The Politics of Coronavirus: Inequality, Repression, and Conflict

Nadim Houry
No one can predict the full impact of the unfolding Covid-19 pandemic on the MENA region, but three issues deserve close attention.

MENA was already the world’s most unequal region. While the virus doesn’t distinguish between people based on wealth, income level affects coping mechanisms. Workers across the region in low-income jobs don’t have the ability to work remotely nor do they get paid when absent. As confinement endures and economies enter into recession, the poorer segments of society – which are the majority of citizens – will be hurt disproportionately. Refugees and migrant workers will also find it impossible to cope with the fallout. Yet, none of the region’s governments seems to have a plan on how to minimize the economic harm or tackle the growing divide in their societies.

Covid-19 will also have a political impact far beyond what one can expect in other parts of the world. The pandemic has already managed to empty the streets of protesters in Algeria, Lebanon and Iraq, and we have seen the region’s armies reclaim public squares in the name of implementing confinement measures. The fear is that autocratic regimes will use the pandemic to strengthen social control, including through measures promoted as necessary to control the virus but that in fact also track the movement of protesters and dissenters.

Finally, the region still has three active conflicts in Libya, Syria, and Yemen that have devastated health infrastructures and left millions displaced. If the virus spreads in these countries, it will wreak havoc. One could hope – that faced with this invisible foe – warring parties and their external backers would seize the moment to try and end the conflicts. This may sound hopelessly naïve, but maybe the virus will succeed in focusing the minds of the region’s warlords in ways that years of suffering by their population failed to.

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- We mobilize stakeholders to build coalitions for positive change

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