

DECEMBER 2020

# CURRENT HISTORY

A Journal of Contemporary World Affairs



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# CURRENT HISTORY

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COMING IN JANUARY

## Global Trends

DESPITE THE UNIVERSAL THREAT posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, most wealthy nations have ignored calls for international cooperation to ensure that every country has access to a vaccine. Instead, they have rushed to place pre-orders for all the doses they can secure, spending billions—even before any vaccine has been proved to work. But if much of the world's population is left unprotected, will anyone really be safe? Meanwhile, with schools closed in many countries, online education companies have seized the moment to gain a foothold inside the virtual classroom, raising questions about inequitable access and algorithmic discrimination. Can innovation deliver all of humanity from the pandemic, or will it merely profit the few? *Current History's* January issue will cover these and other global trends. Topics scheduled to appear include:

- **Can Vaccine Nationalism Be Tamed?**  
Ana Santos Rutschman, Saint Louis University
- **The Perils of a Rush to Online Learning**  
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- **The Meat Industry Returns to the Jungle**  
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- **China's New Global Engagement Model**  
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- **The Decline of US Global Leadership**  
Pauline Jones, University of Michigan
- **White Supremacists and Jihadists**  
Marwan M. Kraidy, Northwestern University
- **Ancient and Modern Pandemic Interpretations**  
Eileen Hunt Botting, University of Notre Dame

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# CURRENT HISTORY

December 2020

*“Securing the throne for Mohammed has been the main driver of many policies sold to the public as reforms that would transform Saudi Arabia. . . .”*

## Brute Force and Hollow Reforms in Saudi Arabia

MADAWI AL-RASHEED

The contradiction between reform and repression provides a useful prism through which to view Saudi Arabia under King Salman bin Abdulaziz and his son, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. But it can be a distorting lens if the observer is not careful. Many respectable academics, media pundits, and policymakers have argued that this duality is inevitable: reforming the Saudi economy and society is necessarily a violent process that must be carried out by an authoritarian, even brutal, new ruler. Such suggestions that repression is a necessary precondition for social reform—establishing a more tolerant form of Islam than Wahhabism (the puritanical Sunni doctrine long promoted by the kingdom), gender equality, a vibrant liberal economy, a fun culture, and empowered, entrepreneurial youth—draw on defunct notions of oriental despotism. Embedded in this outdated paradigm is the mistaken belief that a socially conservative, religiously radical, and economically lazy society will never shed the shackles of the past without coercion.

Saudi Arabia needs to be understood better than the conventional wisdom’s credulous reception of successive monarchs and their visions for transforming the country from tradition to modernity, with an inevitable degree of repression. The Saudi regime is, in fact, an autocracy in which only a superficial social liberalism is allowed to flourish.

When he became king in 2015, and then named his son crown prince two and a half years later, Salman missed an opportunity for a genuine

relaunch of Saudi Arabia. During the reign of his predecessor, King Abdullah (2005–15), calls for political reform were already common and growing louder. Saudi activists, Islamists, and feminists demanded improvement of the country’s human rights record, freedom for political prisoners, and empowerment of women. Some also pushed for transforming the absolute monarchy into a constitutional one, restricting the royal household’s privileges, and establishing an elected national assembly to replace the old appointed consultative council.

After limited easing of restrictions on press freedoms, civil society enjoyed a fleeting moment of optimism that some of these demands would be met. But King Salman and his son had more urgent priorities: establishing the crown prince as the new face of Saudi Arabia, consolidating his power, and eliminating rivals for the throne. Securing the throne for Mohammed has been the main driver of many policies sold to the public as reforms that would transform Saudi Arabia from a radically conservative society into one that promotes openness, tolerance, and economic liberalism.

### POWER MOVES

Since 1933, the succession to the Saudi throne has been horizontal, moving from one son of the founder of the monarchy, Ibn Saud, to another, without necessarily following seniority. Neither foreign observers of Saudi royal politics nor Saudis themselves expected Salman to skip the handful of surviving senior brothers or eligible second-generation princes when it came to selecting his successor.

Within months of taking the throne, Salman had promoted his nephew, Mohammed bin Nayef,

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to the position of crown prince, while appointing Mohammed bin Salman, one of his own youngest sons, deputy crown prince. Rumors about a rivalry between the crown prince and his deputy were rampant, and observers expected the conflict to break out into the open. In June 2017, Salman exercised his prerogative as an absolute monarch and one of the eldest surviving sons of the nation's founder to remove Nayef by royal decree and elevate his son to heir apparent.

Saudi Arabia can now truly be called *al-mamlaka al-salmaniyya*, Salman's kingdom, as it has been dubbed by commentators astonished at the speed with which the king shifted the succession in favor of his own son. Salman has yet to appoint a new deputy crown prince, setting up Mohammed, who is just 35, to be the monarch for a very long time. Mohammed's own sons are now expected to succeed him in turn. The crown prince is already the de facto ruler of the kingdom, though he cannot become the de jure monarch until his father, now in his mid-eighties, passes away.

Within months of his elevation, Mohammed detained several senior princes in the Ritz-Carlton Hotel in Riyadh, including the powerful Miteb bin Abdullah, a son of the late King Abdullah who was in charge of the National Guard. A dozen members of the business elite were also imprisoned. Mohammed presented this drastic measure and unprecedented humiliation as part of a campaign against corruption, but few were convinced. Perhaps suspecting that his relatives had felt sidelined by his sudden ascent, he may have wanted to show that he was capable of ruthlessness if anyone dared challenge his newly acquired powers.

None of the detainees appeared in open court; they settled matters privately with the crown prince and his private aides and secretaries. They were gradually released after paying what were essentially ransoms, turning over their assets to the state treasury. Mohammed appropriated huge sums—reportedly over \$100 billion—from the detainees. None of the prince's other cousins were detained, reflecting the selective nature of the purge and belying the anticorruption pretext. In addition to sending a chilling warning to potential rival princes, the detention of some of the most senior members of the ruling family and the seizure of their assets sent a stark message to the

Saudi people about how far the young crown prince was prepared to go in his determination to become the undisputed future king.

The detention of princes was the first such act in the history of the kingdom, but not the last. Prince Ahmed, the king's brother, and the deposed crown prince Nayef, together with a handful of others, faced a second round of detention and interrogation in March 2020. The successive waves of humiliation and coercion may reveal insecurity on Mohammed's part about his standing in the absence of royal consensus on his leadership. The main threat to his power, he seems to believe, is neither a revolutionary movement nor the demands of activists for political rights, but fellow members of the royal family.

Salman still occupies the throne, but he has retreated from view and from the centers of power due to his advanced age and deteriorating health. In August 2020, when he was discharged from the hospital after minor surgery, he took up residence in NEOM, a futuristic city under construction on the Red Sea. He had previously presided at major state

events and banquets when foreign dignitaries visited the kingdom, and he stepped up his appearances during emergencies. Yet in the summer of 2020, when crises ranging from the COVID-19 pandemic

to plunging oil revenues hammered the kingdom, he seemed to have abandoned the capital, leaving his son in charge.

The crown prince has wasted no time consolidating his hold on power, claiming an array of other titles, including second deputy prime minister, minister of defense, chief of the royal court, and chair of the councils on political and security affairs and economic development. He also heads various newly created foundations and organizations for the promotion of art, entrepreneurship, and youth empowerment. Thus, he now oversees domestic political decision-making, regional and international relations, and security, intelligence, financial, and even cultural matters. No other prince has ever held so many positions at such a young age. Yet he still cannot count on rival princes to accept their marginalization and humiliation.

## UNSETTLING VISION

To consolidate his cult of personality and burnish his image as a champion of reform,

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*While pledging to empower youth, Mohammed has made them targets of repression.*

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Mohammed needed to stage a charm offensive designed to show the world a new, modern Saudi Arabia. As part of this public relations campaign, the Saudi and international media were given unprecedented access to the crown prince. He was photographed attending festivals and concerts, enhancing his reputation as a young, enlightened, and energetic future monarch guiding his country through a great revolution.

This narrative of a top-down national transformation is embedded in Vision 2030, which Mohammed first announced in early 2016 in interviews with two foreign media outlets, the *Economist* and Bloomberg News. After Saudis posted criticism online about his decision to announce such an important initiative in foreign publications, and in English, he outlined his agenda two months later, in April 2016, on the Saudi-owned Al Arabiya television network, whose owner was among those detained at the Ritz Carlton.

The most controversial provisions of Vision 2030 included a plan to raise capital by privatizing 5 percent of Saudi Aramco, the national oil company, in an initial public offering (IPO) of shares, while curbing welfare benefits and subsidies. Defending those proposals to a skeptical national audience, Mohammed noted that Saudi Arabia had stood up to British colonialism at a time before the nation's vast oil reserves were discovered, suggesting that it should now be unfazed by dwindling oil revenues. Vision 2030 would diversify the economy, he explained, and in the meantime, increasing Aramco's transparency, as required by a stock offering, would enable it to generate more revenues for the state. Most of the rest of the company would be privatized at a later date, he implied. The IPO eventually took place on the local stock market.

Jamal Farsi, Isam al-Zamil, and Abdul Aziz al-Dakhil were among many economists and intellectuals who voiced their criticism online and in lectures attended by members of the educated Saudi elite. They objected to selling the nation's main asset to foreign investors. The three were soon arrested, and were still in prison in 2020.

## ILLUSIONS OF OPENNESS

As part of his social reform program, the crown prince pledged to restore a moderate form of Islam in Saudi Arabia. Mohammed alleged that the state religion had been corrupted by Saudi Islamists since 1979, when jihadists besieged the Grand Mosque in Mecca. But his attempts at

liberalization, implemented without any consultation or debate, have proved controversial.

Salman imposed restrictions on the infamous Committee for Commanding Right and Prohibiting Vice, known as the religious police. He also revoked the law that prohibited women from driving.

Other steps toward gender equality were also top priorities. Greater visibility for women in public and private sector employment would help present a picture of reform. The guardianship system was relaxed, allowing women to take jobs without the permission of their male guardians, which had previously been required. However, such a permission requirement remains in place for marriage and foreign travel. In 2019, official newspapers announced that a committee had been formed to study the possibility of abolishing the guardianship system for women ages 21 and over.

A succession of royal decrees also led to greater openness in public spaces—men and women began to intermingle freely in offices, malls, stadiums, and coffee shops. But at the same time, the crown prince has pursued an unprecedented crackdown on civil society, detaining intellectuals, economists, university professors, journalists, feminists, and, above all, Islamists of all shades. Any criticism of his social, economic, and religious policies, or of his regional strategies, such as the war in Yemen, moves to isolate Qatar, and clandestine but close ties with Israel, became taboo.

