The Mideast after Covid-19: Governance and Geopolitics

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Abstract

Policy makers, political and state elites, and civilian and military cadres have grappled with the unprecedented crisis of Covid-19 in the Middle East and North Africa. Against this gloomy backdrop, the main question became whether the region could sustain its traditional security-first policy even though the definition of security has changed. Could the state perpetuate its role as the arbiter of a broken clientelistic contract in a state-led socioeconomic order? Could geopolitical rivalries be upheld against unprecedented domestic challenges? This article tries to illuminate the changing role of the state in the Middle East and North Africa, the rising salience of institutional good governance, and their effects on regional geopolitics in the aftermath of the pandemic.

The Arab states have been vying for a glimpse of optimism in the aftermath of the so-called Arab Spring. To that end, they have restricted their goals to protecting their national polities from predatory attacks by regional and global actors, including their Arab rivals. They have therefore reduced their initially complex ideals of freedom, good governance, and dignity to a rather traditional securitized political agenda. Yet this fragile settlement was further strained with the arrival of the pandemic crisis in early 2020.

With security priorities changing from defying domestic and external threats to confronting an invisible viral enemy to keeping socioeconomic balances afloat, raison d’état in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) moved from arresting change to responsive action to meeting current challenges. As such, the state will regain its eroding primacy, yet with a vengeance that might overburden it with unprecedented responsibility for good governance. The call for freedom and dignity might also alter its face, this time to mean freedom from sickness and the dignity necessary to live in a healthy and sustainable community under an efficient government of sorts.
Confronting the devastating impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, political actors in the Middle East, to a considerable extent, failed to simplify highly complex and occasionally contradictory political realities into manageable geopolitical abstractions.\(^1\) Contagion crises are not a novelty in the region’s history, but the modern nation-state has had to face it for the first time to such an extent under the watchful supervision of social media. Less and less able to hide behind the traditional pretexts of a colonial legacy, Islamic preaching, late modernization, and democratization and geopolitical threats, the MENA states will have to focus on how to ward off the aftershocks of the pandemic. Covid-19 has forced policy makers to go beyond binary distinctions, images, metaphors, and analogies. By considering how political actors present and advocate their policies in an atmosphere of unprecedented crisis, we can better understand how those actors interpret events and construct their geopolitical knowledge in the making of domestic and foreign policy. In this article, we illuminate the changing role of the state in the MENA region, the rising salience of institutional good governance, and their reverberant effects on geopolitics in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic.

BEFORE THE PANDEMIC

More than a decade after the popular revolts, the MENA region is still beset with conflict, unfinished and hopeless political transitions, and self-doubt and fragmentation. Politically, the quest for a secure and stable regional order has hit the impregnable wall of geopolitical rivalries, reincarnated in ethnic, sectarian, and ideational forms. Moreover, the state systems have been vulnerable to economic and social shocks, failing to perform beyond a decaying clientele-rentier order and far from equipped to manage the aspirations of the youth. Reform has been a catchword, but it could not internalize even a pretense of transparency, accountability, and the long-term goals of efficiency and sustainability. Those measures have usually been in conflict with the short-term agendas of political infighting and the elimination of opposition.

In the hodgepodge of the postcolonial regional order, political borders are still contested, constitutionalism has largely failed, and the legal concept of citizenry with rights and responsibilities is at best a sideshow. These are largely the offshoots of half-hearted modernization, imbued with an irrepressible Arab pride and contentment with the grandeur of Islam’s past glories. Neither effectively modernized nor purely Islamized, the current Arab order has been the epitome of unending transition. The major issue with this self-defeating transitional quest has usually been deemed too important in geostrategic and civilizational terms to be left to its own dynamics. This situation further complicates the essential quest for normalization and overcoming the self-destructive traits of mistrust, security competition, and dependence on foreign powers. In retrospect, the Arab Spring, which turned into the Arab upheaval, could be construed as yet another quest to overcome the mismatch between popular demands and the exigencies of political rule. In this latest attempt, the idea of change cultivated hope, which nurtured protests that engendered authoritarian backlash—and success fed into the illusion of restoring the *status quo ante*. Yet the circular illusion of arresting social change might prove a building block to the next upheaval.

