Middle East Pre-Existing Conditions: Regional Security after Covid-19

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Abstract
This article analyzes the underlying human insecurities and changing geopolitical alliances in the Middle East during the past decade to assess the most likely short- and medium-term impacts of Covid-19 on the global security environment. In particular, it focuses on the “pre-existing conditions” for instability in the Middle East, and the opportunity that the pandemic might have to exacerbate them. The region will likely face a growing regional-security dilemma compounded by challenges that are now too familiar: the further entrenchment of political authoritarianism, violent sectarian conflicts, regional rivalries, and the radicalization and recruitment efforts by terrorist and extremist groups. While the pandemic has not led to a significant rise in terrorism and extremist violence, it has worsened fragility and accelerated economic decline. This has increased political instability, which, in turn, makes violence more likely. The civil wars in Syria and Yemen, continued threats from Salafi-Jihadi extremism, massive displacement, sectarianism, and rising inequalities between the rich and the extremely poor are to blame for such fragility. Given the lack of economic resilience and the significant fragility of many Arab states, as well as the availability of advanced military technology in the region, the resulting political, socioeconomic, humanitarian, and security challenges could be devastating.
The coronavirus was relatively late to take hold in the Middle East and North Africa, but its impact, as predicted, came swiftly. By July 1, 2020, close to 6.5 million Covid-19 cases had been confirmed in the MENA region, with more than 100,000 deaths. Iraq, Jordan, and the United Arab Emirates have reported the highest number of cases, while Egypt, Tunisia, Jordan, and Morocco have suffered the largest share of fatalities.\(^1\) While the region is expected to rebound quickly, the economic and social “scars” of the pandemic may remain longer than in other regions, as impacts have disproportionally affected communities already at risk.\(^2\)

Due to a decade of socioeconomic and political decline after the Arab Spring, the region already suffered from pre-existing conditions and risk factors. Following the uprisings in 2011, very few governments did anything to address the grievances that drove a generation of young Arabs into the streets. Living conditions continued to dwindle while inequalities rose, benefiting the political elites and further marginalizing the middle class and the poor.\(^3\) In fact, the Arab world is the only region where poverty increased after 2011,\(^4\) while access to health care, social services, economic opportunities, and education continued to decline.\(^5\) As a result, in February 2019, most of the region’s 435 million residents found themselves in countries with inadequate or nonexistent health services, where jobs in the formal economy were scarce, and incomes unreliable.\(^6\)

In addition, the civil wars in Syria and Yemen, continued threats from Salafi-Jihadi extremism, massive displacement and humanitarian crises, sectarianism, and rising inequalities between the rich and the extremely poor\(^7\) left much of the region vulnerable to political, religious, and social instability.\(^8\) In order to avoid a similar fate, other MENA governments responded by crushing legitimate political participation and the freedom of the press.\(^9\) In effect, governments tightened

1. Due to the difficulty of data collection in many areas, the numbers are likely understated, especially in fragile and conflict-affected areas. See “COVID-19 Response,” International Organization on Migration: Regional Office for Middle East and North Africa, https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/iom_covid-19_sitrep_24_mena_30_june_2021_eng.pdf.
2. “World Economic Outlook,” IMF, April 2021, https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/WEO/Issues/2021/03/23/world-economic-outlook-april-2021.
3. A. Kadir Yildirim and Meredith McCain, “The Aftermath of the Arab Spring Protests: What a Public Opinion Survey Tells Us,” Policy Brief, Baker Institute for Public Policy, March 21, 2019, https://www.bakerinstitute.org/files/14175/.
4. Larry Luxner, “COVID-19 Could Set Back Mideast Economies for Years,” Atlantic Council, July 14, 2020, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/covid-19-could-set-back-mideast-economies-for-years/.
5. “World Economic Outlook,” IMF, April 2021, https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/WEO/Issues/2021/03/23/world-economic-outlook-april-2021.
6. United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia, “New ESCWA Brief: 8.3 Million People Will Fall into Poverty in the Arab Region Due to COVID-19,” UNESCOA, Brief, April 2020, https://www.unescwa.org/news/newescwa-brief-83-million-people-will-fall-poverty-arab-region-due-covid-19; UNESCOA, “The Impact of COVID-19 on the Arab Region An Opportunity to Build Back Better,” Policy Brief, July 2020, https://www.unescwa.org/sites/default/files/pubs/pdf/sg_policy_brief_covid-19_and_arab_states_july_2020_en.pdf.
7. Lydia Assouad, “Inequality and Its Discontents in the Middle East,” Carnegie Middle East Center, March 12, 2020, https://carnegie-mec.org/2020/03/12/inequality-and-its-discontents-in-middle-east-pub-81266; Aya Batrawy, “IMF: Nearly All Mideast Economies Hit by Pandemic Recession,” AP News, October 19, 2020, https://apnews.com/article/virus-outbreak-pandemics-dubai-united-arab-emirates-lebanon-14975eeaceba1fffd5adf677bad02.
8. “States of Fragility 2020,” OECD, https://www.oecd.org/dac/states-of-fragility-fa5a6770-en.htm.
9. See the “2017-18 Arab Opinion Index: Executive Summary, Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies,” Doha Institute, May 9, 2018, https://www.dohainstitute.org/en/News/Pages/ACRPS-Releases-Arab-Index-2017-2018.aspx; Michael Safi, “Life Has Got Worse Since Arab Spring, Say People Across the Middle East,” The Guardian, December 17, 2020, https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2020/dec/17/arab-spring-people-middle-east-poll; “The Impact of
their grip on society without providing needed political reforms, educational opportunities, or health and human services.\textsuperscript{10}

While the 22 countries that make up the Arab world are vastly different in terms of resilience and resources for a post-Covid rebound, they share a history and political culture of authoritarianism, sectarianism, and military kleptocracy.\textsuperscript{11} They also face the same regional and "transnational" threats, including terrorism, state fragility, and religious radicalism and sectarianism.\textsuperscript{12} Whether rich or poor, all states in the region have redirected societal resources to combat Covid-19.\textsuperscript{13}

The coronavirus and its aftermath has exacerbated known conflict drivers, negatively impacting human rights while increasing unemployment and economic inequalities.\textsuperscript{14} If allowed to spiral out of control, these new challenges could become geostrategic threats. A real decline in income, quality of life, and access to healthcare for a large number of people leaves a country vulnerable to political unrest. Combined with repressive government responses and corruption, such unrest leads to state fragility. Radicalization and extremism become more likely.\textsuperscript{15}

The stability of the Middle East in the medium and long term depends on the region’s ability to recover from these shocks and the willingness of regional powers and global actors to invest more readily in processes that support just and equitable economic development, social justice, and comprehensive civil and political rights. The United States, in particular, must balance economic and security interests against increasing competition from potentially destabilizing global and regional actors, including Turkey, Iran, China, and Russia. This is especially important as more countries in the region—including some at high risk for political instability—acquire more sophisticated military technology.

The US withdrawal from Iraq, the end to the NATO presence in Afghanistan, and the growing involvement of Russia and Turkey reflect ongoing regional and global geostrategic shifts, both in great-power engagement and regional alliances. While it is hoped that the Abraham Accords will have a positive and stabilizing effect on regional security, rapid arms procurement by powerful regional actors also risks spurring a security dilemma along sectarian lines, resulting in militarization and possible nuclearization of additional states in the region.

\textsuperscript{10} Poverty is having real effects on the education of the next generation as data shows that about half of primary and middle schools don’t meet requirements in test scores. See Rami Khoury, “Why Mass Poverty Is So Dangerous for the Middle East,” Carnegie Corporation of New York, September 12, 2019, https://www.carnegie.org/topics/topic-articles/arab-region-transitions/why-mass-poverty-so-dangerous-middle-east/.

\textsuperscript{11} Different data sources group the region differently. The “Arab world” usually refers to members of the Arab League. International organizations include between 16 and 22 countries and territories in the MENA category, with outliers such as Mauretania, Sudan, and Turkey accounting for the variation. This article will refer to the MENA region loosely while being transparent about inconsistencies for the sake of data comparison.

\textsuperscript{12} “States of Fragility 2020,” OECD, https://www.oecd.org/dac/states-of-fragility-fa5a6770-en.htm.

\textsuperscript{13} Larry Luxner, “COVID-19 Could Set Back Mideast Economies for Years,” Atlantic Council, July 14, 2020, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/covid-19-could-set-back-mideast-economies-for-years/.

\textsuperscript{14} In 2010, 4% of the Arab population was living below the international poverty line of USD 1.25 per day, while 40% were living below USD 2.75 per day. See the “Arab Development Portal,” on Poverty: https://www.arabdevelopmentportal.com/indicator/poverty.

\textsuperscript{15} “States of Fragility 2016: Understanding Violence,” OECD, https://www.oecd.org/dac/conflict-fragility-resilience/publications/OECD%20States%20of%20Fragility%202016.pdf.
CONFLICT, STATE FRAGILITY, TERRORISM

Despite a general decline in global conflict since the 20th century, the Middle East has continued to figure prominently as a geopolitical flashpoint. In fact, since the 1980s, the Middle East has experienced more armed conflict than any other region and has seen the largest relative increase in state-based conflicts. Research shows that most of the spikes in global-conflict fatalities over the past two decades have been concentrated in the Middle East. In addition, the region remains a trouble spot for various types of nonstate organized violence, including civil wars, insurgencies, and terrorism. Since the Arab Spring, half of all newly emerging conflicts around the world are in the Middle East, as are half of the world’s terrorist events.