After successive waves of arrests since 2017, hundreds of detainees have languished in prison, including religious scholars of the Islamist movement, such as Salman al-Awdah and Safar al-Hawali, and the prominent feminist and women's rights activist Lujain al-Hathloul. Young activists who have been critical of national leaders on social media were also targeted. While pledging to empower youth and women, Mohammed has made them targets of his pervasive repression.

To contain young people and foster creativity, the crown prince has attempted to co-opt the arts. He founded the Prince Mohammed bin Salman bin Abdulaziz Foundation (MISK), which provides arts funding and, according to its website, is "devoted to cultivating learning and leadership for the Saudi Arabia of tomorrow." To serve as chairman of the MISK Initiative Center and head of his private office, Mohammed selected Bader al-Asaker, who gained international notoriety in 2019 when he was linked to a scandal involving an attempt to infiltrate Twitter to uncover the

identities of critics of the Saudi regime. Saudi dissident Fuad Ibrahim has alleged that MISK is a cover for espionage and related activities “linked to the crown prince.”

Perhaps the most controversial component of the Vision 2030 social reforms is the General Entertainment Authority, headed by another of Mohammed’s close aides, Turki al-Sheikh, who was previously in charge of sports. He immediately launched an ambitious entertainment program that staged events featuring Arab and Western pop stars, circuses, and other acts at newly constructed stadiums and concert halls. Saudi youth had previously been deprived of such offerings.

However, a global campaign by human rights activists to name and shame Western pop stars who accepted invitations to perform prompted several to cancel their appearances. Only days before Nicki Minaj was scheduled to perform at the Jeddah Festival in the summer of 2019, she announced on Twitter that she had “educated” herself about Saudi Arabia’s record on human rights and LGBTQ rights, and decided to pull out.

For their part, some Saudis, expressing their views in the only way they can—anonymously and online—condemned the provocative shows organized by the Entertainment Authority and the way the new norms were imposed without consultation. To fend off the criticism, the Authority announced that it had organized a competition, open to all Muslims, in Quran recitation and the call to prayer, with a generous prize of 12 million riyals (more than \$3 million).

## MURDER IN ISTANBUL

While many older activists and young people in Saudi Arabia, preferring silence over detention, have withdrawn from the public sphere in the face of repression, those abroad have felt freer to speak out. But the October 2018 murder of the journalist Jamal Khashoggi in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul demonstrated how far the crown prince would go to pursue critics abroad.

Khashoggi had requested a document confirming his single status so he could marry his Turkish fiancée, Hatice Cengiz. By the time he arrived to pick it up three days later, a rapid intervention squad had been dispatched from Saudi Arabia on a secret mission to assassinate him. After entering the consulate, the journalist was never seen again.

His body was reportedly chopped up and disposed of, either by dissolving it or by packing it into plastic bags for shipment back to Saudi Arabia.

Khashoggi had been living in the United States since 2017, working as a columnist for the *Washington Post* and regularly criticizing Mohammed’s policies and repression. He was apparently regarded by the crown prince as a national security threat because he had been closely associated with senior princes, having served as spokesman for Saudi ambassador Turki al-Faisal in Washington and London. Khashoggi had been a supporter of King Abdullah but was marginalized after Salman ascended to the throne in 2015.

The journalist’s cruel murder exposed Mohammed’s bold talk about empowering women, restoring moderate Islam, and opening up society and the economy as hollow propaganda. The carefully marketed image of the crown prince as an energetic reformer, fit to lead a youthful society in the twenty-first century, was replaced with a darker picture of a ruthless and brutal autocrat.

## EXILE VOICES

Mohammed’s campaign of repression has driven an increasing number of Saudis to seek asylum abroad. Data collected by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees show a rise of more

than 300 percent in the number of Saudi asylum seekers, from 200 in 2012 to 815 in 2017. Many other Saudis, fearing persecution if they return, stay abroad in a state of forced self-exile without applying for asylum. (Self-exile may be a misnomer, since they often have little choice.) Jamal Khashoggi was one of them. It is only when their passports expire and Saudi embassies refuse to renew them that they might feel compelled to apply for asylum.

The growing but still small number of asylum seekers does not worry the regime. But their increasingly effective activism abroad is a cause for concern. Since Khashoggi’s murder, dissidents abroad have successfully engaged in lobbying at the United Nations, the European Union, and the US Congress, playing a central role in stirring a backlash against Mohammed’s methods.

The government has pursued multiple strategies to silence them. The assassination of Khashoggi represented one tactic. An internal study conducted after the murder recommended a less

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*Increasingly effective activism  
abroad is a cause for  
concern to Riyadh.*

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confrontational approach. Emissaries from the regime have called dissidents, informed them that the crown prince wants a rapprochement, and invited them to return. Some have accepted the overtures, and the government has publicized their returns to encourage other exiles to follow suit.

But so far, dissidents have not returned in great numbers. In fact, the Khashoggi murder precipitated a new exodus. Another internal government report, which is not publicly available, predicted that the number of exiles would rise to 50,000 by 2030.

Despite the negative publicity generated by the gruesome murder of Khashoggi and the detention of young feminists, the regime continued to pursue exiles. Saad al-Jabri, a former intelligence officer, alleged in a lawsuit in US federal court in August 2020 that the Saudi regime had sent a squad to assassinate him in Canada shortly after the Khashoggi killing. He also said two of his children had been detained in Riyadh in a ploy to force him to return from exile.

## A DIFFICULT YEAR

The crown prince's economic and social reforms were seriously undermined in 2020 by two global crises. Vast domestic expenditures and generous international investment will be needed to implement his agenda, but government revenue has been hit hard by a decline in oil prices, which began in 2014 and accelerated in the spring of 2020. Mohammed contributed to the slide by continuing to pump oil into a sluggish global market in an attempt to punish Russia for refusing to agree to production cuts.

The loss of revenue deprived Mohammed of the funds he needed to pursue his various projects, including NEOM, the new city by the Red Sea. That project was tarnished by the killing of a member of a local tribe, Abdul Rahman al-Huwaiti, who had refused to relinquish his land for the development and was shot dead in his house during a confrontation with police in April 2020. The biggest hurdle, however, has been the reluctance of international investors to back the project after the Khashoggi murder. Far from realizing the grand designs for a city of the future, NEOM may turn into a Saudi version of Egypt's Sharm el-Sheikh resort, where aging, deposed leaders find luxurious refuge away from the public eye.

In anticipation of rising budget deficits, Saudi authorities announced in July 2020 that the value-added tax would increase from 5 to 15 percent.

A cost-of-living allowance for public sector employees was suspended. The government may be forced to resort to further austerity, such as reducing public sector jobs or cutting the salaries of state employees.

Such measures alone may not be enough to prevent a fiscal crunch, but their political implications are even greater. The Saudi social contract rests on an authoritarian bargain. The government provides extensive services, such as public sector jobs, education, housing, health care—and now, under Mohammed, entertainment and leisure opportunities. In return, citizens are expected to pledge allegiance to the leadership, accepting their total political marginalization, disenfranchisement, and even repression as the price that must be paid for security and affluence. A fiscally constrained regime may find it harder to uphold its end of the bargain.

Along with the oil crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic reached Saudi Arabia early in 2020. The rate of infection rose steadily among the Saudi population, and was even higher among the more than 10 million immigrant workers residing in the country. By August, around 300,000 cases and over 3,000 deaths had been reported. Lockdowns and curfews were imposed in various cities.

The measures to contain the virus included suspending prayers at the Grand Mosque in Mecca, curtailing the religious tourism that the crown prince had hoped would increase as part of his effort to diversify the economy. The authorities announced in June that the hajj, the annual pilgrimage to Mecca, would be “very limited” in 2020: much fewer than the usual number of more than two million Muslim pilgrims from around the world would be allowed. Tourism initiatives in other parts of the country also received a heavy blow from the pandemic's disruptions to international travel. The entertainment program for 2020 was put on hold as Saudis retreated to the safety of their homes and foreign performers canceled scheduled appearances.

## FOREIGN MISADVENTURES

Like his domestic initiatives, Mohammed's foreign policy has been both aggressive and ill-judged. The war in Yemen has been raging since 2015, when the Saudi military commenced airstrikes against Iran-backed Houthi insurgents seeking to oust a government supported by Riyadh. It continues with no end in sight. Saudi Arabia has pledged funds to help rebuild the devastated country on its southern border, but conditions in Yemen



keep deteriorating. The warring parties agreed to a cease-fire in June 2020, yet there is still no sign of a pause in the cycle of Saudi airstrikes and Houthi retaliation. In August, Houthi missiles reached Saudi territory once again.

Meanwhile, the suffering of the Yemeni people, who have already endured a massive cholera epidemic during the war, is compounded by the coronavirus pandemic. Saudi Arabia's military engagement in Yemen is a stain on its foreign policy. In the past, Riyadh had prided itself on deploying peaceful and diplomatic means to secure its national interests.

There have been other foreign policy blunders, notably the stalemated effort to isolate Qatar and the apparent fragmentation of the Gulf Cooperation Council, the intensifying regional rivalry with Iran, and increasingly tense relations with Turkey. The ineffectiveness of Saudi foreign policy was striking in the response to the peace agreement between Israel and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) announced on August 13, 2020. Saudi Arabia kept silent on the matter until August 18, when Foreign Minister Faisal bin Farhan announced that the kingdom would continue to insist on a long-standing Arab peace proposal, which deems recognition of Israel impossible unless Jerusalem becomes the capital of a new Palestinian state, Israel withdraws to its pre-1967 borders, and Palestinians in the diaspora are granted the right to return to what is now Israel. Although the foreign minister suggested that the king would not rush to follow the UAE's lead, Riyadh maintains relations with Israel that the Saudi leadership prefers to keep secret.

A Saudi endorsement of normalizing relations with Israel would have given US President Donald Trump a much-needed boost in his bid to cast himself, in the closing weeks of his reelection campaign, as a peace broker. But if the Saudi regime were to publicly acknowledge its military, surveillance, and technological cooperation with Israel, it would risk the ire of its own citizens. Nonetheless, an Israel–Bahrain agreement soon followed the UAE announcement, and was seen as likely blessed by Riyadh, given its influence over Bahrain.

## TEST OF LEGITIMACY

The era of Mohammed bin Salman has begun with an unprecedented wave of repression and an array of proposed reforms. Since 2015, domestic

politics has revolved around these opposing poles: moves toward liberalization of social and economic policy, coupled with criminalization of any political discussion or debate. The crown prince sought to roll back the state and move away from a state-centered, oil-dependent economic model. Yet he has only increased state control over the economy, society, and media.

An autonomous (or at least semiautonomous) public sphere vanished as Mohammed introduced his own initiatives targeting every aspect of public life, including the arts and entertainment. Controlled social change has been imposed from above on a society deprived of the ability to stage resistance, engage in debate, or express its own aspirations. Highly publicized initiatives have failed to camouflage an autocratic drive to silence critical voices, narrowing the margins of free speech even further.