The problem with the current course of events, following the popular revolts and counterrevolutionary reaction, is that the states in transition, largely lacking institutional tools and a culture of national dialogue, have failed to set the stage for national reconciliation. Unable to overcome

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\(^1\) Gearóid Tuathail and John Agnew, “Geopolitics and Discourse: Practical Geopolitical Reasoning in American Foreign Policy,” *Political Geography* 11 (1992): 195.
the challenges, they fell prey to proxy and civil wars, sectarianism, and the threat of political instability. Also, there is a more complex picture of failed transitions ending in state collapse in Yemen, Libya, and Syria, in the reconfiguration of the ancien régimes in Egypt and Algeria, and in the fragile liberalization and democratization efforts in Tunisia. As Szmolka and contributors to her edited volume have underlined, against the foundations of the Arab Spring, political change in general has been defined by further authoritarianism, with a few sectoral exceptions.\(^2\)

Even if not necessarily an offshoot of the Arab revolts, the role and primacy of the state have become a contested issue in MENA. First, the regional states failed to realize their founding ethos of independence and securing an inclusive and appealing modern Arab national identity. This failure marred their ability to pursue autonomous foreign policies for the broader Arab cause and created a void filled by extremist nonstate actors. Second, they hastily turned into police states, repressing social demands and criminalizing the opposition, a process that in turn has been the underlying cause of the quest for freedom, honor, and dignity. Third, security states underperformed in terms of economic and institutional governance, unable to address the vital needs of employment, education, public services, and technology-infrastructure development, let alone a common national identity leading to modernist cultural renewal. Finally, they have become ever more incapable of claiming to act as the upholder of Islam and Islamic identity at home and beyond.

Following earlier half-hearted and inconclusive attempts, a new idea of reform had been in vogue before the pandemic. What transpired in Mohammad Khatami’s Iran and Bashar al-Assad’s Syria at the turn of the millennium, and in Turkey on a different scale—to open up politically and economically to avert internal and external pressures—was epitomized this time in Saudi Arabia with Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman’s efforts to move toward a modern post-oil economy (Vision 2030). Other Gulf countries pursued similar routes, such as Kuwait’s Vision 2035, the UAE’s Vision 2021, and Qatar’s Vision 2030. The showcase of reform went hand-in-hand with parallel attempts to centralize power and defy any possibility of dissidence. As such, it created for Western audiences a confusing image of reform, economic opportunity, and increased control and repression at home.

A feasible path out of these dilemmas is to build upon broader demands for good governance, responsive and transparent public administration, and a general commitment to bettering not only services rendered but the overall functioning of the state apparatus, including the ability to manage hospitals, provide vaccinations, and ameliorate unemployment and economic crisis. Even if this service-providing role might not holistically address the larger identity crisis, it might still heal the acute erosion of state legitimacy and the ticking bomb of disgruntled masses seeking a dignified life. In general, administrative reform, institution building, and capacity development amid the challenges of the Covid-19 pandemic require the strong backing of ruling elites and a keen reform bloc within the bureaucracy and society. Capacity building entails, inter alia, education, training, and legitimate policy goals. For the MENA region, education and training can be handled through state-led initiatives, while the latter requires political legitimacy, which is in short supply.

In the case of significant state reform, the mechanisms of the state’s capabilities result either from administrative capacity that supplements democratic consolidation (Western democracies) or coercive power that advances autocracy (such as in China). According to Mann, coercive power is the “range of actions which the elite is empowered to undertake without routine,

\(^2\)Inmaculada Szmolka, ed., *Political Change in the Middle East and North Africa: After the Arab Spring* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017).
in institutionalized negotiation with civil society groups.”\(^3\) As for administrative capacity, the state would appropriate an alternative preference in order to “penetrate civil society and to implement logistically political decisions throughout the realm.”\(^4\) Both are largely absent from regional experience.\(^5\) The pandemic created opportunity in the MENA region for the state to reclaim itself in either direction. The choice of coercive power does not have to be the default mode; indeed, investing in administrative capacity building, even in an autocratic setting, became a necessity for preserving a hold on power for these states.

The absence of governance capacity and failure to deliver vital services not only lead to the surfacing of observable and comparatively measurable problems in domestic politics, they also diminish the state’s role and profile in regional geopolitics. The pandemic has removed the barriers between domestic and foreign policy. With the shocking arrival of the pandemic against this gloomy backdrop, the main question is, could the MENA order sustain its traditional insistence on security first, even while the definition of security has changed? Could the state perpetuate its role as the arbiter of a broken clientelistic contract in a state-led socioeconomic order? Could the attributional geopolitical rivalries be upheld against the urgency of addressing unprecedented domestic challenges? The pandemic crisis mandates a rethinking of the three pillars of the MENA order: state, governance, and geopolitical competition.