The Global Peace Index confirmed that the Middle East was the least peaceful region in the world in 2019, a result of a worsening of some of the most significant markers for safety and security, political stability, and potential for political terror. Countries in the Middle East or its immediate vicinity comprise 10 out of the 15 least peaceful in the world, with South Sudan, Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and Afghanistan in the bottom five. This is despite some significant improvements during the second half of the past decade, with the largest improvement of any region during 2020. Since the outbreak of the Syrian civil war in 2014 (its deadliest year, with 80,000 deaths), battle-related deaths have fallen significantly, as has the number of conflicts in the region. In 2019, the Middle East still had 10 state-based conflicts (one interstate war, five civil wars, and four internationalized civil wars), but the number was down from 12 in 2018, the highest recorded since 1946. Similarly, the number of nonstate conflicts in the Middle East rose after 2011 to a high of 37 in 2014 but declined thereafter. However, nonstate conflicts continue to be deadly, with fatalities reaching an all-time high in 2017, largely due to ISIS activities.

Terrorist-related deaths declined in 2019 in all world regions—including the Middle East—for the fifth consecutive year, despite an increase in one-sided violence against civilians due to ISIS activities in Iraq and Syria. This represents a decline in terrorist-related deaths of 59% since the

16 Therése Pettersson and Kristine Eck, “Organized Violence, 1989–2017,” Journal of Peace Research 55, no. 4 (July 1, 2018): 535–47, https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343318784101.
17 Ibid.
18 Jacob Mundy, “The Middle East Is Violence: On the Limits of Comparative Approaches to the Study of Armed Conflict,” Civil Wars 21, no. 4 (2019): 539–68; Erin Miller, “Global Terrorism in 2018,” START, October 20, 2018, https://www.start.umd.edu/sites/default/files/publications/local_attachments/START_GTD_TerrorismIn2018_Oct2018.pdf.
19 These include an increased likelihood in violent demonstrations, a rise of authoritarianism, and increased militarization. See “Global Peace Index 2020: Measuring Peace in a Complex World,” Institute for Economics & Peace, June 2020, https://www.visionofhumanity.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/GPI_2020_web.pdf.
20 Ibid.
21 “Global Peace Index 2021: Measuring Peace in a Complex World,” Institute for Economics & Peace, June 2021, https://www.visionofhumanity.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/GPI-2021-web-1.pdf
22 The deadliest year, 2014, saw almost 80,000 battle-related deaths: Julia Pail et al., “Conflict Trends in the Middle East, 1989–2019,” PRIO Paper, 2020, https://www.prio.org/utility/DownloadFile.ashx?id=2154&type=publicationfile, 10.
23 Ibid, 7.
24 Ibid, 9.
25 Ibid, 24.
26 Ibid, 7-8.
peak in 2014, when 33,438 people were killed in terrorist attacks globally, and reflects the fact that 96% of all terrorist events occur within the larger context of an ongoing conflict. While continued improvements have been recorded since the beginning of the pandemic, the numbers masked a significant shift in terrorism incidents from the MENA region to the African continent, especially during 2020.

While the big guns may have been silenced in Syria, fighting continues in Libya and Yemen. Evidence also suggests that the risk factors for renewed violence across the region may be both poorly understood and overlooked. Geo-locational data shows that the nature of violence has shifted in scope from transnational and national to more local and regional—often between factions—while still utilizing transnational networks. An OECD study found that there is tremendous subnational variation in conflict dynamics and patterns globally and that countries are often affected by multiple forms of conflict and violence simultaneously.

The enormous suffering from the fallout of the civil wars of the past decade was compounded by already existing human and economic insecurity, including weak public sectors, structural unemployment, and low government accountability. As a result, inequality has risen both within and between states, as the human and economic costs of conflict have fallen disproportionately on already weak and fragile countries. Conflict and state fragility are highly interlinked and self-reinforcing. Fragile states lose the capacity to protect their citizens, allowing terrorist groups and violent extremists to exploit grievances and needs. While both ISIS and al-Qaeda have lost strength, affiliates of both groups continue to be active and maintain safe havens under the radar in such fragile security climates, particularly in Libya, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen. Al-Qaeda has remained resilient in the Idlib Province in Northwest Syria, and ISIS-affiliated cells operate in a largely unguarded area in Iraq between Kurdish Peshmerga forces and the Iraqi coalition. The promises of spiritual rewards and a real salary are difficult for many young people to resist, especially given the powerful ideological and religious narratives that Salafi-Jihadi groups use to justify violence.

However, while fragility is often understood as a condition linked to conflict and violence, the absence of a registered conflict does not mean that a country is not vulnerable. Fragility is an accumulation of risk factors (economic and political), and a country’s vulnerability to such risks. The

27 “Global Terrorism Index 2019,” Vision of Humanity, 2019, https://www.visionofhumanity.org/maps/global-terrorism-index/.
28 Ibid.
29 “Country Reports on Terrorism 2020,” Bureau of Counterterrorism, US Department of State, December 2021, https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Country_Reports_on_Terrorism_2020.pdf.
30 “States of Fragility 2016: Understanding Violence,” OECD, https://www.oecd.org/dac/conflict-fragility-resilience/publications/OECD%20States%20of%20Fragility%202016.pdf.
31 Ibid.
32 “COVID-19, Conflict and Risks in the Arab Region: Ending Hostilities and Investing in Peace,” UNESCWA, 2020, https://unescwa.org/sites/default/files/pubs/pdf/covid-19-conflict-risks-arab-region-english.pdf; “The Impact of COVID-19 on the Arab Region an Opportunity to Build Back Better,” UNESCWA, July 2020, https://unsgd.un.org/download/2472/34896.
33 Greg Barton, “In COVID's Shadow, Global Terrorism Goes Quiet. But We Have Seen This before, and Should Be Wary,” The Conversation, http://theconversation.com/in-covids-shadow-global-terrorism-goes-quiet-but-we-have-seen-this-before-and-should-be-wary-144286.
34 “Country Reports on Terrorism 2019,” Bureau of Counterterrorism, 2019, https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Country-Reports-on-Terrorism-2019-2.pdf.
long-term consequences of conflict, such as the loss of societal cohesion and trust, deterioration of inclusive political processes, and the collapse of the economic foundation, will make it difficult for the most vulnerable Middle Eastern countries to weather the macroeconomic shocks and rising inequalities brought on by the pandemic. Due to the very real risk of political instability, fragile states tend to respond with repressive military tactics, clamping down on both illegitimate and legitimate political expression, reinforcing a vicious circle of authoritarianism, dissent, repression, and conflict. Tacit support from the international community to authoritarian regimes in the region has allowed elites to deflect attention from genuine grievances to regional geopolitical tensions and the imperative of counterterrorism.

Even before Covid-19, the region already seemed at a boiling point. In December 2018, when the Sudanese rose up against increasing bread prices, many said that history was repeating itself. Similar demonstrations took place elsewhere, including Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, and Iraq. The triggers for these protests were comparable to those that led to the Arab Spring, when people demonstrated against deteriorating living conditions, failing economies, and corrupt political systems that favor a small elite at the expense of the masses.35 Thus, for some governments, pandemic-related restrictions might even have felt like a respite, as they struggled to maintain legitimacy and control over frustrated populations.

PRE-EXISTING CONDITIONS AND VULNERABILITIES

The pandemic arrived when public trust was already at an all-time low, and after a long decline in the most important development indicators, including poverty, inequality, political freedom, and accessibility to social protection. According to the Freedom House index for democracy, only a single country in the MENA region, Tunisia, has made any democratic progress since the Arab Spring.36 Yet, scholars warn that even Tunisia is at risk, as judicial and institutional reforms have been slow.37

The Middle East is the only region of the world where extreme poverty rates rose between 2011 and 2015. At the start of the pandemic, 18.6 million people (5%) already lived on less than $1.90 per day, and 50 million people were undernourished.38 Largely driven by conflict-affected Syria

35 “Middle East & North Africa: Corruption Continues as Institutions and Political Rights Weaken,” Transparency, July 26, 2021, https://www.transparency.org/en/news/regional-analysis-mena.
36 Kali Robinson, “The Arab Spring at Ten Years: What’s the Legacy of the Uprisings?,” Council on Foreign Relations, December 3, 2020, https://www.cfr.org/article/arab-spring-ten-years-whats-legacy-uprisings. The Article cites the Freedom House Index measuring indicators such as electoral process, political pluralism, and freedom of expression and belief.
37 Stephen McInerney and Amy Hawthorne, “American Democracy Needs Our Support. So Do Other Democracies,” POMED: Project on Middle East Democracy, January 14, 2021, https://pomed.org/american-democracy-needs-our-support-so-do-other-democracies/.
38 “8.3 Million People Will Fall into Poverty in the Arab Region Due to COVID-19,” UNESCWA, April 1, 2020, http://www.unescwa.org/news/83-million-people-will-fall-poverty-arab-region-due-covid-19; In Syria and Yemen, the rates were 20% and 41% respectively. Aziz Atamanov and Sharad Tandon, “Measuring Regional Poverty in MENA: Update and Remaining Challenges,” Arab Voices, November 27, 2018, https://blogs.worldbank.org/arabvoices/measuring-regional-poverty-mena-update-and-remaining-challenges; Tim Callen, Khalid Abu-Ismail, and Bessma Momani, “The Economic Impact of COVID-19 on the Middle East: Recession, Response, and Recovery,” Brookings, September 17, 2020, https://www.brookings.edu/events/the-economic-impact-of-covid-19-on-the-middle-east-recession-response-and-recovery/.
and Yemen, poverty in the Middle East is more pervasive than previously thought and, given the added stress from Covid-19, it is likely to remain so for generations. 39

