang, Xiaojiang Hu and Joanne Nigg, “How Does Disaster Relief Works Affect the Trust in Local Government? A Study of the Wenchuan Earthquake,” Risk, Hazards & Crisis in Public Policy 2, no. 4 (2011): 1-20.

13 Lazarev Egor, et al. “Trial by Fire: A Natural Disaster’s Impact on Support for the Authorities in Rural Russia,” World Politics 66, no. 4 (2014): 641-668.

14 Avtar Singh, “Leaders Can’t Lift Lockdowns Without Public Trust,” Foreign Policy, May 31, 2020, https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/05/31/leaders-cant-lift-lockdowns-without-public-trust/.

15 Bo Rothstein, “Trust Is the Key to Fighting the Pandemic,” Scientific American, March 24, 2020, https://blogs.scientificamerican.com/observations/trust-is-the-key-to-fighting-the-pandemic/.

16 Elena Gorbacheva, “Does Trust Help Fight the COVID-19? A Brief Overview of the Pandemic Situation in Former Soviet and Communist Societies,” Electoral Malpractice, Cybersecurity, and Political Consequences in Russia and Beyond, April 30, 2020, https://blogs.helsinki.fi/elmarb-project/2020/04/30/trust-covid19/.

17 André Blais, Damian Bol, Marco Giani, Peter John Loewen, “The Effect of COVID-19 Lockdowns on Political Support: Some Good News for Democracy?” European Journal of Political Research 60, no. 2 (May 2020): 5, https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6765.12401.
region have led to the adoptions of varied strategies for creating and maintaining trust. In what is known as the rentier model, several Gulf states have instituted an informal social contract between their leadership and citizenry. The basic terms are that rulers will provide citizens with oil revenues; citizens, in return, will provide their leaders with allegiance or political quiescence.18 In this transactional relationship, the state uses its material assets to ensure stability by buying loyalty. As Abulof puts it, “The rentier regime buys stability through material legitimation, allocating resources to both elites and the general public to keep them appeased.”19

Although most of the literature on rentier-state theory focuses on this use of material resources to ensure political stability, trust is also an essential component of this process of legitimation: “Where citizens trust state institutions to provide these public goods in the future, more compliance and less resistance from society is observable.”20 Therefore, by providing health care and other social services to its citizens, based on oil revenues, a rentier state is able in theory to build and maintain political trust in government and political leaders. While this is especially the case in the oil-rich Gulf monarchies, Schlumberger notes that, to a lesser extent, the rentier nature of most Arab states is hardly disputed today.21

Political trust in Middle Eastern regimes worsened in 2011 with the outbreak of the Arab Spring events. These demonstrations expressed the resentment and anger of many citizens toward their regimes, as well as a loss of trust in the political systems in their countries. Since this wave of protests, “the people” (al-shaab) have become a major actor in Arab politics and created a new model, which Sadiki refers to as “people-driven international relations.”22 In response to this change, the different Arab regimes have had to directly address the question of how political trust can be created and maintained so as to prevent the recurrence of such severe upheavals.

Declining Trust

Surveys conducted in the region in recent years indicate “low” to “very low” confidence in government. For example, in Jordan, citizens’ confidence has been steadily declining. In 2010, about 72 percent responded that they believe to some extent in their government, whereas in 2018, the percentage of respondents to this question had dropped to only 38 percent.23 The reasons for this plunge may lie in an increase in the level of education of citizens, which is part of the globalization process, as well as the poor performance of the government. In a survey released in 2020, only about 7 percent of Jordanian citizens expressed reasonable confidence

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18 Michael Herb, Marc Lynch, “Introduction: The Politics of Rentier States in the Gulf,” *The Politics of Rentier States in the Gulf*, Project on Middle East Political Science Studies 33, January 2019, http://pomeps.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/POMEPS_Studies_33.pdf, 3.

19 Uriel Abulof, “Can’t Buy Me Legitimacy: the Elusive Stability of Mideast Rentier Regimes,” *Journal of International Relations and Development* 20, no. 1 (2017): 59.

20 Rolf Schwarz, “The Political Economy of State-Formation in the Arab Middle East: Rentier States, Economic Reform, and Democratization,” *Review of International Political Economy* 15, no. 4 (2008): 607.

21 Oliver Schlumberger. “Opening Old Bottles in Search of New Wine: On Nondemocratic Legitimacy in the Middle East,” *Middle East Critique* 19, no. 3 (2010): 245.