**DYNAMICS OF THE PANDEMIC**

Covid-19 was officially first detected in Iran in February 2020. Keeping its link with China wide open due to suffocating US sanctions, Iran and, at the outset, the city of Qom became the initial epicenter of the pandemic in the region.\(^6\) It speedily hit the surrounding countries and put further strain on already distressed political systems. Over the past two years, the all-encompassing impact of the pandemic has yet to be clearly evaluated. However, the initial assessment points to new vulnerabilities in political systems and health and public services, which are likely to further hinder prospects for stability. The first implications have been economic slowdown, insufficient national capacities, and lack of regional cooperation to fight the virus.\(^7\) The regional order is more than ever defined by self-help-based realism, while the regional leaderships have more reasons to be apprehensive about popular discontent and emerging signs of public grievance.

The fragility of the regional polities, due inter alia to “insufficiently responsive institutions and governance systems,”\(^8\) will now be tested against the spillovers from the pandemic. The region has been in crisis mode, with growing concerns about nepotism, corruption, and the unheeded rule of law, occasionally setting the stage for street protests, armed insurrections, and even civil wars, depending upon a state’s capacity to hold them back. Major societal concerns such as inequality,

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\(^3\) Michael Mann, “The Autonomous Power of the State: Its Origins, Mechanisms and Results,” *European Journal of Sociology* 25, no. 2 (1984): 188.

\(^4\) Ibid.

\(^5\) David Andersen et al., “State Capacity and Political Regime Stability,” *Democratization* 21, no. 7 (2014): 1305.

\(^6\) “Three Gulf States, Iraq Report First Coronavirus Cases, Linked to Iran,” Reuters, February 24, 2020.

\(^7\) Ali Mokdad, Mohammed Hassan and Khalil, Muhamed Almaliky, “Health, Politics, and Stability in the Middle East: A COVID-19 Update,” Washington Institute for Near East Policy, August 7, 2020, [https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysishealth-politics-and-stability-middle-east-covid-19-update](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysishealth-politics-and-stability-middle-east-covid-19-update).

\(^8\) “The Impact of COVID-19 on the Arab Region: An Opportunity to Build Back Better,” United Nations, July 2020, [https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/sg_policy_brief_covid-19_and_arab_states_english_version_july_2020.pdf](https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/sg_policy_brief_covid-19_and_arab_states_english_version_july_2020.pdf).
the use of public resources for competing interests, and increased mistrust of state authority also pointed to the need for strong and autonomous institutions.\(^9\)

Without doubt, the economies of the region have been hit hard; almost all countries were facing negative growth, a rise in inflation and a diminution of state coffers as of the end of 2021. Moreover, the decline in tourism revenues and labor remittances on top of lower oil prices (which have only lately started rising) have undermined regional economic revenues. The MENA region’s fiscal measures have also fallen short of revitalizing national economies.\(^10\) The sustainability of the sociopolitical order will depend on health-care facilities, which surely need institutional capacity building and investment; they directly correlate with state legitimacy and the ability to normalize in the age of Covid-19. With limited financial resources in hand, the regional countries will have a hard time responding to increasing socioeconomic demands, which will put further strain on state systems.

Naturally, the cost of the pandemic has not affected all countries equally. The hydrocarbon-rich states in the Gulf, above all Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar, were able to hedge their reserves and national-wealth funds, even if they had to scale down public expenditures, defer investment and reform plans, and restructure their official development assistance and loans to regional countries. In the particular case of Lebanon, the Saudi decision to keep its distance from the financial crisis, even for geopolitical reasons, aggravated political instability in the country. Jordan and Egypt were also burdened by the lower remittances and financial assistance from the Gulf; this led to street protests in Jordan and Lebanon, and slowed economic growth in Egypt.\(^11\) Kuwait, Oman, and Bahrain also faced financial conundrums due to the decline in oil prices and signaled looming deadlock against the uncertainties of political succession to the younger generation. Looking at the Covid-related disorder in the countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), the numbers are considerably lower in these countries than in the others. This situation does not imply a change from previous patterns of state-society relations—basically, state dominance over the civilian sphere.

The pandemic worsened the ongoing humanitarian crisis in conflict-embroiled states, above all Syria, Yemen, and Libya.\(^12\) They have been facing the double burden of civil war compounded by incessant geopolitical rivalries and virtually ineffective state power, as well as minimal international attention for much-needed humanitarian assistance. Lebanon and Iraq were also among the hard hit, even if the main issue has been the ongoing malfunctioning of their respective political systems. Both have been in political deadlock and unable to bring much-needed harmony among sectarian and factional interests or to broader US-Iran and Iran-Saudi confrontations.