Experts warned that an additional 8.3 million people in the MENA region were likely to fall into poverty as a result of the pandemic, and an additional 2 million were projected to be undernourished.40 The economic and developmental repercussions will be felt most harshly in fragile or conflict-affected states like Syria, Libya, and Yemen. While virus-infection data from these countries is unreliable, it is clear that it has reached devastating levels in some communities. Estimates show that Yemen, with its ongoing humanitarian crisis, suffered 2,100 “excess deaths” due to Covid-19 from April to September 2020.41

The effects of the pandemic will be felt unequally across countries, as pre-existing socioeconomic inequalities, both within and between countries, will be exacerbated. Although difficult to measure due to large, informal sectors, inequality in income rose dramatically in MENA after 2014.42 Reports indicate that the inequality rate in the Middle East was already the worst in the world before the pandemic, with 10% of top income earners receiving about 56% of the national income, and the poorest 50% receiving only 12%. The GCC countries were the worst in the region at 54%. Since the early 1990s, the population across the region has doubled, while the average income has only grown by 18%. In Egypt, the share of the bottom 50% has decreased as a result of policy changes since the 1990s.43 Politically fragile states are increasingly vulnerable, especially those that have taken in large numbers of refugees, as are developing oil-exporters that have yet to diversify their economies.

While poverty in itself may not lead to political instability and conflict, rapid economic decline and rising inequality is statistically linked to fragility, instability, and conflict.44 Because the region is ill-prepared to deal with the pandemic’s wide-reaching consequences, the ripple effects of all of these shocks will be felt across the entire region, with the greatest impact on the most vulnerable populations in fragile and/or conflict-affected states.

DECLINE AND INEQUALITY WITH COVID-19

The ability of the 22 Arab states to adapt to interlinked post-pandemic shocks differs widely among the three tiers of countries—GCC oil-exporting states, developing oil-exporting economies, and developing oil-importing states. Various Covid-19 containment measures, together with a global

39 Rami G. Khouri, “How Poverty and Inequality Are Devastating the Middle East,” Carnegie Corporation of New York (Analysis), September 12, 2019, https://www.carnegie.org/topics/topic-articles/arab-region-transitions/why-mass-poverty-so-dangerous-middle-east/.

40 “Mitigating the Impact of Covid-19: Poverty and Food Insecurity in the Arab Region,” UNESCWA, April 2020, https://www.unescwa.org/sites/default/files/pubs/pdf/en_20-00119_covid-19_poverty.pdf.

41 Kate Kelland, “Grave-Counting Satellite Images Seek to Track Yemen’s COVID Death Toll,” Reuters, October 29, 2020, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-yemen-graves-idUSKBN27C3BT.

42 Paola Pagliani, “Inclusive Citizenship and the Data Imperative in Arab Countries,” UNDP, 2020, https://arab-hdr.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Final-Inclusive-Citizenship-and-Data-Imperative.pdf.

43 Djavad Salehi Isfahani, “Inequality of Opportunity in Egypt,” Brookings, July 25, 2017, https://www.brookings.edu/blog/future-development/2017/07/25/inequality-of-opportunity-in-egypt/.

44 Tahsin Saadi Sedik and Rui Xu, “A Vicious Cycle: How Pandemics Lead to Economic Despair and Social Unrest,” IMF Working Papers, October 16, 2020, https://www.imf.org/-/media/Files/Publications/WP/2020/English/wpiea2020216-print-pdf.pdf.
drop in demand for fossil fuels, had significant impact on economic activity in the Middle East during 2020.\textsuperscript{45} Although many states experienced moderate recovery during 2021 (with growth up to 4.2% forecast in 2022), many economists fear that vulnerabilities exposed during the pandemic may result in economic "scarring" in many sectors and, in effect, wider income gaps within and between states.\textsuperscript{46} Recovery is conditioned by a country's exposure to oil-price fluctuations and its ability to manage subsequent waves of infection. Poorer countries with low vaccination rates and high inflation will have little room to adjust their fiscal and monetary policies, with likely effects on vaccine acquisition and distribution.

The pandemic caused the largest contraction of economic output in the past 20 years for most countries in the Middle East, with significant impact on GDP, financial markets, and labor.\textsuperscript{47} Indeed, data suggest that GDP across the region contracted by an average of 3.8% in 2020, and by as much as 13% in fragile, conflict-affected countries.\textsuperscript{48} GDP per capita, a better indicator of standard of living, declined by 5.4% in 2020, with a projected increase of 1.1% in 2021, which was 4.3% lower than its 2019 level.\textsuperscript{49} Fiscal deficits during 2020 raised debt-to-GDP levels to 95% of GDP on average among MENA oil-importing and fragile and conflict-affected countries. Lebanon and Sudan took the biggest hit, and currencies were devalued in Lebanon, Syria, Iran, Sudan, Libya, and Yemen.\textsuperscript{50} It was reported that during the first half of 2020, global flows of foreign direct investment (FDI) to the MENA region fell by 50%, compared to the preceding six months in 2019.\textsuperscript{51} Although

\textsuperscript{45} Collette Mari Wheeler et al., “Adding Fuel to the Fire: Cheap Oil during the COVID-19 Pandemic,” The World Bank, July 13, 2020, http://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/284371594670190475/pdf/Adding-Fuel-to-the-Fire-Cheap-Oil-during-the-COVID-19-Pandemic.pdf.

\textsuperscript{46} “Regional Economic Outlook: Middle East and Central Asia,” International Monetary Fund, October 2020, https://www.imf.org/-/media/Files/Publications/REO/MCD-CCA/2020/October/English/mreo1020-full-report.ashx, 21; “GCC Economic Update: April 2021,” World Bank, April 2, 2021, https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/gcc/publication/economic-update-april-2021.

\textsuperscript{47} Ibid, 41; Rebecca Engebretsen and Catherine Anderson, “The Impact of Coronavirus (COVID-19) and the Global Oil Price Shock on the Fiscal Position of Oil-Exporting Developing Countries,” OECD, September 30, 2020, https://read.oecd-ilibrary.org/view/?ref=136_136801-aw9npsafk&title=The-impact-of-Coronavirus-COVID-19-and-the-global-oil-price-shock-on-the-fiscal-position-of-oil-exporting-developing-countries&_ga=2.185167534.602432244.1627382873-837946774.1623328508.

\textsuperscript{48} “Five Charts That Illustrate COVID-19’s Impact on the Middle East and Central Asia,” IMF, July 16, 2020, https://www.imf.org/en/News/Articles/2020/07/14/na071420-five-charts-that-illustrate-covid19s-impact-on-the-middle-east-and-central-asia; “Regional Economic Outlook: Middle East and Central Asia,” IMF, October 2020, https://www.imf.org/-/media/Files/Publications/REO/MCD-CCA/2020/October/English/mreo1020-full-report.ashx; “Overconfident: How Economic and Health Fault Lines Left the MiddleEast and North Africa Ill-Prepared to Face COVID-19” Middle East and North Africa Economic Update, The World Bank, October 2021: https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/bitstream/handle/10986/36318/9781464817984.pdf.

\textsuperscript{49} “Overconfident: How Economic and Health Fault Lines Left the Middle East and North Africa Ill-Prepared to Face COVID-19”

\textsuperscript{50} “Regional Economic Outlook: Middle East and Central Asia,” IMF, October 2020, https://www.imf.org/-/media/Files/Publications/REO/MCD-CCA/2020/October/English/mreo1020-full-report.ashx; “Impact of COVID-19 in the Middle East, North Africa, Central Asia, and Eastern Europe,” World Food Program, September 17, 2020, https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/WFP-000019040.pdf.

\textsuperscript{51} “Middle East and North Africa Investment Policy Perspectives,” OECD Publishing, Paris, 2021https://doi.org/10.1787/6d84ee94-en; “Middle East and North Africa Regional Update 2021 - Preventing a lost decade,” The World Bank, 2021, https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/e1ee32f3549c5283e46ca44047843890-0280012021/original/World-Bank-2021-MENA-Regional-Update.pdf; “Investment in the MENA Region in the Time of COVID-19,” OECD, June 4, 2020, https://read.oecd-ilibrary.org/view/?ref=134_134467-ydl12subjo&title=Investment-in-the-MENA-region-in-the-time-of-COVID-19&_ga=2.137383735.602432244.1627382873-837946774.1623328508
global FDI flows have rebounded, initial data from 2021 showed an acute decline in investment in the MENA region during that year, with greenfield investment dropping by as much as 80%. Many middle-income countries, including Egypt, experienced a continued decline in investment prospects and private-sector confidence since 2020.