22 Larbi Sadiki, “The Arab Spring: The ‘People’ in International Relations,” *International Relations of the Middle East* (2016): 335.

23 “Jordan Country Report,” Arab Barometer, 2019, https://www.arabbarometer.org/wp-content/uploads/ABV_Jordan_Report_Public-Opinion-2019.pdf, 6-8.
in their political parties, with overall confidence in the Middle East ranging from 31 percent in Yemen to just 4 percent in Libya.  

The Arab Opinion Index survey conducted in 11 Arab countries between 2017 and 2018 revealed that about 68 percent of the Arab public had confidence and believed in the military; however, only 14 percent have confidence in the parliament. In a survey from 2002, it was reported that, in Turkey, the situation was quite similar, with only 14.7 percent reporting that they trusted the prime minister; about 27.9 percent said they trusted parliament. A study conducted in Turkey in 2015 reported that, in 2007, about 70 percent of survey respondents said they believed the election campaign was fair, but in the 2015 election, that rate dropped to 43 percent, a sharp decline.  

Given these findings, it is understandable that, when it comes to addressing the many challenges the coronavirus poses, Middle Eastern governments and political elites suffer from a low level of trust and are faced with great difficulty in increasing it during the pandemic. States’ strategies for coping with the challenges of the coronavirus could become opportunities to rebuild the trust that is key to their long-term stability. Alternatively, it could cause even further declines.

RESPONSES TO COVID-19

While some states in the MENA region are only beginning to be impacted by the coronavirus, a few examples already stand out in their responses. Iran was one of the first countries in the Middle East to be impacted by the pandemic: the country had one of the worst Covid-19 outbreaks in the world, with more than 151,000 confirmed cases and more than 7,800 deaths as of June 1, 2020. It also began experiencing a second wave of the coronavirus in early June. These numbers could have been avoided had the regime acted differently. Initially, it covered up the extent of the spread of Covid-19 in the Islamic Republic, reporting very few cases, prohibiting journalists from publishing figures other than the official numbers from the Ministry of Health, and instructing Iranian journalists working inside the country not to cover the death toll.

Furthermore, long after it became clear that the virus had originally spread to Iran from China, Mahan Air, a private airline owned by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, continued to fly routes to and from a few Chinese destinations. The Iranian regime prioritized political and ideological considerations over public health concerns, wanting to ensure that citizens would turn out

24 Abdul-Wahab Kayyali, “Arab Political Parties and the Dual Challenge of Trust,” Arab Barometer, May 12, 2020, https://www.arabbarometer.org/2020/05/arab-political-parties-and-the-dual-challenge-of-trust/.  
25 “2017-2018 Arab Opinion Index,” Arab Center Washington DC, July 10, 2018, http://arabcenterdc.org/survey/2017-2018-arab-opinion-index-executive-summary/.  
26 Anna J Secor, John O’Loughlin, “Social and Political Trust in Istanbul and Moscow: A Comparative Analysis of Individual and Neighbourhood Effects,” Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers 30, no. 1 (2005): 66 – 82.  
27 “Public Trust in Fair Elections Declining in Turkey,” Hurriyet, May 7, 2015, https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/public-trust-in-fair-elections-declining-in-turkey-82066.  
28 “Iran,” Worldometer, June 1, 2020, https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/country/iran/.  
29 “Iran Experiencing Second Wave of Coronavirus Infections,” Al-Monitor, June 4, 2020, https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2020/06/iran-second-wave-coronavirus-infections-covid19.html.  
30 “Amid Coronavirus Pandemic, Iran Covers up Crucial Information and Threatens Journalists,” Committee to Protect Journalists, March 20, 2020, https://cpj.org/2020/03/amid-coronavirus-pandemic-iran-covers-up-crucial-i/.  
31 Tara Kangarlou, Joseph Hincks, “‘People Are Dying Left and Right:’ Inside Iran’s Struggle to Contain Its Coronavirus Outbreak,” Time, March 17, 2020, https://time.com/5804706/iran-coronavirus/.
for parliamentary elections on February 21, 2020. Therefore, it under-reported the true extent of the pandemic and continued flights to and from China, as it wanted to maintain critical economic ties with China.