Israel also had a hard time meeting the challenges wrought by Covid. Despite early awareness of the threat and pursuit of lockdown measures, the country went through three waves of the pandemic. A political stalemate, after three inconsequential elections, was partially resolved with a fragile coalition government formed a year into the crisis, March 2021. This engendered anti-government protests and polarization between Orthodox Jews, who resisted the preventive measures, and more secular elements. The Israeli government’s unwillingness to relax restrictive measures, and more secular elements. The Israeli government’s unwillingness to relax restrictive measures.
measures against the Palestinian population and the continuation of the blockade of Gaza not only worsened the economic paralysis in the country but also undermined the prospects for eventual peace between Israel and Palestine.

Iran and Turkey have had varying degrees of spillover from the pandemic. Iran was the worst hit in the region due to unprecedentedly stringent (what Iran called “brutal”) US sanctions as its financial transactions and oil sales literally came to a halt, except for the black market in oil and goods. Unable to enforce lockdowns, Iran had to face a health-care crisis with minimal access to international medical equipment and an overwhelming load on its normally functional national health system, the extent and depth of which seems far greater than official figures indicate. 2020 will be registered as the *annus horribilis* for Iran, which started with the assassination of Qasem Soleimani in Baghdad and the IRGC’s shooting down of a civilian Ukrainian plane; continued with the heavy social and economic costs of the pandemic and nuclear-sabotage attempts, including attacks on facilities inside the country; and ended with the assassination of a renowned nuclear scientist on the outskirts of Tehran. Despite harsh rhetoric in response, Iran appeared resigned to wait for the passing of the Trump era.

Turkey also faced economic hardships due to the pandemic, which aggravated the country’s alarming current-account deficit, public and private debt, and diminishing foreign-currency reserves, on top of an economic slowdown of all export-led domestic production. The effective closure of the tourism and services sectors has further depleted state coffers and worsened the growing unemployment problem. Despite its well-functioning health system, Turkey’s road to normalization appeared longer than expected. The Turkish case is unique because, as a market economy, its government turned to political success stories, not economic welfare and the reorganization of institutional capacity against the pandemic, to divert public attention to geostrategic “victories” from the Caucasus to the Eastern Mediterranean.

Covid-related disorder is high in Iran and Turkey despite the use of coercive state measures in these countries. The protests and other displays of discontent indicate the degree of disappointment in the management of pandemic-related problems. The amount of disorder events in other countries followed the same trend under the extraordinary conditions of the pandemic. However, none of them faced anything close to upheaval, and the states controlled the discontent. The significant observation drawn from the disorder data is the degree of societal restraint in challenging the state; the idea of an adjusted state role as a necessary evil is taking hold among peoples across the region.

**THE STATE STRIKES BACK**

In the most recent geopolitical upheaval in the region, state legitimacy was contested on all fronts, from conventional security provider to flagbearer for the common good. The popular revolts demanded change to ensure civil rights as well as aspirations for a better life. Even in its aftermath, people settled for yielding to state authority. This was effectively ensured through repression, not out of conviction but to ward off further chaos and insecurity. Political borders were also contested, with a decreasing role for central authority and growing claims from armed militias, warlords, sectarian and religious leaders, and tribal elders, particularly in conflict-embroiled states. In others, centralization attempts went hand in hand with elite suppression, whereby the ruling classes were put under the yoke of strongman rule. Even the earlier exception of Tunisia caught up with the trend, suspending the cabinet and parliament in August 2021. Despite certain illusions of the
state’s being back in control, many also believed that states were unable to impose their visions on societies and that the next wave of protests was imminent.\textsuperscript{13} Yet, despite the odds emanating from the insurmountable dynamics of the pandemic, the concept of “the state as the problem” might cede its place to lesser-evil thinking, such as “the state is the (possible) solution.” Even while trust in state authorities is low, responsibility for the burden of the pandemic will fall primarily on those entities. As Heisbourg underlines, “The twentieth-century state as an allocator of resources and economic manager is making a comeback.”\textsuperscript{14} No other group or organization has the resources and authority to address a health crisis of this magnitude with its spillover effects on all walks of life. As in other cases, the pandemic made “state power visible… in ways that many citizens had never experienced before.”\textsuperscript{15} States enforced lockdowns, travel bans, and shop and factory closures, as well as banned community prayers, using their tremendous authority to encroach on all aspects of life. This went hand in hand with the public expectation that all necessary measures would be taken against the pandemic. The state’s role as the savior came to the forefront with the expected health services, ensuring the supply of personal protective equipment—above all, masks—and treating acute cases. The vaccination campaigns beginning in late 2020—starting in Israel and the UAE, and later in Bahrain, Morocco, Qatar, and Turkey—put national authorities at the helm, given that vaccines could only be procured and distributed by states.\textsuperscript{16} Various economic sectors were also dependent on state support to stay afloat in the face of closures and economic slowdowns. The unemployed, including those working in the large unofficial economy and those living below subsistence levels, looked to the state to sustain their livelihoods.