The implications for MENA economies will reverberate across the region. The least vulnerable Middle East states are the large GCC oil producers with relatively stable, albeit autocratic, governments. These states provide a generous safety net for their own citizens and play an important role as investors in developing and fragile states. However, the precipitous drop in demand for fossil fuels, together with announced plans to increase the crude-oil flow, created an oversupply that led to a 60% drop in oil prices during the first four months of the pandemic, reducing government revenues 22.2% on average and erasing previous surpluses. With 75% of exports and 70% of government revenues derived from hydrocarbons, the GCC states experienced a sharp economic downturn, leading to a 4.8% decline in their GDP in 2020.

Developing oil-producing countries that have yet to diversify and where foreign investment remains a large part of government revenue, such as Algeria, Iraq, and Libya, are even more vulnerable to these fluctuations. These countries saw a contraction in GDP by 3% in 2020, and only a moderate forecast of a 2.3% growth in 2021. While oil prices made a quick recovery in 2021, hitting an all-time, six-year high in July, markets are still volatile due to uncertain demand. Fragile and conflict-affected states are particularly at risk, as slower-than-average vaccine rollouts make them vulnerable to new virus variants. However, the World Bank predicts that higher oil prices, strong external demand, and higher vaccine rates across the region could help strengthen average growth by 3.5% in 2022.

The International Labour Organization estimated that almost 100% of workers across the Arab world were affected by Covid-related closures or restrictions between May and October 2020, and warned that labor-market recovery may lag considerably, especially in sectors that rely on

52 “Middle East and North Africa Investment Policy Perspectives,” OECD Publishing, Paris, 2021. https://doi.org/10.1787/6d84ee94-en.
53 “Overconfident: How Economic and Health Fault Lines Left the Middle East and North Africa Ill-Prepared to Face COVID-19.”
54 Phillip Brown, “Low Oil Prices: Prospects for Global Oil Market Balance,” CRS Report 11286, 2020, https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IN/IN11286.
55 “GCC Economic Update: April 2021,” World Bank, April 2, 2021, https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/gcc/publication/economic-update-april-2021: “COVID-19 Pandemic and the Road to Diversification,” Gulf Economic Update, Issue 6, The World Bank, August 2021, https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/748461627924058675/pdf/Gulf-Economic-Update-COVID-19-Pandemic-and-the-Road-to-Diversification.pdf
56 Kirk H. Sowell, “Iraq’s Dire Fiscal Crisis,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, November 2, 2020, https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/83108.
57 “Overconfident: How Economic and Health Fault Lines Left the Middle East and North Africa Ill-Prepared to Face COVID-19”
58 Peter Nagle, “The Oil Market Outlook: A Speedy Recovery,” World Bank, May 4, 2021, https://blogs.worldbank.org/opendata/oil-market-outlook-speedy-recovery.
59 “Overconfident: How Economic and Health Fault Lines Left the Middle East and North Africa Ill-Prepared to Face COVID-19”
60 “Middle East and North Africa,” Chapter 2.4, Global Economic Prospects, A World Bank Group Flagship Report, Jan 2022, https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/bitstream/handle/10986/36519/9781464817601.pdf
low-skilled labor. While most MENA governments have provided stimulus packages to their most vulnerable citizens, levels remain lower than the global average, and differ between the three tiers of states (with more substantial support in the GCC states). Little support was provided for a majority of small and medium-sized businesses across the Middle East, which in many countries provide the backbone of economic activity.

The impact on the labor market will be felt more acutely by oil-importing countries, including fragile and/or conflict-affected states for which remittances sent from citizens employed in the Gulf states have dropped significantly. According to OECD numbers, remittances from GCC countries to other Arab states amounted to $62 billion in 2018. This source of revenue was projected to decline by almost 20% as a result of the pandemic, to $47 billion in 2020. To put the magnitude of this problem into perspective, in 2017 about 9.5 million Egyptians worked outside the country, including 4.5 million Egyptians working in the Gulf (2.9 million in Saudi Arabia, and about 1.5 million in the UAE, Kuwait, and Qatar). In Lebanon, one-fifth of GDP comes from citizens employed in the Gulf. As workers are repatriated, they become an additional strain on their home economies, further marginalizing poor communities and shrinking the share of wealth held by the middle class. The IMF projected that a drop in remittances would worsen extreme poverty by 5.25% and further exacerbate inequality.

The informal economy, which came to an almost complete halt in many countries, employs about 68% of workers in the Middle East. In Egypt, the informal economy accounts for about 50% of GDP and 63% of total employment. These workers are already vulnerable, often day laborers who lack social protections. Scholars warn that inequality would persistently worsen

61 “ILO Monitor: COVID-19 and the World of Work. 7th Edition,” International Labour Organization, January 25, 2021, https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/-/dgreports/-/dcomm/documents/briefingnote/wcms_767028.pdf.
62 Bessma Momani, “The Impact of Low Oil Prices and COVID-19 on Arab Economies,” Arab Center Washington DC, April 2020, http://arabcenterdc.org/policy_analyses/the-impact-of-low-oil-prices-and-covid-19-on-arab-economies/.
63 “COVID-19 Crisis Response in MENA Countries,” OECD, November 6, 2020, https://read.oecd-ilibrary.org/view/?ref=129_129919-4f17bq8asv&title=COVID-19-Crisis-Response-in-MENA-Countries&_ga=2.79063699.602432244.1627382873-837946774.1623238508.
64 Dilip K. Ratha et al., “COVID-19 Crisis Through a Migration Lens,” World Bank Group, April 1, 2020, http://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/989721587512481006/pdf/COVID-19-Crisis-Through-a-Migration-Lens.pdf; Ibid.
65 Al-Masry Al-Youm, “9.5 Million Egyptians Live Abroad, Mostly in Saudi Arabia and Jordan,” Egypt Independent, October 1, 2017, https://egyptindependent.com/9-5-million-egyptians-live-abroad-mostly-saudi-arabia-jordan/; Taha Sakr, “Deteriorated Economy Forces Egyptians to Endure ‘Slavery,’ Maltreatment in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait,” Daily News Egypt, August 20, 2016, https://dailyfeed.dailysnewegypt.com/2016/08/20/deteriorated-economy-forces-egyptians-endure-slavery-maltreatment-saudi-arabia-kuwait/.
66 Bessma Momani, “The Impact of Low Oil Prices and COVID-19 on Arab Economies,” Arab Center Washington DC, April 2020, http://arabcenterdc.org/policy_analyses/the-impact-of-low-oil-prices-and-covid-19-on-arab-economies/.
67 Amr Mostafa, “Egyptians Returning from the Gulf Face Uncertain Economic Future,” Al-Monitor, June 4, 2020, https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2020/06/egypt-working-gulf-return-economy-coronavirus.html; Farah Heiba, “Low-Skilled Expat Workers in Middle East Worst Hit as Hiring Drops 50% over Coronavirus,” Arab News, July 14, 2020, https://arab.news/yj2eb.
68 “Regional Economic Outlook: Middle East and Central Asia,” IMF, October 2020, https://www.imf.org/-/media/Files/Publications/REO/MCD-CCA/2020/October/English/mreo1020-full-report.ashx, 32.
69 It is as high as 74% in Yemen and 74% in Lebanon. Ibid, 37.
70 Mohammed Solimán, “Egypt’s Informal Economy: An Ongoing Cause of Unrest,” Journal of International Affairs 73, no. 2 (Spring/Summer 2020): 185–93.
for up to five years after the pandemic, as the informal economy’s remittance labor will be slow to recover.  

A precipitous drop in tourism in 2020 shrank employment opportunities further. Between March and September 2020, international tourism dropped by more than 95% across the Middle East, and by March 2021 it was still 78% lower than before the pandemic. The World Travel and Tourism Council estimated that the losses to the region’s GDP from the absence of international travel in 2020 amounted to $154 billion. Developing economies are the most affected, as tourism can account for as much as 15% of annual GDP, or even more if the informal economy is fully accounted for. However, tourism has also been an important part of the effort of GCC states to diversify their economies away from oil. Saudi Arabia lost around $12 billion from canceling the yearly Hajj and Umrah, amounting to 20% of its non-oil GDP. This put the Saudi Arabian labor force in jeopardy, some of whom are low-skilled foreign workers from outside the MENA region who may not have the ability to return to their countries. This creates logistical problems and resentment that heightens the risk for social unrest even in the GCC. The Middle Eastern travel and tourism sector is expected to recover by 27.1% in 2021, slightly behind the global average of 30.7%.