Despairing for Saudi Arabia's future under this duality of reform and repression, more young people are fleeing the country for safe havens abroad. This is a challenge for a society unaccustomed to exile and forced migration. Fear has settled over

exiles since the Khashoggi assassination, even those in relative safety overseas. But the murder prompted more young Saudis to leave and become more vocal in their criticism of the regime.

The mobilization of exiles to join demonstrations outside Saudi embassies and consulates in North America, Europe, and Australia, and to lobby international actors to pressure the regime to release prisoners of conscience, has only just begun. Saudi exiles have also become an active presence on social media, where they challenge regime narratives and highlight its severe abuses of human rights.

While this incipient diaspora is still fairly powerless, it is proving to be an embarrassment for the crown prince. The murder of Khashoggi demonstrated the regime's determination to silence Saudis even when they leave the country. Hacking into social media accounts and posting threatening messages on exiles' accounts has become part of a deliberate policy of intimidation. Without a serious reconsideration of Saudi domestic politics and pressure from the international community, many more Saudis will decide to flee the country and continue their struggle for a better life from abroad. This has already become a thorny issue between

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*Fear has settled over exiles since the Khashoggi assassination.*

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Riyadh and its Western partners, as more exiles seek refuge in countries that support the regime.

The real test for the crown prince's legitimacy will follow the death of King Salman, the aging figurehead who has promoted and protected his ambitious and aggressive son. Saudi Arabia will stand at a crossroads, faced with a decision: either open the political sphere to genuine public participation and representation, or become a bastion of repression camouflaged as reform. If it chooses the latter, scandals such as the Khashoggi murder will become the norm. But Mohammed appears unlikely to change his autocratic approach.

The long-term prospects of the contradictory strategy of reform and repression are bleak. It will

lock Saudi Arabia into a spiral of violence and retaliation, alienating the youth that the regime supposedly wants to empower. With dwindling oil income, increased borrowing, and an ongoing pandemic, the future king may not be able to promise greater spending on welfare and services in order to pacify an agitated populace—and the old authoritarian bargain will become untenable. He has already started taxing a population not accustomed to paying high rates for consumption, and has abolished a monthly subsidy to which state employees felt entitled. Unless the crown prince changes his ways, an implosion of the regime may become inevitable, with implications reaching far beyond Saudi domestic affairs. ■

“[M]istrust of official proclamations on the virus seemed like a reasonable attitude for many citizens to take.”

## Pandemic Politics in Iran

KEVAN HARRIS

**W**oe unto all of us who held unshaking prior beliefs about politics and society at the onset of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic. No overarching theory of regime type, ideological doctrine, or cultural norms seemed to explain the national variation of COVID-19 cases across the globe, let alone in the Middle East. In Iran, where the early transmission of the disease outside of East Asia was followed by repeated waves of deadly infection across the country, a series of preexisting factors arguably compounded the severity of the pandemic. This list includes a long-grinding economic recession, a draconian system of financial and trade sanctions imposed by the United States, a weary population mistrustful of official directives, and an uneven reach of government capacity to limit domestic travel and social gatherings inside the country.

By the end of September 2020, Iran had reported an official COVID-19 death toll of over 26,000 individuals—a death-to-population ratio of roughly 330 per million. Compared with regional peers such as Saudi Arabia (144 per million), Turkey (104 per million), and Egypt (59 per million), the spread of SARS-CoV-2 in Iran has been particularly stark. Moreover, judging by available data on excess mortality, there has been an undercounting of COVID-19 cases, which seems only partially due to a lack of rapid confirmatory testing and weakened hospital capacity to absorb the severely ill.

Yet a humbling caveat is warranted before we briskly jump into *schadenfreude* at the struggles of a state that has long vexed antagonists. And by we, I most certainly include those living in wealthier countries such as the United States, which has lurched into a disaster of hegemony-ending

proportions. While the politics surrounding the virus in any country is related to the distribution of perceived blame and praise for the disease's social ramifications, the degree of spread across populations is not foreseeable according to a known set of determinants. The transmission of SARS-CoV-2 proceeds through stochastic behavior: randomly distributed but not predictable in advance.

Small sets of events can unevenly transmit the coronavirus while other groups pass through dense gatherings unscathed. A handful of “super-spreading” episodes can tip the luck of a neighborhood, city, or country in a worse direction than adjacent areas. Well-intentioned policies like wide-scale testing and contact-tracing of positively identified cases may be frustrated by the randomness of viral spread through some group clusters but not through other face-to-face networks.

As observable numbers of cases and hospitalizations inch lower, state officials claim sage insight and vindication of their policy choices; when the numbers soar upward, the same officials and policies are assailed by criticisms from all sides. In this sense, Iranian pandemic politics is also too stochastic to confidently foretell the long-term aftermath of COVID-19 in the country, whenever the pandemic finally subsides. The country, after all, already was facing a heavier burden of political and economic challenges than most.

### AN ECONOMY GONE VIRAL

Whether measured by income growth, non-oil trade, employment rates, or state coffers, the Iranian economy benefited from the tenuous geopolitical truce afforded by the July 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), negotiated between the Islamic Republic and the permanent members of the United Nations Security Council plus Germany. The accord was designed to place Iran's nuclear enrichment program under an

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unprecedented level of international scrutiny. In exchange, it lifted economic sanctions. Over several years, a provisional coalition of center-left and center-right actors inside Iran had painstakingly built the internal political consensus needed to prevent a spanner from being thrown into the deal's workings by any of the state's loosely connected power centers. The exercise of such a veto would have dashed the agreement.

The promise of JCPOA-induced economic growth underpinned by a stable, albeit nondemocratic, political order looked appealing enough to many Iranian citizens in a region beset by state collapse, armed conflict, and the unintended consequences of social unrest. Buoyed by a year of economic recovery driven by oil exports, rising confidence among domestic investors, and a stabilization in foreign exchange rates, President Hassan Rouhani was reelected by a 19-point margin in May 2017 on the hope that his administration could minimize threats from the implacably hostile US administration of Donald Trump while keeping a firm hand on the tiller amidst domestic political infighting.

By most accounts, Rouhani failed on both fronts. The Trump administration unilaterally withdrew from the JCPOA in May 2018 and flipped the sanctions switch back on. A month earlier, anticipation of US-enforced strictures on oil exports precipitated a run on the Iranian currency, the rial. Iran's central bank and the Rouhani administration could allay the inflationary pain by restricting and subsidizing the currency market, but no salve was permanent.

Small producers and traders across the country pushed up prices, hoarded assets, and speculated through arbitrage across different commodities. The formerly exuberant animal spirits of domestic investors reversed. They were further unnerved by a near-zero trickle of European investment or trade entering into the country. Although European powers feigned an independent foreign policy approach to keep the nuclear agreement on life support by creating a financial channel to bypass US sanctions, the outcome was so paltry that it gave further ammunition to the JCPOA's critics inside Iran.

With the revenue-starved state budget tightened by austerity measures, and no loans to be had from US-disciplined institutions such as the

International Monetary Fund, living standards and income levels were already in decline by the time SARS-CoV-2 entered Iran. The global spread of recession further depressed demand from neighboring countries for Iran's non-oil exports, such as plastics, minerals, and natural gas. These constraints on the fiscal policy toolkit were the context for the Rouhani administration's decision to stress the revival of employment and production in June 2020, after the first wave of infections receded, as a priority equal to the enforcement of health and safety measures.

After all, partly as a consequence of the pre-pandemic campaign by the United States to drive Iran's economy into decay, the government faced a devil's bargain that pitted economic resuscitation against the safeguarding of public health. Most developing countries, including democracies ranging from India to South Africa to Mexico, were soon confronted with the same bargain. Since there can be no satisfactory outcomes on either side of this ledger for Iran, Rouhani and his dwindling group of political supporters are bearing the brunt of criticism in the run-up to the presidential election in 2021.

## THE CENTER COMES UNDONE

Iran's 2013 election was similar to most elections in presidential systems. Rouhani won a majority of voters that year by corraling together a motley mix of backers hard to fit into a single ideological mold. Established political figures on the center-left and center-right supported him against other conservative candidates after the discomfiting tenure of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, an erratic conservative populist who held the presidency from 2005 to 2013. Rouhani was also eventually backed, often reluctantly, by civic organizations and non-state associations that could mobilize turnout across the country.

The building of this coalition required considerable horse-trading and an even greater amount of promise-making. To some degree, online and offline oppositional networks fostered by the 2009 post-election "Green movement" protests were awakened and mobilized for the 2013 electoral campaign. Yet the popular base of the coalition that elected Rouhani was far wider than any straightforward grouping such as, say, the Iranian "middle class."

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*The 'middle class' in Iran has rarely acted as a coherent pro-democratic force.*

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Indeed, according to the nationally representative Iran Social Survey, fielded by this author in 2016, neither education nor income usefully predicted vote choice in the 2013 election. (See my article in the 2020 edition of the annual review *Political Power and Social Theory* for a more extended discussion of these findings.) Instead, individual-level data on reported vote choice suggests that *key political cleavages in Iran ran within social classes, not between them.*

Just as self-characterized middle-class individuals around the world are periodically wooed by populist leaders and with nondemocratic policies, I would contend that the “middle class” in Iran, measured by educational attainment or income level, has rarely acted as a coherent pro-democratic force, despite being commonly portrayed as such by Western journalists and Iranian intellectuals alike. Instead, the political coalitions that drove support for relatively liberalizing or democratizing candidates in Iranian elections over recent decades have been flimsier and more fickle than most prefer to admit.

The 2013 coalition was one such example, bound together by Rouhani’s promises to rely on technocratic expertise in economic affairs and deliver incremental improvements in social and political rights. Although the 2016–17 JCPOA period of economic revival exhibited a possible path where this coalition could have held together, fracture lines were already visible. Even before the pandemic, socially liberal “reformist” politicians argued that Rouhani was skimping on his commitments to tame the state’s heavy policing of media criticism, public culture, and domestic activism.

Conservative politicians weaponized long-running debates over bureaucratic nepotism and fiscal transparency, previously wielded against them, into catch-all accusations of corruption against the entire political class. Reminiscent of Xi Jinping’s early tenure as Chinese leader, numerous state officials enthusiastically egged on anticorruption drives that resulted in high-profile figures across the political spectrum being put on trial for embezzlement and squandering public assets. As of 2020, according to the current head of the judiciary, Ebrahim Raisi, over 1,000 individuals had been sentenced for “financial corruption.”

Yet unlike the purges inside the Chinese party-state, which consolidated Xi’s power over his opponents, the outcome in Iran may have contributed to a deepened anger against the Islamic Republic in general, without producing any strategic victor.