The ultimate question, however, is whether the MENA states were ready to fulfill such a gargantuan task. With obvious inefficiencies and mismanagement, the MENA states would have to rise up to address burgeoning political and socioeconomic problems. If the first two years of the pandemic are a benchmark, the MENA region has broadly appeared able to absorb the first shock in terms of economic indicators, even if unemployment is a major concern. Despite an across-the-board slowdown in growth and with declining revenues from tourism, remittances, and oil, they either employed their reserves (Gulf states) or received international assistance through the IMF (Egypt, Tunisia, Jordan, and Morocco)\textsuperscript{17} to make up for financial losses. Yet the sustainability of this uneasy equation is a big question mark. As Dabrowski and Domínguez-Jiménez emphasize, the major structural problems of “labor participation and unemployment, education, and military spending”\textsuperscript{18} are stumbling blocks against economic development, a situation that undoubtedly has worsened throughout the pandemic.

\textsuperscript{13} Paul Salem, “Why the Arab Spring Failed—And Why It May Yet Succeed,” \textit{Time}, January 5, 2021, https://time.com/5926292/arab-spring-future/.

\textsuperscript{14} François Heisbourg, “From Wuhan to the World: How the Pandemic will Reshape Geopolitics,” \textit{Survival} 62, no. 3 (June/July 2020): 10.

\textsuperscript{15} Sami Moisio, “State Power and the COVID-19 Pandemic: The Case of Finland,” \textit{Eurasian Geography and Economics} 61, no. 4/5 (2020): 600.

\textsuperscript{16} Yasmina Abouzzohour, “One year of COVID-19 in the Middle East and North Africa: The Fate of the ‘Best Performers,’” Brookings Institution, March 22, 2021, https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2021/03/22/one-year-of-covid-19-in-the-middle-east-and-north-africa-the-fate-of-the-best-performers/.

\textsuperscript{17} Marek Dabrowski and Marta Domínguez-Jiménez, “Economic Crisis in the Middle East,” Bruegel, January 21, 2021, https://www.bruegel.org/policy-brief/economic-crisis-middle-east-and-north-africa.

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid.
Against such a backdrop, the issue of “the quality of government,” or good governance, is likely to dominate political agendas. The pandemic will possibly disrupt the post-Arab Spring equation: security in exchange for nonrepresentation in national politics. The question of governance—not only to provide a livelihood, but to protect people’s lives during the pandemic and provide a sustainable living in its aftermath—would again become a primary issue. This time, however, it would leave no comfortable space for state authorities to differentiate between conventional security threats and other political issues. Popular demands for security from illness, a basic source of income, safe and accessible education and public services, and, more depressingly, the contours of reopening will directly correlate with political legitimacy. As such, state-capacity building and governance per se are likely to turn into security issues.

Yet, the political regimes in the MENA region have been fighting this hide-and-seek game for a long time. The Arab revolts a decade ago were testaments to popular demand, which had been seeking an outlet for pressure. In fact, the failure of normalization—i.e., meeting popular demands rather than prioritizing internal and external security threats—did not lead to the vaporization of the demands. Rather they were either suppressed at home or found other outlets, mainly emigration. The governance problem is at the core of the need for Arab transformation. The pandemic crisis might have aggravated its urgency.

Can the MENA states rise to this task? At least state authorities are becoming more aware and trying to respond. The responses of the policy makers were reflected in the domestic landscapes and foreign policies toward the new challenges and risk environment. The common element in the emerging narratives is mainly the recognition of the primacy of the state in the fight against the pandemic. The measures might go in two directions. The main trend is to exploit the situation to consolidate the authoritarian hold on power at home. This line of thinking prefers to avoid taking lasting measures against the pandemic and to deal with stopgaps to save the day. Alternative thinking pays attention to the requirements for a performative state to tackle novel problems. Putting pressure on policy makers to shift their attention to governance issues is unprecedented in the MENA region in the recent era.

For those who appropriated the first rationale, the ultimate role is about using authority to crowd out popular demands and nonstate actors’ possible roles in governance. Yet saddling the state with the insurmountable task of addressing immediate questions of providing services to alleviate the harms of the pandemic has panicked state elites. At home, this psychology has led to zero tolerance for any sort of opposition and meager room for domestic cooperation and coalition-building. Abroad, it has meant giving up any pretense of consistency in foreign policy to seek possible support to stay secure in power and afloat financially.