The most serious impact of the labor shortage may affect younger generations (below 30), who make up 60% of the MENA population. Youth unemployment has challenged the Arab world for more than 25 years, with only Oman, Bahrain, the UAE, and Qatar falling below the global average of about 15%. The highest rates are in Libya (50%), the West Bank and Gaza (40%), Saudi

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71 Davide Furceri et al., “Will COVID-19 Affect Inequality? Evidence from Past Pandemics,” International Monetary Fund, May 1, 2021, https://www.imf.org/-/media/Files/Publications/WP/2021/English/wpiea2021127-print-pdf.ashx.
72 “International Tourism and Covid-19,” UNWTO, https://www.unwto.org/international-tourism-and-covid-19.
73 “Middle East Recovery Scenarios: Nov. 2020,” World Travel and Tourism Council, November 2020, https://wttc.org/Portals/0/Documents/Reports/2020/Middle%20East%20Recovery%20Scenarios%20Nov%202020.pdf?ver=2021-02-25-183016-973, The Arab region’s gross domestic product (GDP) was expected to fall by about $152 billion as a result of the forecasted 5.7% per cent contraction in growth between 2019 and 2020.
74 Mirette F. Mabrouk, “Egypt’s Sizeable Informal Economy Complicates Its Pandemic Response,” Middle East Institute, June 22, 2020, https://www.mei.edu/blog/egypts-sizeable-informal-economy-complicates-its-pandemic-response; Mohammed Soliman, “Egypt’s Informal Economy: An Ongoing Cause of Unrest,” Journal of International Affairs 73, no. 2 (Spring/Summer 2020): 185–93.
75 Tom Allinson, “Saudi Arabia: Hajj Cancellation Spells Frustration and Empty Pockets,” DW, July 6, 2020, https://www.dw.com/en/saudi-arabia-hajj-cancellation-spells-frustration-and-empty-pockets/a-54064035; Ahmed Maher, The Economics of Hajj: Money and Pilgrimage, BBC, 2012, https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-middle-east-20091310.
76 “Regional Economic Outlook: Middle East and Central Asia,” IMF, October 2020, https://www.imf.org/-/media/Files/Publications/REO/MCD-CCA/2020/October/English/mreo1020-full-report.ashx, 11.
77 “Middle East Travel & Tourism sector set to recover by over a quarter this year,” Press Release, 27/10/2021, World Travel and Tourism Council, https://wttc.org/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=MZ_jemjr2Pg%3d&portalid=0.
78 “Arab Human Development Report 2016: Youth and the Prospects for Human Development in a Changing Reality,” UNDP, https://arab-hdr.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/adhr-report-2018-chapter-1.pdf.
79 The ILO’s range for the global average unemployment for 15-25 year olds in 2019 is 12.3-14.9%. The World Bank estimated 15.3% in the same year. See “Data Finder - World Employment and Social Outlook,” International Labour Organization, https://www.ilo.org/wesodata/chart/bcJY1X4RA; “Unemployment, Youth Total (% of Total Labor Force Ages 15-24) (Modeled ILO Estimate) - Middle East & North Africa, World, East Asia & Pacific, Latin America & Caribbean, Sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia.” The World Bank, June 15, 2021, https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.UEM.1524.ZS?locations=ZQ-1W-Z4-ZJ-ZG-8S&start=1991&end=2020&view=chart.
Arabia (30%), Jordan (37%), and Egypt (27%). While unemployment cannot be directly linked to political dissent, the fact that more than a third of all young people have no means to support themselves and—by extension—begin productive lives and careers, is highly problematic. Many have argued that the Arab Spring was sparked by the confluence of the Arab “youth bulge” in the early 2000s and the political disempowerment and dwindling economic opportunities after the 2008 recession. When a large cohort of young men in Muslim communities searches for economic opportunities and cultural status, it also opens up recruitment opportunities for Salafi-Jihadi groups.

The above challenges could trigger a reinforcing spiral of economic hardship and conflict in the countries that are most fragile. Lebanon is perhaps at highest risk, as it has endured multiple shocks to its fragile resilience already, including the Beirut port explosion of August 4, 2020. In March 2020, the country, which already hosts 1.5 million Syrian refugees, defaulted on its sovereign debt for the first time in history, and its currency (artificially pegged to the dollar) lost about 80% of its value on the black market. The prime minister noted that the country had to choose between “honoring its debts and providing the most basic needs to its citizens.” The World Bank suggests that Lebanon’s financial crisis may rank among the top three most severe global crises since the mid-19th century.

Lebanon is one of the states that relies heavily on Saudi Arabia for occasional economic “bailouts.” However, discussions held before the pandemic with Saudi Arabia and France to aid Lebanon’s economy came to a halt as the kingdom redirected its resources to support its own citizens and businesses. After the Beirut harbor explosion, the Saudis sent a search-and-rescue team but no funds. In addition, a widespread Covid-19 outbreak overwhelmed Lebanon’s limited health infrastructure, which was already suffering a shortage of medical doctors, hospital beds, and sanitation.

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80 Nicole Goldin, “Past, Present, and Prospective: The Demographic Dividend Opportunity in Arab Youth,” Atlantic Council, July 9, 2020, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Past-Present-and-Prospective-The-Demographic-Dividend-Opportunity-in-Arab-Youth-1.pdf; Ibid.
81 Nicole Goldin, “Past, Present, and Prospective: The Demographic Dividend Opportunity in Arab Youth,” Atlantic Council, July 9, 2020, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Past-Present-and-Prospective-The-Demographic-Dividend-Opportunity-in-Arab-Youth-1.pdf.
82 Tova C. Norlén, Connections Quarterly Journal, (forthcoming, 2022).
83 “Resilient No More,” Economist, March 14, 2020.
84 Kareem Chehayeb, “Lebanon Was on Life Support. Now It’s in Free Fall.,” Washington Post, December 29, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2020/12/29/lebanon-explosion-pandemic-economy-crisis/; “Lebanese Banks Raise USD Withdrawal Rate to 3,850 Pounds/Dollar,” Reuters, June 29, 2020, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-lebanon-crisis-banks-idUSKBN2401WS.
85 “Lebanon’s Economic Update — October 2021,” The World Bank, October 7, 2021, https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/lebanon/publication/economic-update-october-2021
86 Zvi Bar’el, “Coronavirus Economic Impact Could Decimate the Middle East,” Haaretz, April 2, 2020.
87 Private conversations with a member of the Lebanese Security Forces; Mohammed Solimán, “COVID-19, the Oil Price War, and the Remaking of the Middle East,” Middle East Institute, April 8, 2020, https://www.mei.edu/publications/covid-19-oil-price-war-and-remaking-middle-east.
The IMF estimates that the most fragile countries together have 17.2 million internally displaced people and host a total of 2.7 million refugees.\(^8\) UNICEF warns that one-fifth of all children in the region will need life-saving assistance in 2021, the majority in Syria, Yemen, and Sudan.

Security conditions and crowding in refugee camps have made virus containment difficult. Some humanitarian agencies have cut their foreign staff and are operating on very scarce resources using limited local personnel.\(^9\) Citing worsening conditions as a result of Covid-19, UNICEF applied for a record-breaking $2.5 billion in emergency funding for MENA in December 2020.\(^10\) In July 2020, senior UN officials reported to the Security Council that the “humanitarian crisis in Yemen has never been worse, with conflict escalating, famine on the horizon, the economy in tatters and Covid-19 out of control.”\(^11\) Although most governments have activated social safety nets for their most vulnerable populations, logistical hurdles and security concerns in the most fragile states make it difficult to reach many recipients, especially if they are refugees or IDPs.\(^12\) There is legitimate worry that fragile states may not recover for years, as additional communities become trapped in unemployment and poverty.\(^13\)

While the most immediate effect of the pandemic-induced crisis is economic, income inequality will inevitably also lead to further social and political marginalization of the poorest populations and widening social gaps, increasing the potential for political unrest. Inequality goes beyond wages and consumption.\(^14\) School closures are more likely to have long-term effects on youth in lower-income households, including families of foreign workers in the GCC. In addition, digitalization of education and work has benefited the upper class and elevated skilled workers while further marginalizing the poor.\(^15\) Lack of access to education and the low return for graduates due to the sclerotic job market were factors that sparked the protests during the Arab Spring in

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\(^8\) “COVID-19 Poses Formidable Threat for Fragile States in the Middle East and North Africa,” IMF News, May 13, 2020, [https://www.imf.org/en/News/Articles/2020/05/13/na051320-covid-19-poses-formidable-threat-for-fragile-states-in-the-middle-east-and-north-africa](https://www.imf.org/en/News/Articles/2020/05/13/na051320-covid-19-poses-formidable-threat-for-fragile-states-in-the-middle-east-and-north-africa); “Regional Economic Outlook: Middle East and Central Asia,” IMF, October 2020, [https://www.imf.org/-/media/Files/Publications/REO/MCD-CCA/2020/October/English/mreo1020-full-report.ashx](https://www.imf.org/-/media/Files/Publications/REO/MCD-CCA/2020/October/English/mreo1020-full-report.ashx), 17.

\(^9\) Ben Parker, “UN Reduces Staff in Yemen,” The New Humanitarian, May 20, 2020, [https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news/2020/05/20/un-yemen-pullout-staff-safety-covid-19](https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news/2020/05/20/un-yemen-pullout-staff-safety-covid-19).

\(^10\) “UNICEF Appeals for a Record US$2.5 Billion to Respond to Children’s Humanitarian Needs and the COVID-19 Pandemic in the Middle East and North Africa,” UNICEF, December 7, 2020, [https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/unicef-appeals-us25-billion-humanitarian-needs-covid-2021](https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/unicef-appeals-us25-billion-humanitarian-needs-covid-2021).

\(^11\) Mark Lowcock, “Briefing to the Security Council on Yemen,” Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, July 28, 2020, [https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/20200728%20USG_Statement%20to%20%20Security%20Council%20on%20Yemen.pdf](https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/20200728%20USG_Statement%20to%20%20Security%20Council%20on%20Yemen.pdf).

\(^12\) “Regional Economic Outlook: Middle East and Central Asia,” IMF, October 2020, [https://www.imf.org/-/media/Files/Publications/REO/MCD-CCA/2020/October/English/mreo1020-full-report.ashx](https://www.imf.org/-/media/Files/Publications/REO/MCD-CCA/2020/October/English/mreo1020-full-report.ashx), 17.

