



Arab Reform Initiative

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The Politics of Coronavirus: Inequality, Repression, and Conflict

→ Nadim Houry





Arab Reform Initiative

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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About the author



Nadim Houry

Nadim Houry is the executive director of the Arab Reform Initiative (ARI). Prior to ARI, Nadim was at Human Rights Watch (HRW) for 13 years where he started and ran HRW's Beirut office for a decade before taking on the role of director of HRW's Terrorism and Counter-terrorism Program. During his time at HRW, he worked across the MENA region, particularly on Lebanon, Syria, Egypt, Iraq, and Jordan on a range of human rights issues ranging from freedom of expression to abuses by security forces to labour rights. He has conducted extensive research in conflict zones and his writing often focuses on the themes of governance and accountability. A passionate advocate for change in the region, he has addressed the Security Council and the European Parliament on challenges in the Arab world. A lawyer by training, Nadim worked in the UN as Deputy Counsel for the Volcker Commission which conducted investigations into allegations of corruption into the Oil-for-Food Program in Iraq and was previously a lawyer.

About Arab Reform Initiative

The Arab Reform Initiative is the leading independent Arab think tank working with expert partners in the Middle East and North Africa and beyond to articulate a home-grown agenda for democratic change. It conducts research and policy analysis and provides a platform for inspirational voices based on the principles of diversity, impartiality and social justice.

- We produce original research informed by local experiences and partner with institutions to achieve impact across the Arab world and globally
- We empower individuals and institutions to develop their own concept of policy solutions
- We mobilize stakeholders to build coalitions for positive change

Our aim is to see vibrant democratic societies emerge and grow in the region.

Founded in 2005, the Arab Reform Initiative is governed by a Plenary of its members and an Executive Committee.

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