This gloomy backdrop was visible in the unending elite infighting in Lebanon, which has effectively brought the state to near collapse. In Iraq, not only did the divide between Baghdad and the federal units widen, but the central government was kept in limbo, lacking a common vision, even among the majority Shiite political parties. In Egypt, despite power consolidation since the coup in 2013, the Sisi government was far from assured of its hold on power and appeared poised to attack any internal threat. In Jordan, rising popular grievances and protests against the government were followed by what was presented as an in-palace coup attempt, which again seemed to aim at the elimination of any royal or political opposition.

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19 Fareed Zakaria, *Ten Lessons for a Post-Pandemic World* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2020), 29-55.

20 “Nearly 20 Arrested in Alleged Plot against Jordan’s King Abdullah II,” *Washington Post*, April 3, 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/jordan-coup-abdullah-plot/2021/04/03/2a517ed2-9498-11eb-a74e-1f4cf89fd948_story.html.
paused due to the pandemic, returned, but the political establishment and the opposition parties have still been unable to reach a sustainable formula for the post-Bouteflika era. In the final analysis, political infighting rather than capacity building and institutionalization might have set the stage for coups d’état or new street protests, both of which will further aggravate the delicate balances in the MENA region.

As examples of the second line of reasoning, the young Saudi leadership, despite all reports of killings, hotel prisons, and harsh policies to eliminate threats, seems aware that the economic structure requires transformation. Qatar organized its first legislative elections in October 2021. The electorate voted for 30 of 45 members of the Shura Council, which, according to the constitution, shall assume legislative authority, approve the general policies of the government and the budget, and exercise control over executive authority. Qatari rulers aim to achieve authentic representation and legislative power within the political system, a significant move in the direction of representative rule and good governance.

In Tunisia, President Kais Saied sacked the government, suspended parliament, and usurped a range of executive powers. He appeared to be on the pre-2011 course of re-establishing strong presidential rule by decree. Tunisia’s economic and social problems hit bottom with polarization, spiraling inflation, and fast-growing unemployment under the worsening pressure of the pandemic. His designated prime minister, Najla Bouden, was tasked with promoting foreign investment and improving the economic situation to tackle the pandemic. Saied’s bold move, putting aside implications for Tunisian democracy, aims to stabilize the domestic landscape and remove the structural barriers to the generation of governance capacity.

The UN-led process in Libya resulted in creation of an interim government with the duty to prepare the country for the elections in December 2021. The interim rulers face many problems in their attempts to unify the country’s divided institutions, pursue reconstruction plans, and stabilize the country for an acceptable election without delay. Despite this glass-half-full picture, one sees conflict de-escalation, warlords running for election, and many parties to the decade-long crisis envisioning reconciliation and inclusive government in Libya. Yet the highly ambitious December 24 scheduling of the elections did not work, and questions abound regarding the prospects for political transition.

Elections in Iran empowered a regime confidant. The Iranian establishment has a concern for the future of the regime in the looming question of the successor to the ailing supreme leader, Ali Khamenei. In this sense, President Ebrahim Raisi, as an ideal partner in regime consolidation through his working with the leader, will be a caretaker in case of Khamenei’s passing and might be considered a probable candidate to replace him. The Iranian state apparatus aims to keep its monopoly on administrative decisions and form a capable government to prove the efficiency of its rule, which still depends on a sustainable opening in relations with the international community, above all the United States.

In this wider picture, the reductionist roadmap, which appears to have omitted the need for political and social change leading to a transition to a performance- and delivery-oriented state culture and a “vibrant society,” is at best dubious in a high number of countries in the region. However, such initiatives indicate an elite (even top-down) attempt to steer the call for good governance. Such top-down and selective modernization projects usually end up only in deserted

21 “Algeria’s Protests Are Back and the President Is Worried,” BBC News, February 20, 2021; also see Yahia H. Zubir, “Can Algeria Overcome Its Long-Lasting Political Crisis?” Brookings Institution, January 15, 2020, https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2020/01/15/can-algeria-overcome-its-long-lasting-political-crisis/.

22 See Vision 2030 of Saudi Arabia, https://www.vision2030.gov.sa/en.
concrete buildings. Yet the history of regional modernization has been a top-down process from the very beginning. The crux of the issue is whether the Arab states could reform themselves to respond to popular demand for good governance and open up channels for making sure people’s voices are heard. It is a long road in any case, but the pandemic crisis might facilitate the reckoning.