\(^13\) Larry Luxner, “COVID-19 Could Set Back Mideast Economies for Years,” Atlantic Council, July 14, 2020, [https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/covid-19-could-set-back-mideast-economies-for-years/](https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/covid-19-could-set-back-mideast-economies-for-years/).

\(^14\) Djavad Salehi-Isfahani, “Inequality of Opportunity in Egypt,” Brookings, July 25, 2017, [https://www.brookings.edu/blog/future-development/2017/07/25/inequality-of-opportunity-in-egypt/](https://www.brookings.edu/blog/future-development/2017/07/25/inequality-of-opportunity-in-egypt/); Michael Safi, “Life Has Got Worse Since Arab Spring, Say People Across the Middle East,” Guardian, December 17, 2020, [https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2020/dec/17/arab-spring-people-middle-east-poll](https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2020/dec/17/arab-spring-people-middle-east-poll).

\(^15\) “COVID-19 Crisis Response in MENA Countries,” OECD, November 6, 2020, [https://read.oecd-ilibrary.org/view/?ref=129_129919-41ff8b9167441623238508&page=2](https://read.oecd-ilibrary.org/view/?ref=129_129919-41ff8b9167441623238508&page=2).
Egypt. Thus, the potential for social discontent and political instability is high in the medium to long term.

**SCLEROTIC POLITICS AND AUTHORITARIAN RESPONSES**

Too often in the Middle East, politics has consisted of one leader in power and the opposition in jail. The time has come for nations across the Middle East to abandon these practices, and treat their people with dignity and the respect they deserve.

—President George W. Bush, Sharm el Sheikh World Economic Forum, 2008

The collapse of democratic aspirations and the consolidation of authoritarians during the post-Arab Spring era had a chilling effect on a generation of young people in the Middle East. While they understood that revolution would not be easy, the almost complete reversal of any legitimate democratic progress made in the aftermath of the uprisings left citizens across the Middle East in apathy. Marwan Muasher explains that the Arab Spring ended not because citizens’ demands were met, but “because Arab governments quashed the protests with force, money, or both,” and because they understood that pushing further would most likely lead to civil war, as in Syria, Libya, or Yemen.

To avoid war, many regimes moved quickly to make adjustments to ensure even greater societal control through military repression. Thus, while the protesters disappeared from the streets, the political and economic grievances that sparked the protests not only continued but also worsened. Surveys across the Arab world show that most Arabs feel they have no political influence. In Egypt, whose youths spearheaded the uprisings, those “unconcerned about politics” rose from 48% in 2013 to 70% in 2018. These numbers also correlate with the degree to which citizens feel they are unable to criticize their government.

In addition, the past decade brought very little improvement to overall governance. Rather, public sectors were expanded and became increasingly ineffective, while bureaucratic abuses continued unchecked and corruption remained high, especially in oil-importing countries.

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96 Djavad Salehi-Isfahani, “Inequality of Opportunity in Egypt,” Brookings, July 25, 2017, https://www.brookings.edu/blog/future-development/2017/07/25/inequality-of-opportunity-in-egypt/.
97 “COVID-19 Crisis Response in MENA Countries,” OECD, November 6, 2020, https://read.oecd-ilibrary.org/view/?ref=129_129919-4li7bqasv&title=COVID-19-Crisis-Response-in-MENA-Countries&_ga=2.79063699.602432244.1627382873-83794674.1623238508,11
98 George W. Bush, “Middle East Peace Process,” C-SPAN, 2008, https://www.c-span.org/video/?205421-1/middle-east-peace-process.
99 A. Kadir Yildirim and Meredith McCain, “The Aftermath of the Arab Spring Protests: What a Public Opinion Survey Tells Us,” Policy Brief, Baker Institute for Public Policy, March 21, 2019, https://www.bakerinstitute.org/files/14175/.
100 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.
101 On freedom of press, see Marwa Al-Asar, “Press Freedom Curtailed after Arab Spring: Report,” Middle East Eye, 7 May 2015, https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/press-freedom-curtailed-after-arab-spring-report.
102 “2017-2018 Arab Opinion Index: Executive Summary,” Arab Center Washington DC, July 10, 2018, http://arabcenterdc.org/survey/2017-2018-arab-opinion-index-executive-summary/.
Transparency International reported that in 18 Arab states surveyed, political elites have outsized influence over government policy, funds are diverted at the expense of citizens, government crackdowns on civil and political rights are common, and checks and balances are weak or nonexistent.103 Efforts to create accountability are undermined, and powerful elites in parliaments and judiciaries are often coopted.104

Most MENA countries are heavily militarized. In contrast to the rest of the world, military budgets in the Middle East rose as a proportion of GDP in most Arab states over the past decade, a “phenomenon that is often correlated with both conflict incidence and recurrence, and corrupt and autocratic governments.”105 In many countries, military and political elites have become largely symbiotic, and the lines between national defense and domestic security have been erased through the increasing use of excessive military force against domestic populations.

Thus, at the start of the pandemic, civil and political liberties were already under repressive state control, with the social contract between governments and citizens broken for decades. Covid-19 lockdowns gave authoritarian governments a legitimate justification to expand powers to curb political freedoms and democratic participation even further. In Egypt, President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi approved amendments to the constitution that extended the country’s Emergency Law to grant him and the security forces additional powers in the name of coronavirus containment. In addition to allowing measures intended to mitigate the spread of the virus, it also authorized expanded powers to ban public and private meetings, protests, celebrations, and other types of assembly whenever the law is imposed.106 There is concern that such emergency legislation in Egypt and elsewhere will become permanent beyond the pandemic.

Aided by these and similar Covid-19 measures, many governments cracked down on journalists and news outlets all across the Middle East, resulting in a substantial decline in press freedom since the start of the crisis. Several international news outlets were fined for sharing medical information that contradicted the government’s account or that accurately portrayed a lack of resources,107 and their reporters were sued for spreading false news with the aim of destabilizing security.108 In the UAE, a $5,500 fine was levied against the sharing of any medical information

103 “UNICEF Appeals for a Record US$2.5 Billion to Respond to Children’s Humanitarian Needs and the COVID-19 Pandemic in the Middle East and North Africa,” UNICEF, December 7, 2020, https://www.unicef.org/mena/press-releases/unicef-appeals-us25-billion-humanitarian-needs-covid-2021.
104 Tarik M. Yousef et al., “The Middle East and North Africa over the next Decade: Key Challenges and Policy Options,” Brookings, March 3, 2020, https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/the-middle-east-and-north-africa-over-the-next-decade-key-challenges-and-policy-options/.
105 High military spending often correlates with corruption, which in turn has a detrimental effect on economic efficiency and growth. Bribes commonly make up 15% of total spending during weapons acquisition, made possible by the fact that defense projects are often secretive, capital-intensive, and unregulated by market forces. See Florence Gaub, “Arab Military Spending: Behind the Figures,” European Union Institute for Security Studies, May 16, 2014, https://www.iss.europa.eu/content/arab-military-spending-behind-figures.
106 Samy Madgy, “Egypt’s President Expands Powers, Citing Virus Outbreak,” AP News, May 9, 2020, https://apnews.com/article/63abe33c947e857505ef351f3558a744.
107 Rana Sabbagh, “Arab Reporters During COVID-19 Lockdown: Life On the Edge,” OCCRP, May 3, 2020, https://www.occrp.org/en/coronavirus/arab-reporters-during-COVID-19-lockdown-life-on-the-edge.
108 “Egyptian Writer Detained for Protesting Prison Conditions That Could Worsen COVID-19 Spread,” PEN America, March 18, 2020, https://pen.org/press-release/egyptian-writer-detained-for-protesting-prison-conditions-that-could-worsen-covid-19-spread/.
about the coronavirus.  

Political repression and socioeconomic disempowerment can become powerful drivers for political polarization and dissent. However, a trigger, such as a galvanizing event or crisis, is often needed to move people to violent mobilization. The Salafi-Jihadi “wave” that emerged at the end of the Arab Spring came after a long struggle in the Arab world against the tyrants who rose to power in the oil-based world order. When the hopes of creating a new system based on responsive political institutions and inclusive governance were crushed in the name of countering terrorism, the prophecy gradually became self-fulfilling. The Salafi-Jihadi threat justified the use of the military against civilian targets, and terrorist groups rose to the challenge. The allure of the Islamic State and the apocalyptic promise of the caliphate has to be understood against these developments. Some scholars worry that the pandemic might spark leadership vacuums similar to those that were created by the Arab Spring.

MILITARIZATION AND SHIFTING ALLIANCES

Given its unique strategic role as the epicenter of international rivalry during the Cold War, its natural resource wealth in oil and gas, and its abundance of deadly conflict, it is no surprise that the MENA region is a highly militarized driver of the global arms trade. The Global Militarisation Index shows that, except for Iraq, all countries in the Middle East are among the most militarized in the world, with military expenditures to GDP reaching an average of 5.7%, compared to the global average of 2.2%. During the latter half of the past decade, 35% of all global arms sales went to MENA countries. These post-Cold War purchases were spurred by a mix of political and security incentives: continued regional tensions, domestic insurgencies and terrorism, and the economic incentives for militaries to influence national procurement.