Months after Rouhani’s reelection, street protests broke out across most provinces in December 2017 over economic grievances and were put down by internal security forces and riot police. The countrywide unrest had a powerful reprise in November 2019, spurred by a hike in fuel prices amid a sanctions-induced recession and an austere fiscal response.

True to form, politicians from all sides accused each other of intentionally fomenting the protests, even as they also claimed to hear the popular cry for economic justice. This was the climate in which the pandemic blew into Iran, which partly explains why mistrust of official proclamations on the virus seemed like a reasonable attitude for many citizens to take.

### SNEEZING LIKE A STATE

As in other countries facing the pandemic, Iran’s government tried to carve out a middle road between public health stringency and economic survival. To the credit of the health ministry and trained staff across the medical system, the disease was destigmatized in the public sphere to encourage individuals to report symptoms and be aware of how transmission occurs. After an initial shortage of protective equipment, sanitizing agents, testing kits, and medical supplies, the country’s long-stagnating industrial capacity was mobilized to domestically produce what could not be acquired on international markets because of US sanctions on financial transactions as well as the global rise in demand for the same goods. Lockdown protocols were communicated via public channels, public employees were sent home, outdoor mask-wearing was promoted, and a collectivist spirit of nationalist mobilization was encouraged.

However, government responses to new hot-spots in border zones and far-flung provinces were haphazard and lagging. Cross-country travel for spring holidays and summer pilgrimages was loosely regulated. Schools and universities were allowed to open in September, partly due to the fact that an estimated 30 percent of the student population lacks access to the Internet and is unable to attend classes online. As a third wave of infections crested in the fall of 2020, the government finally mandated the public use of masks across the country, threatened to fine taxi drivers and business owners who did not comply with masking directives, and banned public gatherings, including weddings and wakes.

Policy responses on the economic front were not insignificant, even if they could only act as a buffer against the compounding effects of business closures and income loss. The Ministry of Cooperatives, Labor, and Social Welfare issued a one-time cash transfer of approximately \$43 to 22 million households via mobile phone apps, and a monthly transfer worth \$10–\$25 to the poorest 2 million households. The government also offered a large program of loans for firms that retained at least one worker on their payrolls, reportedly taken up by over 5,500 employers. Although the government touted these measures as wide-ranging, only time can tell how effective any of them have been.

With each successive wave of the pandemic, peaking in March, July, and September, the political recriminations against the Rouhani administration grew louder. Mostafa Moin, a physician and former minister of science from the reformist camp, lauded the country's health workers but lamented the lack of planning for their protection and a dearth of proper medical equipment. By the time he spoke out, at least 180 health workers had died of COVID-19 in Iran. Moin argued via numerous media outlets that an immediate public explanation of what was known about how transmission of the virus occurred, along with a strict quarantine of initial hotspots and a consistent repetition of health information, could have halted the spread, as China, Australia, and New Zealand had achieved with such measures.

Former Tehran mayor and Revolutionary Guards officer Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf, currently the conservative speaker of parliament, claimed on Twitter in April that he had warned the government that it was being too optimistic about its control over the situation, even while it “procrastinated” over the implementation of needed restrictions. Masih Mohajeri, a prominent cleric and editor of the daily newspaper *Islamic Republic*, noted that while religious pilgrims were largely obeying the official health warnings, the government had not banned unnecessary travel outright. Unlike poets, who only can advise, Mohajeri chided, officials have the power to prevent the negligence of people whose behavior may endanger the public.

In June, Leader and Supreme Jurist Ayatollah Ali Khamenei lamented that the situation was

eroding national prestige: “Iran was hailed as a successful country in the world at first [when the initial wave subsided], but it was short-lived and currently some officials and some of the public have become slack.” The analogy he turned to for explaining state failure was, unsurprisingly, corruption: “The only difference between the coronavirus and the virus of corruption,” Khamenei stated, “is that the coronavirus can be washed off from hands but the only way to tackle corruption is to chop off the hand of the corrupt.”

To some extent, public understanding of anti-coronavirus health measures and methods of prevention has become widespread in Iran, though acquired in tandem with mounting exhaustion over public restrictions and frustration with government policies. According to polling in Tehran carried out by the Iranian Students Polling Association (ISPA), 70 percent of respondents claimed to have lost income after the first month of the pandemic. In a subsequent ISPA survey, 12 percent of respondents attributed the pandemic to divine anger, 15 percent to a conspiracy against Iran by

other countries, 17 percent to a lack of hygiene among the population, and 26 percent to the weakness of the government. Those who attributed the disease spread to either public or state carelessness were also more likely to be concerned about catching the

disease and willing to implement public health directives. Follow-up surveys over the summer and fall noted that Tehran citizens’ stated concerns about themselves or their families becoming infected with the virus tracked roughly with the rise and fall in cases.

Who can capitalize on these calamities is still an open question, especially now that the ruptured segments of the political establishment that backed or opposed Rouhani are jockeying in preparation for 2021 presidential election. Consider the possibility that a conservative coalition, newly sutured together from the past decade’s fragmented politics, puts forth a decently competitive candidate who runs on a campaign of economic revitalization and calls for honoring the newly martyred souls who battled the pandemic as diligently as an earlier generation fought the Iraqi Baathists. Alternatively, consider the chances of a candidate sufficiently distanced from Rouhani but with mildly reformist bona fides who can

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*Iran’s government tried to carve out a middle road between public health stringency and economic survival.*

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repackage earlier promises by blaming the centrist old guard and championing the cadres who mobilized against the coronavirus. Each could obtain backing from state power centers to protect his flanks, and each would hold that a chastened post-Trump America would more likely negotiate with him than with his opponent.

Perhaps either scenario is unlikely. After all, forecasting elections in Iran, even months in advance, is a fool's game. Yet the reason it is foolish is that politics in Iran can be stubbornly stochastic. Like the pandemic that is plunging the country even deeper into misery, Iran's politics are becoming more unstable and unpredictable. ■

“Public health authorities in the Gulf have long considered labor migrants to be a high-risk community.”

## Migrant Workers Bear the Pandemic’s Brunt in the Gulf

ZAHRA R. BABAR

At the global level, the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed not only the fragility of public health capacity, but also the persistence of systemic social inequalities. Both North America and Europe, with comparatively robust public health systems and social policy frameworks broadly designed to be inclusive, have provided mounting evidence that minorities and immigrants suffer disproportionately from the effects of COVID-19. The coronavirus itself is not racist or classist in nature, but the outcomes it produces have starkly illuminated preexisting social and economic divides in the countries it afflicts. It has brutally dismantled any residual public complacency that human well-being and health care are somehow sacrosanct, and spared from the worst of our biases and behaviors. This pandemic drives home the dismal fact that there continues to be a strong correlation between one’s status and identity in any given society, and how exposed one is to a disease and its worst outcomes.

If governments and citizens in the West were caught off guard by the fact that COVID-19 seemed to target certain communities more than others, the similarly disproportionate impacts of the pandemic on subcategories of populations in other parts of the world were greeted with less surprise. In the six Arab monarchies of the Persian Gulf, the virus hit lower-income migrant worker communities faster and harder than it did other segments of society. The Persian Gulf monarchies for many decades have hosted a migrant population that is proportionately among the largest anywhere in the world.

Recent estimates suggest that there are some 35 million international migrants present across the six Gulf states, out of a total population of 54 million. Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and Oman host sizable cohorts of migrants, while migrants massively outnumber locals in Kuwait, at 70 percent of the population, and in Qatar and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), at nearly 90 percent. Based on the logic of these demographics alone, it was almost unavoidable that the virus would launch a direct and ferocious onslaught on migrant communities once it reached the shores of the Persian Gulf.

But particular features of the regional migration system, and the patterns of exclusion and exploitation that it engenders, heightened migrants’ vulnerability to the disease to an extent even beyond what their numerical density could account for. A large cohort of people living in immediate proximity to one another, working in blue-collar jobs that put them in regular and sustained contact with employers, coworkers, and customers, and lacking sufficient and timely access to health care, suddenly encountered a highly contagious, previously unknown, and potentially deadly disease. In these circumstances, what’s remarkable is not that the COVID-19 infection rate among Gulf migrant workers was so high during the spring and early summer of 2020, but rather that it did not spiral out of control. The gravest consequences of the disease remained relatively in check.

### CLOSE QUARTERS

When COVID-19 first started spreading through the region in February, the cases initially identified were primarily linked to groups of travelers who had recently been to China, as well as pilgrims who had returned from Iran. Much as in other parts of the world at the time, these first

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Gulf cases were people who had traveled internationally to one of the early epicenters, presumably caught the disease there, and brought it back home with them. But within a matter of a few weeks it was no longer residents and citizens returning from China or Iran who were sparking concern among Gulf authorities. Lower-income migrant workers were the new focus.

Public health authorities in the Gulf have long considered labor migrants to be a high-risk community. This is partly because many of them come from countries where infectious diseases are endemic, but also because their living arrangements and occupational conditions while in the host state make them far more susceptible to being exposed to (and spreading) infectious diseases. These realities are reflected in the targeted disease-screening measures imposed on migrants at regular intervals, including in their home countries prior to their arrival in the Gulf. They also inform broader public health policies on communicable disease in the region, which were in place long before the current pandemic erupted.

Once they secure their job contracts and reach the Gulf, most lower-income workers live in shared accommodations provided by their employer. Male migrant workers in sectors such as construction, transport, security, and many other lower-skill tiers of the labor market reside in dormitory-style living quarters, which can vary greatly in size and design. Almost all migrants share a room with several others, and frequently these rooms are located in multi-story buildings that house hundreds if not a few thousand people.

Migrants' living quarters have increasingly been purpose-built within labor camps situated in designated parts of a city, often some distance away and segregated from the main residential or commercial neighborhoods. Larger labor camps with multiple buildings can house up to 100,000 migrants who live cheek by jowl, sharing communal dining areas, bathrooms, and recreational spaces. Some male and female migrants live outside these designated labor camps, but they still tend to stay clustered in group accommodations, commonly sharing private dwellings that are converted to meet the housing needs of a company's employees.

Whether they live in a labor camp or in a repurposed private house, migrants residing in these employer-provided shared living facilities are

highly vulnerable to the transmission of any infectious disease. The nature of the work they do creates another layer of risk.

## ESSENTIAL WORKERS

By March 2020, not long after the coronavirus had reached the Gulf, authorities rapidly rolled out a host of mitigation measures to contain its spread. All six member states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) imposed some of the most stringent lockdowns seen anywhere around the world.

The measures included compulsory mask-wearing in any setting outside the home; mandatory work-from-home regulations for all sectors except a few deemed essential; business shut-downs; closures of most retail outlets, restaurants, gyms, parks, and entertainment venues; suspension of all in-person education; modifications to a range of other public services normally requiring face-to-face contact; border closures and bans on international arrivals; and assorted other restrictions on personal mobility. There were also extensive public awareness campaigns promoting social distancing, hand hygiene, and symptom spotting.