GEOPOLITICAL COMPETITION

Covid-19 further aggravated a tumultuous phase in MENA geopolitics, with added uncertainties. The region, from Algeria to Lebanon, Jordan, and Iraq, seemed in early 2020 to be on the cusp of a new series of protests, which came to an uneasy halt with the advent of the pandemic. Initially, there was the expectation that the states’ priority would be securing citizens’ lives, thereby sidelining or curtailing involvement in conflicts. The current geopolitical structure faces the challenges of the pandemic through three dynamic developments that have been shaped in the wider context. These are UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres’s call for a global ceasefire, the evolving regeneration of US foreign policy under President Joe Biden, and, in consequence, renewal of the power rivalries in the region.

The first geopolitical change was Guterres’s appeal for “a global ceasefire” in March 2020.23 Yet, despite some early positive responses, the call fell on deaf ears, particularly in Syria, Yemen, and Libya.24 However, despite an early pause in the intensity of conflict following the secretary-general’s appeal, the regional setting immediately turned back to power rivalries and the perpetuation of regional conflicts.

The second change in the new era was the end of the Trump administration, with the pandemic in the United States being credited to a large degree for his departure. The Biden presidency, even before the inauguration of January 20, 2021, compelled regional states to alter their geopolitical calculations. The four-year-old Gulf crisis came to an official end at the Al-Ula Summit of the GCC in early 2021. The Saudi leadership recalibrated their policy toward a possible US return to the Iran nuclear deal. There were also certain moves to prepare the ground for the inevitable political successions in the Gulf states, from Riyadh to Kuwait City and Muscat, to adapt to changes in regional geopolitics.25 A similar test of uncertainty applied to Turkey, which also sought to realign its foreign-policy positions to set the stage for an understanding with the Biden administration, though without much success. The geopolitics of the MENA region seemed open to both peaceful settlement and confrontation. The Biden administration’s political commitment to returning to the Iran nuclear deal and its public denunciation of Saudi Arabia, particularly over the war in Yemen, resembled a revival of Obama-era dynamics that built on seeking an Iran-Saudi balance to minimize US commitments.26 However, neither Iranian hopes nor Saudi fears have materialized. Instead, the new US administration appeared somewhat hesitant to take a decisive step on the Iranian question and appeared softer than expected on Saudi Arabia.

23 “COVID-19: UN Chief Calls for Global Ceasefire to Focus on ‘The True Fight of Our Lives,’” UN News, March 23, 2020. https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/03/1059972.
24 “Attempts for Middle East Cease-Fires amid the Coronavirus Crisis Have Not Stopped the Fighting,” Los Angeles Times, April 3, 2020.
25 Bülent Aras and Emirhan Yorulmazlar, “King-Making amid the Gulf Crisis,” Gulf Studies Center, no. 42, February 2021.
26 Jeffrey Goldberg, “The Obama Doctrine,” The Atlantic, April 2016, https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/04/the-obama-doctrine/471525/.
The third influential trend in regional geopolitics, beyond the US inclination toward retrenchment, is the development that “nation-states are the ultimate and increasingly exclusive authorities in international relations set to prevail”\(^27\) in the post-pandemic era. Indeed, with limited international cooperation, great-power rivalries prioritizing domestic consolidation, from the EU to Russia, the United States, and (partly) China, and the resultant go-it-alone policies everywhere epitomized the so-called vaccine nationalism. This is a new order of self-help, in which each nation-state is fighting for its own survival. In the MENA region, this dynamic has both encouraged regional states to seek minimization of conflict and speeded up regional competition and enmity to fill the growing void in shifting geopolitical strategies. As such, the regional states appear uninhibited by foundational conflicts, such as the Palestinian question, and are open to new coalitions and accepting of any assistance to weather the storm.

The policy makers in the MENA region started to extend overtures for mediation, conflict resolution, and animosity reduction. An emboldened Qatar sought a mediation role between Iran and the United States, as well as between Saudi Arabia and Turkey, while Oman brought together warring parties in Yemen. There were hints that Saudi Arabia might soften its stance against Tehran,\(^28\) but it still appeared reluctant to move forward despite five rounds of talks with Tehran held in Iraq. Turkey also sought the possibility of repairing ties with Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and the UAE. In response, the top UAE security official and crown prince of Abu Dhabi, Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, visited Turkey and met with President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. These visits resulted in multibillion-dollar trade deals and mutual declarations of political will to normalize relations. There have been mid-level official meetings between Ankara and Cairo for the same purpose. Saudi Arabia also made an immediate call for a ceasefire in Yemen, which followed the Biden administration’s public pressure toward that end and its decision to reverse the terrorist designation of the Houthis. The UAE’s normalization with Israel, followed by those of Bahrain, Sudan, and Morocco, pointed to a new era of realpolitik adjustment to a post-pandemic era. Only two years ago, at the beginning of the pandemic, the Gulf crisis was going on unabated, despite various mediation attempts. Regional polarization was at new heights, with Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Egypt openly standing against Iranian and Turkish interests in the broader region. The change toward finding common ground exemplifies how an unprecedented crisis changed the geopolitical reasoning and prompted a problem-solving narrative in the region, which also symbolized an adjustment to evolving US foreign policy.