These actions had a devastating impact on Iranian citizens’ trust in the regime. As one analyst noted, the handling of the coronavirus outbreak in Iran caused an intensifying crisis of confidence in the regime.32 This trend is not new. It was already visible in the protests that took place in Iran over the past two years and became even stronger after the downing of a Ukrainian plane by the Revolutionary Guard in January 2020. Nevertheless, the regime’s response to the coronavirus—including denial and cover-up—exacerbated this trend, leading, according to some assessments, to a massive loss of confidence in the government.33 As a result, trust between the public and the government has fallen to an all-time low.34

Iran’s case illustrates the threat to trust in government posed by a regime’s mishandling of its response to the pandemic. But whereas Iran sought to silence, deny, and delay its public response, other governments in the region acted differently. Days after the first case of coronavirus was reported in Saudi Arabia, the government implemented firm measures to contain its spread. It started by imposing a quarantine on al-Qatif,35 in Eastern Province, later imposing a 24-hour curfew in the holy cities of Mecca and Medina.36 Furthermore, in an attempt to combat the spread of misinformation, rumor mongers were prosecuted.37

In addition to these hard measures, the Saudi government took several other steps to deal with the economic impact of Covid-19 on the kingdom. The health minister announced that citizens and residents—including expats and those in violation of residency laws—who tested positive for coronavirus would have their medical expenses covered by the government. The government also announced that it would cover 60 percent of the salaries of private-sector workers in industries hit by the pandemic.38 The government’s proactive and people-focused approach was also reflected in its official messaging. The minister of health announced that the crown prince had sacrificed many economic gains to ensure the health of citizens, which he stated was the government’s top priority.39 The Saudi government also started a social-media campaign to promote awareness of the pandemic in the kingdom, under the hashtag “we are all responsible.”

32 Raz Zimmt, “From the Ukrainian Airplane to the Coronavirus: The Crisis of Public Confidence in the Iranian Regime,” INSS Insight No. 1272, March 11, 2020.
33 Shabnam von Hein, “Coronavirus: Iranians Lose Trust in Government as Virus Spreads,” Deutsche Welle, March 5, 2020, https://www.dw.com/en/coronavirus-iranians-lose-trust-in-government-as-virus-spreads/a-52651804.
34 Djavad Salehi-Isfahani, “The Coronavirus Is Iran’s Perfect Storm,” Foreign Affairs, March 18, 2020, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/iran/2020-03-18/coronavirus-irans-perfect-storm.
35 Tamara Abueish and Ismaeel Naar, “Coronavirus: Saudi Arabia Imposes Quarantine on al-Qatif City,” Al Arabiya, March 08, 2020, https://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/gulf/2020/03/08/Saudi-Arabia-temporarily-bars-entry-exit-into-Kingdom-s-al-Qatif-city.
36 “Saudi Arabia Imposes 24-hour Coronavirus Curfew in Mecca, Medina,” Al-Monitor, April 2, 2020, https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2020/04/saudi-arabia-curfew-mecca Medina-coronavirus-covid19.html#ixzz6PQezFlxz.
37 “Saudi Arabia to Prosecute Rumor Monger,” Saudi Gazette, March 19, 2020, https://saudigazette.com.sa/article/591052/SAUDI-ARABIA/Saudi-Arabia-to-prosecute-rumor-monger.
38 “Saudi Arabia Says It Will Pay For Coronavirus Patients’ Treatment,” Al-Monitor, March 30, 2020, https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2020/03/saudi-arabia-coronavirus-treatment-pay-health-covid19.html#ixzz6PR6m6Cp4; James Haines-Young, “Saudi Government to Cover 60 Percent of Salaries Amid Coronavirus,” The National, April 03, 2020, https://www.thenational.ae/world/gcc/saudi-government-to-cover-60-per-cent-of-salaries-amid-coronavirus-1.1001035.
39 (@CGCSaudi), Tweet from April 13, 2020, https://twitter.com/CGCSaudi/status/1249728093876555776.
These moves were designed to help cushion the financial impact of the virus, but they were also crucial for maintaining public trust in the kingdom’s leadership during these difficult times. They have not only shown that the country can be a responsible member of the international community, as some analysts have argued, but also that the Saudi public can trust Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and the government to look after its citizens and expats in the kingdom in the face of the economic and social constraints posed by the pandemic. Other Gulf states have announced similar moves: Qatar announced that it will temporarily pay some private-sector salaries to mitigate the economic impact of the pandemic, and Bahrain published a similar decision.