Many Gulf migrants work in essential and lower-skill occupations. They are heavily represented in sectors such as construction. Governments across the Gulf identified construction as a vital sector and exempted it from many of the COVID-19-related restrictions and regulations, allowing it to remain largely operational even during the height of the pandemic.

For migrants living in labor camps, ferried to and from work sites, and engaging in physical labor for several hours in close proximity to co-workers, adherence to social distancing and hygiene guidelines was extremely challenging, if not impossible. Even apart from construction, the bulk of migrants are engaged either in some form of manual labor or in service-sector occupations that necessitate physical presence and regular contact with customers and clients. These are not jobs that can be done remotely or virtually.

Combined with the massive number of migrants in the Gulf, their inability to work from home or effectively practice socially distancing resulted in their accounting for a large share of COVID-19 cases across all six states during the early stages of the lockdowns. Media and public

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*The Gulf states became even more reliant on blue-collar migrants during the pandemic.*

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discussions tended to concur that migrant workers would prove to be a destabilizing factor in the region's fight against the coronavirus—and that this particular cohort could spread the virus through society and the entire region if the situation was not swiftly addressed. In response, several Gulf states adopted increasingly stringent, targeted, and controversial containment measures to prevent transmission to the broader population.

One such measure was to cordon off parts of the city where laborers were housed, and clamp down on any movement into or out of these zones. In March, Qatari authorities imposed a monthlong total lockdown on several of Doha's largest labor camps, barring anyone from entering or exiting except with explicit permission and for critical reasons. Migrants required to continue working were limited to traveling between their workplaces and their living quarters—they were not allowed into other parts of the city. Public health care authorities across the region also prioritized testing, quarantining, and segregating migrants who were suspected of having been infected by their coworkers and roommates.

Paradoxically, during the acute stages of contagion, when migrants were being surveilled, tested, and subjected to tight restrictions on mobility, the Gulf states became even more reliant on the blue-collar migrant workforce. These workers were needed to carry out a host of “essential” tasks so that people sheltering at home could continue to eat and have medicines and other critical goods delivered to them. While both citizens and foreign white-collar workers stayed home and were prohibited from venturing out for any but the most urgent reasons, migrant workers were delivering supplies to shops so they could fulfill online orders, preparing take-out and delivery meals in restaurants, and serving customers in grocery stores. They were doing the cleaning and security work in hospitals, at desalination and power plants, at communications facilities, and in many other critical locations that remained operational. They ensured that the food supply system and domestic agriculture continued to function. They kept transportation and logistics networks running.

All of these necessary tasks required physical and face-to-face forms of labor. Despite the stringent monthlong public health measures in the Gulf that kept millions of people isolated indoors, migrant workers continued to make up the bulk of the non-medical “essential” workforce. As a result,

they remained at a much higher risk of catching and passing on the virus.

## INVASIVE SCREENING

In the aftermath of the pandemic, the data will no doubt show that an alarming number of migrant workers caught and transmitted COVID-19 in the Persian Gulf. Although breakdowns of COVID-19 cases in the Gulf have been sparse so far, the Saudi Ministry of Health disclosed in May that migrants made up 76 percent of positive cases at that time—a very high proportion, given that migrants comprise 36 percent of the Saudi population as a whole. An August 2020 study on the pandemic in Oman found that migrants—mostly workers from Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan—made up 65 percent of positive cases recorded in the sultanate between February and April.

This will have implications for policymaking in the areas of both public health and migration. Even at this early stage, there are signs of how certain parts of migrants' lives might be shaped in the future by the events of 2020.

One of the most dramatic aspects of the pandemic is how it has transformed human mobility all around the world, seemingly overnight. In the first weeks and months after the virus began its global spread, cross-border and even subnational travel controls were adopted by several countries. From France to Indonesia and India, authorities classified certain cities and regions as red, yellow, and green zones based on the prevalence of positive cases, and correspondingly limited mobility to varying degrees, barring almost all visitors from entering or residents from leaving the zones designated as worst affected. Some of these changes to international travel and domestic mobility may remain in place beyond the current health emergency.

For labor migrants, state-imposed restrictions and control over movement are a given. Their right to mobility is determined by a range of factors beyond just their skill sets and suitability for an overseas job. Health status has always been a factor in determining eligibility for a job in the Gulf. States argue that legal and regulatory controls help protect vulnerable migrants from traffickers, unethical recruiters, and criminal networks. They similarly claim that medical inspections conducted as part of the immigration vetting system are essential to safeguarding migrants' health and well-being during their overseas sojourns. But contrary to this protective language,

migrants often view such health screening processes as an oppressive invasion of their privacy.

Health inspections as well as other portions of the pre-departure immigration process in the countries that send the most migrant workers to the Gulf—Bangladesh, Nepal, India, Pakistan, and the Philippines—are to some extent managed by receiving states through externalized control mechanisms. All potential Gulf migrant workers must undergo a medical checkup and biometric data-collection process, and obtain clearances from their national authorities prior to departure. The mandatory pre-departure medical examination checks them for various infectious diseases, among other things. These tests can only be administered at a few facilities in sending countries that have been vetted by the Gulf Approved Medical Centers Association. Migrants frequently have to cover the costs of these tests themselves.

Migrants have undergone such extreme forms of screening for years, but they have been applied selectively—primarily to less-skilled laborers from Asia and Africa. After the pandemic, pre-departure health screening systems will surely incorporate a new layer of testing for the novel coronavirus. And these screenings are likely to expand to cover new categories of migrants, such as skilled and white-collar workers, including those from North America and Europe, where outbreaks of COVID-19 have been particularly severe.

A transformation in controls on human mobility in many other parts of the world can be expected. Lower-skilled workers seeking jobs overseas will no doubt face even more rigorous and onerous forms of health vetting. If necessary, the existing screening structures can be replicated and expanded in other migrant-receiving regions.

The intense period of vetting before departure for the Gulf instills in migrants a deep sense of unease over obtaining the necessary paperwork and ensuring that it stays in order. For many migrants, these anxieties over documents persist throughout their time in the Gulf, even if they stay for years. As the anthropologist Sarah B. Horton has argued, visas, passports, residency permits, and health cards are both symbolic and practical control mechanisms that determine migrants' status, security, and access to services in the receiving state.

Migrants' accounts suggest that Gulf employers and supervisors regularly manipulate these anxieties over papers as a means of discipline and control. Scholarly and policy-based research on Gulf migrants has found that some employers threaten

to block the renewal of workers' residency permits, delay the processing of health cards, or illegally retain passports and travel documents in order to deter potential wage complaints or other demands for improved labor rights.

After the pandemic, migrants' mobility will be even more heavily scrutinized and managed. Already, new surveillance instruments are being deployed, purportedly to maintain oversight over the quarantining and isolation of COVID-positive migrants. These can easily be used for long-term enforcement of mobility controls.

As a matter of course, public health policy prioritizes native inhabitants, and measures taken during a health emergency are grounded in the same citizen-focused logic. Past epidemics have demonstrated that policymakers focus on assessing the risk of migrants spreading a contagious disease. Policies cordoning off migrant communities become normalized and more likely to be used again in the future.

In the Gulf, where lower-income migrants already contend with severe forms of segregation from citizen populations, such policies further erode their limited rights and consign them to even greater isolation. They are also counterproductive in a practical sense. If migrant workers are a community of epidemiological concern, they should be well integrated into the public health care strategy, since its effectiveness will rely on their cooperation and participation—especially when it comes to compliance with preventative measures in the midst of a pandemic.

## STAY OR GO?

Some positive developments have emerged from the Gulf's pandemic experience. First, it appears that the measures adopted by Gulf states to contain contagion among the migrant population proved to be generally effective by July 2020, as indicated by a steady decline in COVID-19 cases. Available figures also indicate that death rates have remained low for the Gulf in general, especially among migrant workers.

Qatar, for example, at 40,000 cases per million, has had one of the highest global rates of confirmed cases. But as of the end of August, with only 67 COVID-19 fatalities per million (a 0.17 mortality rate), Qatar had one of the lowest virus-related death rates anywhere in the world.

This can be partially attributed to the fact that most of the migrant worker cohort consists of younger and fairly healthy people who are less

likely to become severely ill when exposed to the coronavirus. But mortality rates also may have stayed low in the Gulf because health care systems operated well. Dedicated facilities and services for COVID-19 patients were available to nearly everyone who needed treatment. The authoritarian oil monarchies had the financial wherewithal to contain the virus by expanding testing, increasing medical resources, and enforcing quarantines.

Still, there have been severe economic and social consequences beyond the immediate danger of infection and disruption of daily life for millions of people. White-collar workers, both citizens and foreigners, have endured curtailments of their mobility as well as financial constraints, as salaries have been cut and jobs have disappeared. Expatriate skilled workers, however, have largely been able to carry out their responsibilities remotely. They have had greater financial stability in the midst of the pandemic than their lower-income and less-skilled counterparts. Their much higher salaries, ability to save and invest, and access to greater social capital (personal networks of family, friends, neighbors, expatriate community groups, and so on) positioned them to manage the sudden disruptions to their income streams with relative ease.

Migrants working in beauty salons, as waiters, and as salespeople in shops have suffered much greater financial anxiety than bankers and professors. Although construction workers and truck drivers had to keep working despite the risks of catching the virus, many migrants whose jobs required their physical presence, or whose employers or businesses had to shut down completely, had their salaries slashed or went entirely unpaid for months at a time. Since migrant workers send most of their earnings home, the loss of income during the pandemic meant that their families also suffered.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that there has also been a surge in migrants taking on illegal or irregular work in 2020. Many tried to make up for lost income by taking on part-time employment with entities or individuals who were not their authorized employers or visa sponsors. Over the summer, there was also a sharp increase in voluntary departures as well as deportations, as thousands of workers left after months without work or salaries, or having lost their jobs and associated visa status as businesses downsized or collapsed.

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*Qatari authorities imposed  
a monthlong total lockdown on  
Doha's largest labor camps.*

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For many migrants, there was a complicated personal cost-benefit calculation to make when deciding whether to wait out COVID-19 in the Gulf or return home. Migrants frequently have invested substantial financial resources to secure the opportunity to work in the region, and it is difficult for them to consider returning home without at least recouping that initial investment. Many must also weigh their chances of finding paid employment at the moment back home in India, Pakistan, or Uganda, or in other parts of the world where the virus has decimated employment and disrupted economic conditions.

Traveling home has not been easy during the pandemic. Most commercial airlines ceased flying—and for the few exceptions, tickets were often prohibitively expensive. Most international borders were shut to commercial flights. Migrants routinely state that they are neglected by their countries' consular services in the Gulf, and these complaints have only been amplified during COVID-19.