The United States is the single largest arms supplier to MENA since the end of the Cold War. Globally, US arms trade increased by 42% in 2019, to a total of $69.7 billion, the highest level since 2010. Much of that was due to a 118% increase in arms deals to the Middle East, with sales to MENA countries increasing from $11.8 billion in 2018 to more than $25.5 billion in 2019. Fifty-six percent of all US sales to the region went to GCC countries, including the UAE and Saudi Arabia, both active in the brutal war in Yemen.

109 Rana Sabbagh, “Arab Reporters During COVID-19 Lockdown: Life On the Edge,” OCCRP, May 3, 2020, https://www.occrp.org/en/coronavirus/arab-reporters-during-COVID-19-lockdown-life-on-the-edge.
110 Ibid.
111 GMI measures militarization as: relative expenditures to GDP, number of reserves relative to population, and amount of heavy weapons in relation to population. Max Mutschler and Marius Bales, “Global Militarisation Index 2019,” Bonn International Center for Conversion, February 2020, https://www.bicc.de/uploads/tbx_bicctools/BICC_GMI_2019_EN.pdf.
112 “SIPRI Yearbook 2017: Armaments, Disarmament and International Security,” Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 2017.
113 Clayton Thomas et al., “Arms Sales in the Middle East: Trends and Analytical Perspectives for U.S. Policy,” CRS Report, November 23, 2020, https://fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/R44984.pdf.
114 Ibid, 1.
115 Ibid, 3.
116 Dominic Dudley, “U.S. Arms Sales To The Middle East Have Soared In Value This Year,” Forbes, December 16, 2019, https://www.forbes.com/sites/dominicdudley/2019/12/16/arms-sales-middle-east-soar/.
Arms sales can be an important element of state power if used as leverage to enhance the security of key allies, or to constrain and contain enemies. The strong US commitment to Israeli defense and security has served many of those goals. Initially, US military aid to Israel contributed to the overall balancing strategy in the region against the Soviet Union, and more recently it has become an element for countering the Iranian threat. 117 The December 2020 arms deal between the United States and the UAE was arguably both a “reward” for long-time support of US counterterrorism operations against ISIS, but also vital in the larger regional strategy to deter Iran and block growing Chinese inroads into the Middle East defense markets. 118

External military support to a variety of actors in the Middle East comes at great risk, especially as the region faces increased challenges. As Covid worsens societal vulnerabilities and state fragility, advanced military equipment may end up in the hands of insurgents, terrorists, and non-state actors, further exacerbating current tensions. Since militarization is used by many authoritarian regimes as a source of national identity and pride, greater access to advanced systems could lead to a regional arms race between mid-sized powers with conflicting agendas for neighborhood disputes.

While the unresolved Israeli-Palestinian conflict continues to provide the inspiration for violent mobilization and terrorism, the most destabilizing element in the region may still be the centuries-old Sunni-Shia sectarian divide, which drives the Saudi-Iranian rivalry, the GCC relationship with Qatar, and the conflicts in Yemen and Syria. The sectarian divide also contributes to instability in some of the region’s most fragile states, including Iraq and Lebanon, and to a lesser extent Bahrain. 119

The complex web of sectarian ties and cross-regional alliances has led to an alarming number of states in the region being involved in conflict either in their own territory or that of a neighboring state. According to the research institute SIPRI, in 2016, at the height of the recent Middle East instability, seven out of 18 MENA countries deployed combat forces in their own territory, and at least 11 states intervened militarily in the conflict of another country. 120 The three civil wars—in Syria, Yemen, and Libya—drew interventions from 11 out of the 18 states, with five intervening in more than one. 121

While it is impossible to know how much the international arms trade contributes directly to these conflicts, it is clear that any transactions in weapons and military systems will end up in the hands of leaders who have a role in one or more of these conflicts. To put it in perspective, only four out of 18

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117 The request for 2021 encompassed approximately 59% of total requested FMF funding worldwide. Jeremy M. Sharp, “U.S. Foreign Aid to Israel,” CRS Report, November 16, 2020, https://fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/RL33222.pdf, 8; James Kirchick, “Quit Harping on U.S. Aid to Israel,” Atlantic, March 29, 2019, https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/03/american-military-aid-israel-context/585988/.

118 Chinese defense contractors often fill supply gaps for US defense equipment, including drones and air defense systems. See Camille Lons et al., “China’s Great Game in the Middle East – European Council on Foreign Relations,” European Council on Foreign Relations, October 21, 2019, https://ecfr.eu/wp-content/uploads/china_great_game_middle_east.pdf; “Chinese Military Drone Sales Hover over Middle East,” South China Morning Post, February 26, 2018, https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/2134680/chinese-military-drone-display-united-arab-emirates; Tom Kingston, “UAE Allegedly Using Chinese Drones for Deadly Airstrikes in Libya,” Defense News, May 2, 2019, https://www.defensenews.com/unmanned/2019/05/02/uae-allegedly-using-chinese-drones-for-deadly-airstrikes-in-libya/.

119 Jodi Vittori, “Bahrain’s Fragility and Security Sector Procurement,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, February 26, 2019, https://carnegieendowment.org/files/Vittori_Bahrain_final.pdf.

120 Dan Smith, “The Middle East and North Africa: 2016 in Perspective,” in SIPRI Yearbook 2017: Armsaments, Disarmament and International Security, 76.

121 Ibid.
countries in the SIPRI yearbook are not involved in an external conflict, but all four were battling insurgents in their own territory. Thus, not a single Middle Eastern country was entirely free from combat, internal or external. The US deal with Saudi Arabia in December 2020 received bipartisan criticism in the US Congress because of evidence that Saudi jets, using US precision munitions, may have bombed civilian targets in Yemen.

Middle East wars also tend to be highly internationalized and include actors from outside the region with troops or proxies supporting one or both sides of the conflict. Over the past decade, there have been interventions from the United States, Russia, Turkey, and various European states in MENA wars, including Iraq in 2003, Libya in 2006, and more recently against the Islamic State in Syria. While some of these interventions have been stability operations against “illegitimate” or terrorist actors, others had much more sinister agendas.

Turkish and Russian engagements are good examples. With their interventions in both Syria and Libya, their intentions to increase their roles as power brokers in the region seem clear. In Syria, while Turkey is primarily focused on containing the Kurdish forces in the north, Russia clearly sees its intervention as an opportunity to re-establish global influence while supporting its main ally, Bashar al-Assad. In Libya, both countries are allegedly looking for economic dividends from energy contracts while demonstrating a growing appetite for regional domination.

Even targeted counterterrorism (CT) operations with limited goals can have devastating impacts on the humanitarian situation on the ground. While military force can be effective in rooting out terrorism if it targets key operators and leaders, it is often counterproductive when overly punitive measures breed resentment among local communities. Military CT operations also tend to export the problem to neighboring states. Social-science research suggests that, while international interventions in regional conflicts sometimes may be needed for humanitarian purposes, they often lead to higher lethality and longer durations. In addition, a complex web of Middle East factions with fluid alliances means that weapons from external forces sometimes end up in the wrong hands. The rise of ISIS was partially aided by previous US and British military support to Sunni insurgents in Syria and Iraq.

Given this backdrop, and the US administration’s recent drawdown of troops in the region, it is perhaps not surprising that some of the states with the most to lose from decreased US engage-

122 Pieter Wezeman, “Military Spending and Arms Transfers to the Middle East and North Africa,” in SIPRI Yearbook 2017: Armaments, Disarmament and International Security, 2017, 105–15.
123 Dominic Dudley, “U.S. Arms Sales To The Middle East Have Soared In Value This Year,” Forbes, December 16, 2019, https://www.forbes.com/sites/dominicedudley/2019/12/16/arms-sales-middle-east-soar/; Missy Ryan and Karen DeYoung, “Trump Administration Pushes Forward on $500 Million Weapons Deal with Saudi Arabia,” Washington Post, December 23, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/trump-administration-saudi-weapons-deal/2020/12/23/657dc72-4565-11eb-8deb-b948d0931c16_story.html.
124 Nicholas Saidel, “The Middle East Conflict You Haven’t Heard About,” Wall Street Journal, February 9, 2020, https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-middle-east-conflict-you-havent-heard-about-11581277914.
125 Alexander Pearson and Lewis Sanders IV, “Syria Conflict: What Do the US, Russia, Turkey and Iran Want?,” DW, January 23, 2019, https://www.dw.com/en/syria-conflict-what-do-the-us-russia-turkey-and-iran-want/a-41211604.
126 Audrey Kurth Cronin, “How Al-Qaida Ends: The Decline and Demise of Terrorist Groups,” International Security 31, no. 1 (2006): 7–48 (about the claim that Russian military response in Chechnya led to the spread of the conflict into including Ingushetia and Dagestan).
127 Wukki Kim and Todd Sandler, “Middle East and North Africa: Terrorism and Conflicts,” Global Policy 11, no. 4 (2020): 424–38.
128 Seumas Milne, “Now the Truth Emerges: How the US Fueled the Rise of Isis in Syria and Iraq,” Guardian, November 15, 2015, https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/jun/03/us-isis-syria-iraq.
ment felt the need to take things into their own hands and create new security arrangements. The Abraham Accords were announced as a peace deal that would normalize relations between the signatories, but in hindsight we know that it is more accurately described as an arms deal, albeit a significant one. There is no doubt that the proposed sale of nearly $500 million in precision bombs to Saudi Arabia was meant to strengthen the anti-Iran coalition. However, such large arms sales could also destabilize the region by prolonging the Yemeni civil war and, as many US lawmakers pointed out, threatens Israel’s qualitative military edge.