The conciliatory inclinations in the new regional narratives of policy makers gradually find their expression on the geopolitical stage. The challenge is to reconcile this regional vision with the novel self-help dispositions of the nation-states. The prevalent mood of state elites is currently a panic that paves the way for new modes of cooperation. Yet cooperation is mostly tantamount to suspending a number of conflict dynamics, without eliminating or removing their root causes. The Abraham Accords with Israel were packaged as a historical step toward peace. While the end of the Gulf crisis meant Qatar’s return to the GCC fold, the divergences persist. In the aftermath of the Al-Ula summit, Qatar was initially able to seek cooperative ways to restore diplomatic ties and commercial investment with Riyadh and Cairo. A lasting peace requires clearing away mistrust, and the ongoing indecisiveness of the UAE and Saudi rulers is a major barrier against

\(^{27}\) Bulent Aras and Emirhan Yorulmazlar, “The Day after COVID-19: Capacity, Governance and Order,” Istanbul Policy Center, July 2020, 1.

\(^{28}\) “Gulf Reaches Out to Erdogan in Wary Move to Ease Tensions,” Bloomberg, February 4, 2021.
taking concrete steps. Despite the close cooperation on several issues, the Saudi decision to force foreign companies to move their headquarters to the kingdom was construed as a blow to Dubai’s role as a regional hub.\(^{29}\) In Yemen, the Saudi-UAE divergences were also becoming more visible. The anxiety over survival and the search for risk minimization and common ground coexist in a dialectical format in regional politics.

**CONCLUSION**

Facing the unprecedented crisis of Covid-19, policy makers, political and state elites, civilian and military cadres, and intellectuals and opinion leaders, among others, have used geopolitical reasoning to create causal narratives that help them interpret crises. Policy makers—based on the logic of their reasoning, values, and state capabilities—formulated strategies to respond to crises.\(^{30}\) They were drawn into a process that operated in both international and domestic decision-making as the crisis penetrated into the states and shaped their political trajectories. Trying to simplify complex geopolitical realities through narratives replete with binary distinctions, images, metaphors, and analogies turned into a difficult task.\(^{31}\) Despite early dismay about the risks and political implications of the crisis, the regional leaderships seemed to believe they could quickly restore the traditional state of affairs. This article argues that, with a re-emphasis on the state as a primary agent of policymaking after the pandemic, the need for a performative state and responsive action by governments entails taking into account popular demands and aspirations, a cause that would be best served by good governance and institutional capacity building. The dominant attitudes have instead been an expedited attempt to consolidate power, defy the opposition, and hedge against geopolitical risk, upholding the security state to sustain political rule.

The domestic political trajectories will face the predicament of this unbridgeable gap between the need for addressing popular concerns and the political urge to uphold the status quo. The geopolitical reasoning that sustains such traditional policy making not only endangers the stability of political regimes but also runs the risk of feeding into the regional structural polarization. At the crossroads of an evolving US global role and the return of great-power rivalries, regional states are tested against both domestic and geopolitical pressures to face the spillover from the pandemic crisis. Notwithstanding whether it is populist, authoritarian, or any other form of government, the absence of good governance, institutional capacity, and necessary—even urgent—state services would result in difficulty to hide failure on the part of the political regimes. The pandemic took the opportunity from the hands of leaders to depend on simple and familiar storylines and geographic generalizations, concealing their own political objectives and values to gain public approval for their preferred policies. Their rhetoric will only make sense if they can generate institutional capacity, empower performative states, and implement measures against the spread of the virus and address its socioeconomic implications. Absent responsive action, failure will be imminent and obvious.

\(^{29}\) “Foreign Companies Pushed to Site Regional HQs in Saudi Arabia,” *Financial Times*, February 16, 2021.

\(^{30}\) G. Tuathail and J. Agnew, “Geopolitics and Discourse: Practical Geopolitical Reasoning in American Foreign Policy,” *Political Geography* 11, no. 2 (1992): 190–204.

\(^{31}\) Gearóid Tuathail, *Critical Geopolitics: The Politics of Writing Global Space* (London: Routledge, 1996).
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