Embassies and consulates of major migrant-sending states argue that they tried their best, but were overwhelmed by the numbers of their citizens who needed assistance and just did not have the capacity to help them all. Between March and June, embassies in the Gulf were besieged with thousands of repatriation requests. In response, several sending states organized special repatriation flights for citizens stranded overseas. Between May and August, India flew home over a million of its citizens, a large portion of whom came from the Gulf.

Repatriating so many people was no easy task. Compounding the practical challenges, authorities and citizens in the sending states feared that workers returning from the Gulf would bring the virus back with them. In India, the virus was first identified in European tourists and travelers from the Gulf, so authorities were understandably reluctant to let in even more potentially infected people, even if they had to keep out their own diaspora members and overseas workers.

Just as challenging, and financially taxing, were the protocols that sending states put in place for returnees. Several governments insisted on mandatory 14-day quarantines. But providing the necessary accommodations for hundreds of thousands of returning migrant workers at public expense was

deemed untenable, so migrants were required to contribute toward the cost. In India, migrants had to pay from 5,000 to 30,000 rupees (\$65 to \$400) to cover their quarantine period, an unaffordable bill for many in the lower-income bracket.

## A CLOSING DOOR?

Across all six Gulf monarchies, the closure of shops, restaurants, hotels, schools, universities, workplaces, and recreational facilities for many months has had a drastic financial impact. Even as infection rates in the region appeared to be on a stable downward trend as of August 2020, the regional economy remained in an uncertain state.

As if contending with a global pandemic were not difficult enough on its own, the Gulf states also had to cope with an oil price war in April between the major producers Saudi Arabia and Russia. An oversupply of oil, combined with plunging demand as a result of the pandemic, led to a dramatic collapse of global prices. A simultaneous drop in oil and gas prices has piled pressure on hydrocarbon economies. The more resource-dependent states in the region—Kuwait, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia—have all sharply curtailed public spending. Even Dubai, which is less reliant on hydrocarbons, has not been spared: it is excessively dependent on tourism and real estate, sectors also pummeled by the pandemic.

For decades, governments in the Persian Gulf have limited the impact of economic downturns on their citizens by instituting various direct and indirect transfers of funds derived from oil and gas revenues. They are committed to protecting their citizens from the economic consequences of the current pandemic as much as possible. It is the migrant workers who are bearing most of the burden through job loss, repatriation, and reduced wages.

In the short term, the pandemic will do damage to the region's productive fabric by driving a return to rentier dependency, as states respond to citizens' financial needs with an expansion of public

sector employment opportunities and other measures that have been used in the past. In the long term, however, Gulf governments may take this crisis as an opportunity to shift away from heavy reliance on foreign workers to fill private sector jobs, encouraging their citizens to play a more active role in the labor market.

In July, for example, Kuwait announced dramatic reductions of up to 40 percent in its migrant workforce, with the aim of making this a permanent shift beyond the duration of the pandemic. The feasibility of a lasting reduction on that scale remains to be determined. Many of the jobs being done by migrant workers will be too low-paid or low-status to appeal to Kuwaiti citizens.

Whether or not this pandemic will force the Gulf states toward reforming the most problematic features of their labor migration systems is still very much an open question. Although they do not

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*After the pandemic, migrants' mobility will be even more heavily scrutinized and managed.*

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have a formally harmonized approach, all six states' labor laws and apparatuses for managing migrants share similar features. Since about 2005, several of the GCC states have undertaken reforms to create improved living and working

conditions for lower-income migrants, at least partly in response to international scrutiny. The most recent and focused effort to do so was announced by Qatar in September 2020: a mandatory minimum wage was rolled out along with a new law that allows migrants to change jobs and visa sponsors of their own volition.

But the pandemic and its economic fallout are likely to stall some of these reforms, or at least blunt their impact. The coronavirus and plunging oil and gas prices have offered a convenient opening to finally push through long-debated restrictions on the number of labor migrants allowed into the region, in the name of protecting both citizens' economic rights and public health. Migrants may find it harder than ever to secure work either in the region or at home in economies under severe pressure. Those lucky enough to find a job in the Gulf may be willing to endure even worse conditions. ■

“The vulnerabilities of the residents of Baddawi camp are caused by political failures that have deep historical roots.”

## Refugees’ Pandemic Responses in a Palestinian Camp in Lebanon

ELENA FIDDIAN-QASMIYEH AND YOUSIF M. QASMIYEH

Far from being passive recipients of humanitarian aid, people who have experienced conflict and displacement are always finding ways to respond to the challenges they face and help others in the same situations. Since 2016, with a team of researchers in Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey, as well as in Europe, we have explored how local communities in the Middle East have responded to displacement from Syria since 2011. We started from the premise that the members of such communities hosting refugees have often experienced displacement and forced migration in the past themselves, and may well face displacement again in the future. People who are currently labeled as refugees were, are, and will be hosts.

In our interviews in the Hamra neighborhood of Beirut in 2017–18, for instance, our Syrian and Lebanese interlocutors alike recalled their personal and family histories of having hosted Lebanese people displaced during the 1975–90 Lebanese Civil War. One-third of our Lebanese interviewees in Hamra had hosted Lebanese citizens who had been internally displaced in 2006 during the Israeli war on Lebanon. And half of our Syrian interlocutors had hosted internally displaced people in Syria since the outbreak of conflict there in 2011.

In light of such complex histories and shifting roles among refugees and their hosts, analyses of

displacement should resist the presentist bias that prevails in much media reporting and policy rhetoric about forced migration. The ways that histories of displacement intersect with histories of hosting have important implications for both the present and the future. Solely focusing on—and providing aid to—“newly” displaced people can discriminate against those living in protracted situations of displacement, whose vulnerability may increase over time.

As the events of 2020 have starkly illustrated in Lebanon, vulnerabilities may be accentuated by intersecting crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, which has afflicted the country since March, and the devastating explosion in Beirut’s port on August 4, believed to have been caused by an impounded cargo of ammonium nitrate stored for several years in a warehouse without proper safety precautions. With a blast radius that extended up to 10 kilometers from the port, the explosion killed over 200 people, seriously injured more than 6,500, left severe damage in more than half the city’s neighborhoods, and rendered some 300,000 people homeless, including citizens, refugees, and migrants. It wiped out over 80 percent of the country’s wheat reserves; demolished key infrastructure, including three hospitals and half of the city’s clinics; and created major impediments for the emergency delivery of humanitarian aid supplies.

International donors sent aid, including medical supplies and equipment, to Lebanon via the smaller northern port of Tripoli. The Lebanese Red Cross headquarters subsequently announced that all of the group’s hospital teams in the north would be relocated to Beirut due to a shift in priorities: they were needed to bolster medical capacity to assist both blast survivors and the dramatically increasing number of COVID-19 patients in the capital.

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It is to the coronavirus pandemic that we now turn, shifting from Beirut (which has been the focus of so much attention) to a small and under-researched urban refugee camp in North Lebanon called Baddawi camp. Here in Baddawi, residents have been supporting both “old” and “new” fellow refugees who share the camp amid the multifaceted risks created by the pandemic and by the diverse responses to it, from the allocation of health care resources to anti-refugee rhetoric. To provide more direct, personal impressions of what it is like to experience these conditions than can be conveyed by more detached analytical observations, we intersperse our reflections with excerpts from the poetry of one of the authors, Yousif M. Qasmiyeh—who was himself born in Baddawi camp.

### LIFE IN A CROWDED CAMP

“What makes a camp a camp? And what is the beginning of a camp if there is any? And do camps exist in order to die or exist forever?” These questions, posed by Qasmiyeh in his 2016 poem “Writing the Camp: Writing the Camp Archive,” hover as we consider how to introduce Baddawi camp. One way of doing so is as follows:

Baddawi camp is situated on the outskirts of Lebanon’s second-largest city, Tripoli, near the small town of Baddawi, which is located on the coastal road that runs all the way to Syria. The camp was established in the mid-1950s to house Palestinian refugees. Ever since, it has remained on the original one-square-kilometer plot of land leased by the Lebanese state to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA). But it has expanded vertically to accommodate not only the original inhabitants and their families, but also the thousands of people who have arrived Baddawi from different conflict situations across Lebanon and farther afield. These included Palestinians from other Lebanese camps, like al-Nabatiyeh, destroyed by Israeli air raids in 1974; Tel el-Zaatar, razed to the ground in 1976 by Lebanese Christian militias and the Syrian army; and Nahr el-Bared, shelled and bombarded in 2007 by the Lebanese Army in clashes with the Fatah al-Islam militant group. The most recent arrivals are refugees from the ongoing Syrian conflict.

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*Municipalities discriminated  
against Palestinian and Syrian  
refugees alike.*

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Alongside that conventional description, consider these excerpts from “Writing the Camp”:

Baddawi is my home camp, a small camp compared to other Palestinian camps in Lebanon. For many residents, it comprises two subcamps: the lower and the upper camps that converge at the old cemetery. As I was growing up, it was common for children to know their midwife. Ours, perhaps one of only two in the entire camp, was an elderly woman, who died tragically when a wall collapsed on top of her fragile body during a stormy day in the camp. The midwife was the woman who cut our umbilical cords and washed us for the first time. She lived by the main mosque—*Masjid al-Quds*—that overlooked the cemetery. She would always wait by the cemetery to stop those who she delivered en route to school, to give them a kiss and remind them that she was the one who made them.

The camp is never the same albeit with roughly the same area. New faces, new dialects, narrower alleys, newly-constructed and ever-expanding thresholds and doorsteps, intertwined clothing

lines and electrical cables, well-shielded balconies, little oxygen, and impenetrable silences are all amassed in this space. . . .

Refugees ask other refugees, who are we to come to you and who are

you to come to us? Nobody answers. Palestinians, Syrians, Iraqis, Kurds share the camp, the same-different camp, the camp of a camp. They have all come to re-originate the beginning with their own hands and feet.

These processes of different groups of displaced people “re-originating the beginning” reflect the extent to which the camp is always in a state of becoming, due to overlapping forms of conflict and displacement. Refugees create and recreate the camp, as well as knowledge of the camp.

### DISCRIMINATION AND DISTRUST

Focusing on the responses developed by and for both Palestinian and non-Palestinian residents in Baddawi camp highlights the importance of relationality. In this context, the term encompasses relationships among different groups of refugees, including Palestinians and Syrians, as well as the intersections of local-level responses with local, national, and international structures of inequality, exclusion, and marginalization.

Palestinians in Lebanon have historically been denied access to key rights and state services, including citizenship and health care. Both of the UN's refugee agencies, UNRWA and the office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), currently operate in Lebanon's Palestinian camps. These camps have been home to Palestinians since the 1950s. Since 2011, they have also been hosting refugees from Syria.