As long as the Abraham Accords remain in place and Iran remains a threat more ominous than Israel for both the UAE and Saudi Arabia, a strong investment in both the Emirati and Saudi defense sectors may help preserve the balance of power. Both countries have a profound interest in preserving their sovereign wealth and their increasingly diversified economies. The UAE, in particular, has already demonstrated a capacity to effectively project power beyond its borders in support of the international counterterrorism efforts against ISIS. It has also created cooperation and trust between major US allies and countered the threat of encroachment on the market by China and Russia.

However, if at a time in the future the authoritarian monarchies of the Gulf are toppled by Islamist or extremist forces, the world might find that we have created military monsters, armed not just with Humvees and jeeps but with F-35s and precision-guided munitions. Even if the normalization process of the Abraham Accords encourages increased economic integration between Israel and the Gulf, and collaboration in industries such as technology and tourism, it is not likely to have significant trickle-down benefits for a vast majority of Arab citizens. The facts that the 2019–2020 Arab Opinion Survey found that 89% of all Arabs believe that Israel poses a threat to security and stability in the region, and that a vast majority disapprove of any recognition of Israel, do not reflect the enthusiasm by which the Arab publics supposedly received the news of the new relationship with Israel.

Covid-19 has both enabled this new regional geopolitical security order and necessitated it for the main stakeholders. The pandemic broke the ideological defense against ties with the Jewish state at a time when the most vocal groups were just not paying attention. The US withdrawal

129 Tova Norlén and Tamir Sinai, “The Abraham Accords: Paradigm Shift or Realpolitik?,” The George C. Marshall Center for International Security Studies, October 2020, 1–15, https://www.marshallcenter.org/sites/default/files/files/2020-10/Security%20Insights%2064%20-%20Norlen%20Sinai%20-%20The%20Abraham%20Accords%20-%20OCT%202020.pdf.
130 “SIPRI Yearbook 2017: Armaments, Disarmament and International Security,” Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 2017, http://gcim.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=cat07243a&AN=mcr.95213&site=eds-live&scope=site; “USA and France Dramatically Increase Major Arms Exports; Saudi Arabia Is Largest Arms Importer, Says SIPRI,” SIPRI, March 9, 2020, https://www.sipri.org/media/press-release/2020/usa-and-france-dramatically-increase-major-arms-exports-saudi-arabia-largest-arms-importer-says.
131 Sheren Khalel, “House Democrats Introduce Bill to Restrict US Arms Sales to Arab Countries,” Middle East Eye, October 30, 2020, http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/house-democrats-introduce-bill-restrict-us-arms-sales-arab-countries.
132 Tova Norlén and Tamir Sinai, “The Abraham Accords: Paradigm Shift or Realpolitik?,” The George C. Marshall Center for International Security Studies, October 2020, https://www.marshallcenter.org/sites/default/files/files/2020-10/Security%20Insights%2064%20-%20Norlen%20Sinai%20-%20The%20Abraham%20Accords%20-%20OCT%202020.pdf; Jeremy M. Sharp, “Israel’s Qualitative Military Edge and Possible U.S. Arms Sales to the United Arab Emirates,” CRS Report October 26, 2020, https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R46580, 5.
133 Mathew Daly, “House Approves Defense Bill with Veto-Proof Margin,” AP News, December 9, 2020, https://apnews.com/article/donald-trump-politics-media-social-media-defense-policy-a51f7777ac2d287c2b3157f1bc75015.
134 “The 2019-2020 Arab Opinion Index: Main Results in Brief,” Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, Doha, Qatar, Nov 16, 2020,” https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/the-2019-2020-arab-opinion-index-main-results-in-brief/#section9
of counterterrorism train-and-assist missions from Iraq and the evacuation of allied forces from Afghanistan is generating renewed political instability, while also creating an enabling environment for terrorist and extremist groups to recruit and re-arm. With high-tech military equipment flooding the market, MENA monarchs and authoritarian leaders have set themselves up for further retrenchment and alienation. Some argue that external military support, such as that of the United States, is needed more than ever in order to stem a new tidal wave of instability and insecurity. Thus, stepping away from supporting the bare bones of counterterrorism measures (train-and-assist) that were still functioning was unfortunate.\textsuperscript{135} Mitch McConnell, the US Senate’s minority leader, predicted that withdrawal would hurt US allies and “delight the people who wish us harm”:

\begin{quote}
The consequences of a premature American exit would likely be even worse than President Obama’s withdrawal from Iraq back in 2011, which fueled the rise of ISIS and a new round of global terrorism. It would be reminiscent of the humiliating American departure from Saigon in 1975.\textsuperscript{136}
\end{quote}

CONCLUSION

The analysis of socioeconomic and political risk factors makes it clear that the long-term effects of the pandemic in the Middle East could be profoundly destabilizing. State fragility is likely to increase, economic opportunities will likely decline while inequalities rise and political freedoms are further curtailed; conditions for renewed radicalization and extremism will likely ripen. A resurgence of Salafi-Jihadism could have devastating effects in a region that is already “trip-wired” by a complex web of regional and global rivalries between authoritarian regimes with access to advanced military technologies. With no expectation of a significant change to the trajectory of US engagement in MENA conflict zones and trouble spots under the Biden administration, the region is potentially on the brink, and more intelligent diplomacy and targeted support will be required to avert disaster.

The first priority should be to identify and address the needs of fragile and failing states. It is a key US and NATO interest that Lebanon and Jordan remain stable and that further security disintegration be prevented. This requires addressing both the pressing socioeconomic conditions that give rise to anti-government sentiments, and the inefficient and subverted political processes that benefit the few at the expense of the many.

Second, ungoverned areas and former conflict zones need to be secured so that Salafi-Jihadi groups are prohibited from rearming, including in Iraq, Syria, Egypt/Sinai, and Libya. There is evidence that ISIS cells are regrouping and recruiting in an area in Iraq that straddles the border between the Peshmerga forces and the government-controlled territory in the center of the country. The restriction on troop movement due to virus-containment measures, as well as the lack

\textsuperscript{135}Meghann Myers, “New in 2021: US Troop Presence Heading down to 2,500 in Iraq and Afghanistan,” \textit{Military Times}, December 28, 2020, \url{https://www.militarytimes.com/news/your-military/2020/12/28/new-in-2021-us-troop-presence-heading-down-to-2500-in-iraq-and-afghanistan/}.

\textsuperscript{136}Eric Schmitt et al., “Trump Is Said to Be Preparing to Withdraw Troops From Afghanistan, Iraq and Somalia,” \textit{New York Times}, November 16, 2020, \url{https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/16/us/politics/trump-troop-withdrawal-afghanistan-somalia-iraq.html}.
of manpower due to quarantine, has exacerbated this situation by giving terrorist groups more freedom to maneuver.\(^{137}\)

Third, the humanitarian disasters that are already taking place as a result of the region’s devastating civil wars need to be addressed. Covid is said to have reached unsustainable levels in some of the most war-torn areas of Iraq and Syria, including Idlib.\(^{138}\) The refugee crisis, the lack of economic opportunities, and the dearth of adequate health services set these areas up for immense suffering. Without an equitable supply of vaccines through the help of international humanitarian organizations, suffering will be prolonged and difficult to prevent.

Fourth, the socioeconomic and political conditions that fuel the political grievances that spark radicalization and extremism have to be improved. There are known pathways between such risk factors and violent mobilization, with the links between similar grievances and the Arab Spring uprisings well documented. Economic inequality and the factors that exacerbate it, including the increasing competition over water and the growing impact of climate change, will not improve unless MENA political elites begin to focus on equitable long-term sustainability. The refugee crisis is particularly urgent to address in this context, as the burden for some of the most fragile state continues to be unsustainable. Collective regional and international efforts to repatriate and rehabilitate refugees and IDP are essential in order to prevent or forestall renewed radicalization among the younger generations.

Finally, given underlying sociopolitical and economic insecurities, regional and global rivalries that could lead to a worsening security dilemma have to be checked. Despite the drop in revenues as a result of the pandemic, militarization will continue as long as the conditions that drive it remain.\(^{139}\) Most important, as long as the ruling elites do not feel the pandemic-induced economic impacts, lucrative military contracts will remain at the top of the agenda while extreme poverty continues to expand. Major arms suppliers (including the United States, Russia, France, and China) must re-evaluate the devastating long-term consequences of staying the course. If the mass demonstrations for civilian government in Algeria and Sudan just before the pandemic tell us anything, it is that the Middle East will remain vulnerable to significant regional instability for years to come.\(^{140}\) The effects of the pandemic on the Middle East could present enormous challenges for regional and global security.

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\(^{137}\) Interview with Iraqi Kurdish Peshmerga officer.

\(^{138}\) “Virus Threat ‘a New Terror’ in Syria’s Scarred Idlib Region,” *Asharq Al-Awsat*, November 19, 2020, https://english.aawsat.com/home/article/2634331/virus-threat-new-terror-syrias-scarred-idlib-region.

\(^{139}\) Charles W. Dunne, “The Arms Trade in the MENA Region: Drivers and Dangers,” Arab Center Washington DC, June 17, 2020, http://arabcenterdc.org/policy_analyses/the-arms-trade-in-the-mena-region-drivers-and-dangers/.

\(^{140}\) 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.