In Jordan, the authorities also acted decisively against the virus, introducing some of the toughest anti-coronavirus measures in the world, taking preventive steps at a relatively early stage. These included an indefinite 24-hour curfew, a one-year prison sentence for those who violated it by going outside, and the closing of all businesses in the kingdom; these restrictions were relaxed in late April 2020. In addition to these measures, the Jordanian regime communicated to the public the gravity of the threat posed by the coronavirus and the country’s progress in combating the pandemic.

King Abdullah II delivered a speech in which he addressed Jordanians in a fatherly tone as “sons and daughters of a dear people,” warning them about the global danger posed by the coronavirus. In addition to the king’s speech, the country’s top health official, Dr. Saad Jaber, gave nightly press briefings on the coronavirus situation in Jordan. Jaber, a heart surgeon by training who served as director-general of Royal Medical Services in the Jordanian army, became the most well-known government official in the country’s response to the crisis.

Some Jordanians have claimed that Jaber’s frequent press briefings and media appearances have instilled in them a sense of security during the coronavirus crisis. According to one Jordanian woman, Jaber’s “presence and the credibility of his words give us a sense of security in our hearts and removed our fears about the coronavirus.” More broadly, the government’s decisive response to the coronavirus seems to have won it Jordanians’ political trust. According to one Jordanian analyst, “The government in the first few weeks gained serious public trust and support due to its health measures, transparency and dealing with social consequences of the pandemic by extending donations and financial relief.”

Yet for the region as a whole, the pain caused by the pandemic has been immediate and tangible, whereas any potential downstream gains will be delayed and diffuse. The disease will likely impact the Middle East region directly for several years to come and indirectly for even longer. Its ravages can be mitigated and reduced but not avoided. However, through the right combination of foresight, and policy and institutional reforms, Middle Eastern countries can emerge both better

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40 Yasmine Farouk, “Updating Traditions: Saudi Arabia’s Coronavirus Response,” Carnegie Endowment, April 07, 2020, https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/04/07/updating-traditions-saudi-arabia-s-coronavirus-response-pub-81481.

41 “Coronavirus Wages: Bahrain to Pay Private Sector Salaries,” Al-Jazeera, April 8, 2020, https://www.aljazeera.com/ajimpact/coronavirus-wages-bahrain-pay-private-sector-salaries-200408182326104.html; “Qatar to Pay Private Sector Salaries as Virus Cripples Business,” Bloomberg, April 12, 2020, https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-04-12/qatar-to-pay-private-sector-salaries-as-virus-cripples-business.

42 The Royal Hashemite Court, Facebook, March 23, 2020, https://www.facebook.com/RHCJO/videos/664772730938054/.

43 Mohammad Ersan, “Coronavirus: Jordan Swoons Over Heartthrob Health Minister,” Middle East Eye, April 29, 2020, https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/coronavirus-jordan-handsome-health-minister-saad-jaber-fans.

44 Taylor Luck, “How Jordan Crushed the Curve and Halted Coronavirus in its Track,” National, April 30, 2020, https://www.thenational.ae/world/mona/how-jordan-crushed-the-curve-and-halted-coronavirus-in-its-tracks-1.1013228.
able to prevent such disasters in the future and with a set of more agile and responsive institutions that will help them tackle other pernicious development challenges.

**POST-COVID TRUST AND STABILITY**

As shown above, political trust in governments in the Middle East has been in decline for quite some time. The coronavirus crisis is almost certain to worsen this trend. The lack of transparency over the true extent of Covid-19 infections, which characterized many governments' initial responses to the pandemic, as well as the economic crisis that resulted from lockdowns, are very likely to negatively impact people's trust in their governments. Political trust has been found to be one of the important determinants of a polity's stability, and it is hypothesized to have direct effects on both the survival of the regime and its effective functioning. Lack of trust in the political system, on the other hand, can damage the government's ability to function. As Marien and Hooghe note,

> When citizens distrust government, their willingness to obey government decisions is limited and, in particular, citizens are less willing to pay taxes and will be more likely to develop ways to avoid this. Given the importance of taxes for the functioning of any government, a general lack of trust is therefore likely to have grave consequences for the stability of the system (emphasis mine).