UNRWA is ostensibly responsible for the well-being of Palestinian refugees, whereas UNHCR has a mandate to protect all non-Palestinian refugees. One might assume that the presence of these two UN agencies means that refugees in Palestinian camps have access to two sets of support systems. With their widely divergent budgets, mandates, and programmatic activities, however, the UN agencies have created a bifurcated system of assistance, consolidating a hierarchy of worth and exclusion among different groups of refugees on the basis of their nationalities and places of origin. Even in the midst of the pandemic, the two agencies have largely failed to cooperate in their efforts to support displaced people living side by side.

As the number of COVID-19 cases has risen across Lebanon, to around 37,300 by the end of September 2020, according to the official count (though there are fears that cases have been dramatically underreported), so, too, have xenophobic, anti-refugee, and discriminatory responses. Mobilizing the well-worn trope that refugees are spreaders of disease, Lebanese officials and politicians at the start of the outbreak promptly demanded that Palestinian camps be placed under even greater control and surveillance, invoking the threats that have long been imagined as emanating from these "foreign" and "polluted" spaces.

Although coronavirus infections in Lebanon reportedly originated among Lebanese nationals (mainly religious pilgrims returning from countries such as Iran and Italy), such demands resulted in the camps being placed under tight lockdowns in early March. Local municipalities discriminated against Palestinian and Syrian refugees alike, imposing long curfews that were not extended to either Lebanese citizens or non-Lebanese residents in other areas, and forcibly preventing people from leaving their home camps. In March, the Lebanese Red Cross reportedly refused to transfer a refugee camp resident with a suspected case of COVID-19 to Rafik Hariri University Hospital in Beirut, the only public hospital where

coronavirus patients were being quarantined and treated free of charge. This caused great alarm inside the camps.

Camp residents in Lebanon—including Palestinians, Syrians, Iraqis, Kurds, and Lebanese—are acutely vulnerable to the impacts, of COVID-19. (Lebanese residents include people who have intermarried, some who are drawn by the cheaper rents or even the prospect of a free burial in the camp's cemetery, and others who work in the camps with other residents.) Living in overcrowded urban camps with poor infrastructure, many are afflicted with preexisting health conditions that have multiplied and worsened. The fragile UNRWA health systems have been defunded and weakened over decades by fickle donors, while Lebanese health systems have a long history of discriminating against and denying treatment to refugees.

Against this backdrop, it is not surprising that mistrust among Palestinians and their fellow camp dwellers toward international and national aid agencies and government departments has remained high as they have faced COVID-19. Yet refugees in Lebanon, like other displaced and dispossessed people around the world, have drawn on long-standing traditions of mutual aid and solidarity to seek ways to protect themselves and others from the pandemic.

## IMPROVISING SOLUTIONS

As of mid-June 2020, only 12 COVID-19 cases had been confirmed among Palestinian refugees in Lebanon. But by the end of September, UNRWA reported that 963 Palestinians had tested positive, of whom 24 had died. How have the residents of Baddawi camp responded to this impending catastrophe?

As we wait for the disease, in echoless rooms, doors locked up, shutters dusted, thrust to the heart. . . . The disease that will sign a pact with our diseases. In patience bereft of patience, we stand still behind our walls: without seeing, we shall see the disease that will be. . . .

With a third eye, I see the catastrophe.

On March 22, camp organizations including the Security Committee (a coalition of Palestinian factions that at times acts as a mediator with UNRWA and Lebanese officials to maintain security in the camps) announced a curfew for the camp's residents and businesses. Unlike previous curfews and



camp lockdowns (there have been many since the camp was established in the 1950s), this one was not imposed by Lebanese authorities asserting that the camps posed a danger to the surrounding communities. Instead, after COVID-19 cases were confirmed in a neighboring area outside the camp, refugee activists lobbied for the camp's entry points and exits to be closed in order to protect its residents.

In Lebanon, as in other displacement and hosting contexts, refugee camps are not isolated spaces. They are intimately connected to urban and non-urban areas beyond the camp limits. Palestinian camps have often been perceived as "islands of insecurity" (to use anthropologist Rosemary Sayigh's words), but when the pandemic arrived, many camp residents promptly identified the risks existing outside the camp and encouraged fellow inhabitants to remain inside.

Since before the curfew started, many advocates and volunteers in Baddawi camp have been working tirelessly to prepare and distribute information, guidelines, and resources to help keep residents as safe as possible during this pandemic. They have developed inclusive approaches designed to reach all residents, irrespective of nationality or legal status.

UNRWA was perceived as having been slow to inform camp residents about the risks of COVID-19 and provide support. So members of the Palestinian Cultural Club in Baddawi camp promptly took action, drawing on their intimate knowledge of everyday life and needs in the camp. They adapted existing evidence-based informational posters (including World Health Organization materials), translated them into Arabic, and shared the posters and other forms of guidance in print and via social media to reach camp residents of all demographics in an accessible manner.

In addition to running special programs on its radio station, the Cultural Club has worked with social media networks that have been established locally for years. These networks previously had been used to inform residents about everything from school closures to which areas of the camp should be avoided during armed clashes or sporadic shootings. While the threat of COVID-19 is less visible, or audible, the threat to life is no less real, and information is among

a range of resources essential for survival in these circumstances.

Food is another essential resource, of course, and camp residents try to make sure everyone receives enough. Over the past few years, in preparation for the holy month of Ramadan, Palestinian residents—including members of the Cultural Club—have collected financial donations from other Palestinians to prepare *iftar* food baskets for distribution to residents identified as especially in need, whatever their nationality (Palestinian, Syrian, Iraqi, Kurdish, or Lebanese) or place of origin. In 2020, given the fears and restrictions on movement due to the pandemic, the organizers were concerned that it would not be safe for large numbers of people to go door to door collecting donations or to work together shopping for ingredients, cooking, and distributing hot meals during Ramadan.

The disease is not yet here. Alongside our heavy hearts, we have what will be: flour, beads of yeast, whole and crushed lentils, potatoes, their red soil to nurture escaping blessings in dryness.

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*Refugees in Lebanon have drawn on long-standing traditions of mutual aid and solidarity.*

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The number of people in need of food in the camp has been much larger than in previous years—not just because of the pandemic, but also due to the ongoing collapse of the already fragile Lebanese

economy. As an acute financial crisis has spiraled since 2019, people who were lucky enough to receive salaries through bank transfers have been unable to withdraw money from their bank accounts for months. Dollar withdrawals from banks were suspended on March 30 amid a national liquidity shortage.

Camp residents who once relied on remittances from family and friends abroad have been unable to receive international money transfers. The closure of the Beirut airport and the country's land borders has made it nearly impossible for relatives to send cash directly. The devaluation of the Lebanese lira compounded a more than two- or even threefold rise in prices for basic necessities over the course of only a few months.

With cash scarce and movement restricted in the camp, the Cultural Club started seeking other ways to safely collect and distribute donations to people in need. Club members contacted local businesses, including groceries and mini-markets both inside and on the outskirts of the camp,

soliciting cash and in-kind donations. The club also produced and broadcast a “Who Will Donate a Million?” fund-raising drive on its online channel.

As donations were secured, the club's facility—the ground-floor unit in an old apartment block in the camp, comprising three small rooms and a small patio—was converted into a storage and packing unit. Having initially considered that distributing tinned food items so that people could cook their own *iftar* meals would be the safest option, the club members soon realized that many residents were unable to afford cooking gas, or might lack cooking or refrigeration appliances. They decided to maintain the original plan of working together, as safely as possible, to cook hot meals for distribution to camp residents breaking the daily fast during Ramadan.

Just a few days before the start of Ramadan on April 23, as the limits of local resources became increasingly apparent, the Cultural Club's chapters in Baddawi and Mar Elias camps joined an emergency relief fund-raiser in partnership with al-Naqab Center (a youth-based cultural group) in Burj al-Barajneh camp and two US-based Palestinian initiatives, the Palestinian Youth Movement and Al-Awda: The Palestine Right to Return Coalition. The aim was to raise \$50,000 to buy and distribute packages of food and sanitizing products (each worth approximately \$50) to help the residents of those three camps practice social distancing and offset some of the economic damage caused by the pandemic. Within three months, the initiative had exceeded that goal.

## SYRIAN SCAPEGOATS

For communities living in poverty around the world, the risk of contracting COVID-19 is paralleled, or surpassed, by the risks of destitution and starvation arising from policies and political decisions. Social distancing is ultimately impossible among people who live in overcrowded conditions, who have no savings to draw on to buy food, and whose survival is contingent on precarious daily labor in the informal sector.

In Lebanon, national authorities have long prohibited Palestinian and Syrian refugees from entering the formal labor market. That leaves them among the people least likely to be able to afford to practice social distancing, putting them at higher risk of contracting the virus.

Local initiatives have sought to help make people more capable of social distancing. But

national policies and politics in Lebanon have created structures of inequality and exclusion over decades. In the first half of 2020, national and municipal authorities created new forms of marginalization and discrimination with COVID-19 testing programs that targeted people on the basis of nationality.

On June 21, when there were still relatively few confirmed COVID-19 cases among Palestinians and Syrians in Lebanon (12 and 13 cases, respectively), municipal authorities and the state-run National News Agency reported that Syrian refugees working in Tripoli's port and living in Baddawi camp and on its outskirts in Wadi al-Nahleh had tested positive for the virus. In a flurry of public announcements, one by the UNRWA Health Department warned that these confirmed cases marked a tipping point in the country: “The epidemic no longer just threatens our camps—it has now entered them.” Random tests on 119 Palestinian residents in June had all been negative; UNRWA officials implicitly asserted that the previously “clean” camp was now at risk due to the Syrians' infections.

UNHCR, the UN agency ostensibly responsible for Syrian refugees, has been conspicuous by its absence both inside and outside Baddawi camp. Our interviews with camp residents confirmed that these Syrians and their families received food supplies from UNICEF to sustain them under quarantine. They had received no assistance from UNHCR.

Local actors in the camp, including its Palestinian factions and its Popular Committee, announced that they had identified the location of the two Syrians' living quarters, marking them as the epicenter of contagion risk in the camp. Contact tracing was immediately set in motion under the supervision of the camp's Health Committee and the Lebanese Ministry of Health, which had committed to transferring any individuals who tested positive to a state hospital. As these developments unfolded, some camp residents started to associate COVID-19 with Syrians, in line with xenophobic rhetoric used by Lebanese politicians at the onset of the pandemic.

Amid rising fear over the arrival of the virus, members of the Popular and Security committees roamed through the alleyways and streets of the camp, instructing people to shutter their shops and stay indoors. Baddawi camp was once again subjected to closure, a space and community in quarantine.

## A BORROWED AMBULANCE

Since the devastating August 2020 blast in Beirut's port, coronavirus infection rates have soared across Lebanon, and medical infrastructure nationwide has been under mounting pressure. All of the Red Cross hospitals in north Lebanon are relocating, with medical staff either being laid off or moving to Beirut in order to care for both blast survivors and the rising number of COVID-19 cases in the capital.