Political trust, or lack thereof, is therefore directly related to the stability of the political system. More specifically, this article argues that low trust in government following the Covid-19 crisis—that is, after the spread of the pandemic is contained within the country—might increase the potential for social unrest and mass protests. Low political trust has been associated with participation in riots, aggressive political protest, and, if sufficiently widespread, political instability. The Middle East already witnessed waves of mass protests in late 2019; in Iraq, Lebanon and elsewhere in the region, youth protests have led many analysts to refer to these events as “Arab Spring 2.0.” As coronavirus lockdowns have already caused people to protest against the government and local authorities in the United States, the United Kingdom, and across Europe, this is likely to happen in the Middle East, as well. These protests, in turn, could be met with more state repression, adding further tension to state-society relations. If the economic situation in the region worsens and popular discontent increases, sustained protest could become a serious challenge to a regime’s stability.

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45 S. C. Patterson, J. C. Wahlke, and G. R. Boynton, “Dimensions of Support in Legislative Systems” in *Legislatures in Comparative Perspective*, ed. Alan Kornberg (New York: McKay, 1970), 273.

46 William Mishler and Richard Rose, “What Are the Political Consequences of Trust? A Test of Cultural and Institutional Theories in Russia,” *Comparative Political Studies* 38, no. 9 (2005): 1052.

47 Sofie Marien and Marc Hooghe, “Does Political Trust Matter? An Empirical Investigation into the Relation Between Political Trust and Support for Law Compliance,” *European Journal of Political Research* 50, no. 2 (2011): 271.

48 Jeffery M. Paige, “Political Orientation and Riot Participation,” *American Sociological Association* 36 (1971): 810.

49 Marwan Muasher, “Is This the Arab Spring 2.0?,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, October 30, 2019, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/10/30/is-this-arab-spring-2-0-pub-80220>; Ferid Belhaj, Rabah Arefki, “Arab Spring 2.0: The People are Showing the Rulers How to Govern,” *Middle East Eye*, December 6, 2019, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/opinion/arab-spring-20-fresh-calls-accountability-across-region>; “Expert: This is ‘Arab Spring 2.0’,” CNN, <https://edition.cnn.com/videos/world/2019/11/04/iraq-lebanon-protests.cnn>.
However, Covid-19 did manage to stop “Arab Spring 2.0,” for now. But this is at best a short reprieve. How each country comes out of the pandemic will define the momentum with which it can start addressing its own structural challenges—economic, social, and political—all of which will be based on people’s level of trust in government.

Furthermore, low political trust is likely to negatively impact the economy:

If people have confidence in the political leaders who shape economic policy, this may enhance their confidence in the future of the economy. In contrast, if the people believe that political leaders are incompetent, this may lead to more gloomy predictions about the uncertain economic future.\(^{50}\)

The coronavirus has caused an unprecedented economic crisis, which the International Monetary Fund described as “the worst recession since the Great Depression, and far worse than the Global Financial Crisis.”\(^ {51}\) If individuals feel that they cannot trust their government to manage the response to the pandemic, this sentiment may, in turn, impact their spending habits and willingness to take risks amid economic uncertainty, such as opening small businesses or making large investments. As of May 2020, consumers have already been less inclined to increase their spending.\(^ {52}\) Low political trust, therefore, risks making the current economic crisis even worse; governments will find it difficult to reopen their economies if people do not trust their officials to competently handle the coronavirus crisis.

Low political trust in government following the coronavirus crisis could thus have a highly negative impact on stability in the Middle East as a region and as individual countries. These developments, however, are not inevitable. They depend on governments’ responses to the crisis and their ability to provide people with solutions to their critical problems. States that handle the crisis responsibly are likely to gain public trust and could potentially enhance their domestic legitimacy. On the other hand, governments that ignore the pandemic or mismanage their reactions to it risk long-term political instability, as people may lose trust in the political authorities responsible for the national response. As a result, even if states succeed in “flattening the curve” of coronavirus infections, the battle to gain and maintain citizens’ trust in government may prove to be a no less difficult, yet essential, task.

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\(^{50}\) Suzanna De Boef and Paul M. Kellstedt, “The Political (and Economic) Origins of Consumer Confidence,” *American Journal of Political Science* 48, no. 4 (2004): 634.

\(^{51}\) Gita Gopinath, “The Great Lockdown: Worst Economic Downturn Since the Great Depression”, *IMF Blog*, April 14, 2020, https://blogs.imf.org/2020/04/14/the-great-lockdown-worst-economic-downturn-since-the-great-depression/.

\(^{52}\) Katie Jones, “These Charts Show How COVID-19 Has Changed Consumer Spending around the World,” World Economic Forum, May 2, 2020, https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/05/coronavirus-covid19-consumers-shopping-goods-economics-industry.