While the focus on Beirut is understandable, given the vast destruction caused by the port explosion, allocating more resources to the capital puts people living elsewhere in the country at greater risk, citizens and refugees alike. UNHCR has been working to expand hospital capacity for COVID-19 patients (regardless of their nationality), adding 16 intensive care units (ICUs) in Halba's Governmental Hospital, in the northern Akkar municipality; Rafik al-Hariri Hospital in Beirut; and Saida's Governmental Hospital in South Lebanon. At the time of this writing, however, no additional ICUs are yet available in the government hospital in Tripoli, which is the nearest hospital to Baddawi camp.

Recognizing the increasing pressure on medical infrastructure amid the national emergency, as infection rates and deaths started to increase in Baddawi camp, the Cultural Club approached local officials in the town of Baddawi in August to ask if it could use one of the municipality's ambulances to take refugees with COVID symptoms to hospitals. The municipality granted its approval, loaning the club an ambulance that was not being used.

A member of the club volunteered to collect people with suspected COVID-19 infections from both Baddawi camp and the neighboring camp, Nahr el-Bared, and transport them to hospitals in Tripoli and Halba, and in some cases to Rafiq al-Hariri Hospital in Beirut. This refugee-driver wears a hazmat suit and protective gear provided by the Red Cross and Red Crescent Society at the club's request. Masks are bought from local supermarkets and shops in the camp and neighboring areas.

By "borrowing" the ambulance, the Cultural Club is using the citizen's tools to assist other refugees, improvising with the limited available resources to navigate entrenched inequitable systems. Such makeshift measures, however, are not sustainable, and they are no substitute for the

health care resources that local and national governments should be allocating to the camps during this crisis to protect both their residents and the surrounding communities.

## STRIVING FOR SOLIDARITY

Local responses developed by Baddawi camp residents demonstrate the ways in which refugees have worked individually and collectively to find means of caring for Palestinian, Syrian, Iraqi, Kurdish, and Lebanese residents in highly precarious conditions, at a time when their vulnerability is only increasing. These kinds of refugee-led crisis responses have long transcended nationality-based identity markers. But over the past few months, such modes of solidarity and mutuality have had to contend with national and municipal interventions that align with policies and political discourses constituting refugees as the Other—as the threatening carrier of disease and risk. In this context, political pressures and responses can sometimes divide camp residents along national lines.

Such hostile rhetoric ignores the fact that refugees are often hosts to other refugees, and take responsibility for their well-being when the state fails to do so. Recognizing the many roles that they play to protect members of their own communities, and others, is an essential means of challenging monolithic representations of refugees as either security threats or passive recipients of international aid. Documenting and archiving such local responses is necessary to record how refugees seek to fill gaps and redress inequalities that have been created and reproduced by national and international actors alike.

Well before the COVID-19 pandemic, mutual aid initiatives in Baddawi camp provided support to residents with wide-ranging backgrounds. It is important to critically examine how such preexisting support systems and networks are coping with both the pandemic itself and the different policies and politics emerging in response to the crisis.

We cannot understand either the vulnerabilities that people face in displacement or the responses they develop without considering the ways that local experiences are framed by systems on multiple scales, including long-entrenched structural inequalities and processes of marginalization and exclusion. The vulnerabilities of the residents of

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*Refugee camps are not  
isolated spaces.*

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Baddawi camp are caused by political failures that have deep historical roots. As these refugee communities, isolated by the authorities, turn to each other for help to survive crisis after crisis, the repercussions will continue to be felt in both the near and distant future.

When the camp falls ill, tomorrow falls ill for its sins.

By tomorrow, by its disavowed promise, we promise the disease what we have of wishes: a camp big enough for death, a camp with fewer deaths. ■

“It has taken a long time for MENA governments to acknowledge the importance of social protection in ensuring safer and more equitable standards of living for their citizens.”

## Social Protection and the Pandemic in the MENA Region

RANA JAWAD

The COVID-19 pandemic has been a wake-up call for states and societies around the world, confronting them with the stark realities of social and economic inequalities that have eluded social protection systems for decades. In many nations, the pandemic has brought new urgency to long-running arguments about how to address those inequities, notably in countries with high percentages of poor people, such as India and Brazil.

Due to the lack of effective public service provision and the persistence of conflict as well as humanitarian crises, the nations of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region were particularly vulnerable to a highly contagious and life-threatening disease like COVID-19. It threatened to wreak further havoc in conflict-torn countries such as Yemen, Syria, and Iraq. The economic impact of the pandemic has been more acute in nations that were already in financial distress, such as Lebanon, which is now on the brink of collapse—by some estimates, at least half of its population is now living in poverty and short of essential daily needs such as food, water, and electricity.

The response to COVID-19 has varied across the region. Many countries mobilized quickly to protect at least some of their people, providing emergency financial relief either through their existing welfare systems or with other forms of aid, such as food parcels and cash transfers. They also activated public health procedures to limit the spread of the disease. But the pandemic has magnified existing gaps and inequities

in public health and social protection systems in the region.

In societies where from one-half to two-thirds of workers are employed as daily wage laborers or in the informal sector, it is no wonder that the pandemic has led to a major disruption of livelihoods and slashed the incomes of tens of millions. Informal work is not regulated by a country's social security system or its formal employment laws; workers in this sector have no job protection or income guarantees and do not pay income tax.

The big question that faces MENA countries is whether this is a crisis like so many others that have previously passed through this volatile region and left governance unreformed, or whether it is a moment of departure—an opportunity to establish more comprehensive social protection systems that will make countries more resilient and build much-needed trust between society and the state.

Social protection, one of the many tools that social policy can draw on, encompasses a range of in-kind and in-cash services and programs that governments, civil society groups, or international donor agencies use to alleviate poverty and provide emergency humanitarian relief. The most common type of social protection program nowadays is the unconditional cash transfer, a form of noncontributory financial assistance that is targeted and means-tested.

Social protection, however, is an arm of social policy that is concerned not only with welfare, but also with social cohesion. In addition to delivering social services to the most vulnerable, it involves putting into place a system of social benefits that supports the entire population through the life course. Achieving both of these aims is vital for ensuring a socially just society.

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It has taken a long time for MENA governments to acknowledge the importance of social protection in ensuring safer and more equitable standards of living for their citizens. But their policies in this area are still limited by poor administration and neglect of some sectors. Unfortunately, the region seems to inch closer to reform only when a crisis hits or the agenda of international donors shifts in a new direction.

The current pandemic response has exposed a fundamental problem with the way social policy is often made in MENA countries. It tends to be reactive, with a crisis-management approach emphasizing immediate emergency relief rather than long-term planning and investment in public services. This is explained in part by a heavy reliance on external donor funding, especially among Arab countries in the Southern Mediterranean. But it also reflects the reality that many governments in the region lack the capacity or the political will to develop long-term, inclusive, and peaceful visions for their societies.

## BROKEN BARGAIN

The nations of the MENA region (and Arab countries in particular) mostly operate under a type of social contract generally described by analysts as an “autocratic bargain.” This political arrangement was historically based on government provision of free health care and education, public sector jobs for all graduates, and subsidized prices for necessities such as bread and fuel. In return for these benefits, the people were expected to accept limited political and civil liberties. This status quo did not, however, stamp out civil and protest movements calling for expanding citizens’ rights, notably for women, ethnic minorities, and workers. These groups came to the fore in the Arab Spring events and have continued campaigning to the present day, a decade later.

The authoritarian bargain mainly benefited the urban middle classes. Even after the Arab Spring, social welfare systems remain biased toward the interests of political and urban elites. As a result, the political systems of the MENA countries have not provided quality services to the constituents who need them most in the context of accelerating population growth, increasing poverty, and a globalized economy.

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*The pandemic has magnified existing gaps and inequities in public health and social protection systems in the region.*

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Dependence on oil revenues also bears a share of the blame for the region’s economic volatility and ineffective social protection systems. It has fostered a rentier model of distribution: political elites maintain their dominance by avoiding taxation and controlling the distribution of rents— income accrued from an unproductive source, often related to natural resources—in ways that serve only to entrench the corrupt political system and undermine the productive capacities of the economy. Because of this, the region has consistently experienced economic growth without a corresponding increase in jobs over the past few decades.

The entrenched rentier system has not only fostered authoritarian rule, but also spawned inefficient domestic political economies based on corruption and clientelism. The influence of rent-seeking has extended even to the non-oil-based economies of the region, such as Egypt and Lebanon. Large-scale labor migration from these countries to the oil-rich Arab Gulf states has encouraged a reliance on remittances sent home

by migrant workers; meanwhile, the productive capacity of their home countries is not being developed.

Since the 1990s, the neoliberal orthodoxy that has shaped social and economic policies around the world has also made its mark on MENA

countries through the Washington Consensus represented by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, and the structural adjustment programs they imposed on the indebted countries of the global South in the 1990s. But in this region, the orthodoxy put greater emphasis on privatization and economic deregulation than on reforms granting greater political freedoms. As states ceded direct control of their economies, they moved from developmentalist to more managerial forms of governance, yet the autocratic bargain was left in place.

## PILLARS OF POLICY

Four institutional pillars undergird social policy in the MENA countries: the state, the family, the market, and the community or civil society. They each have assumed key roles in welfare programs for specific segments of the population.

The general pattern in the region is that state institutions oversee social insurance systems that

are linked to formal employment, particularly for public sector workers, who tend to receive generous benefits. These systems are more likely to cover formally employed urban workers than informal rural workers. The state maintains public health and education systems, though health care programs often rely on partnerships with private sector providers. The growth of private health insurance and medical care in the region has been driven by the absence of, or lack of trust in, government facilities. Distrust is especially high in deregulated market economies, like Lebanon's.

There are long-established noncontributory social assistance programs in a number of MENA states, including Morocco and the Palestinian territories, as well as mechanisms for subsidizing purchases of food and fuel. But these have recently become a target of reform initiatives, as Arab governments look for ways to reduce their budget deficits by cutting spending on such programs.

Nuclear and extended families have always played key roles in social support across the region, particularly in caring for dependents such as young children and elderly or disabled family members. But the family-based model of social welfare is coming under increasing strain from the high cost of living, which makes it necessary for more household members to earn income, often by taking on more than one job. That reduces the likelihood of family-based care for children and the elderly. And earning capacity often remains low, even if multiple adults in a household are working. Female-headed households are especially hard hit by poverty, due to the persistence of the male-breadwinner model of social policy in MENA countries.

Meanwhile, formal-sector employees are the primary beneficiaries of health insurance programs. They are typically males based in urban areas. Even after the Arab Spring, the emphasis of most social policy systems in the region is still on such targeted schemes.

Universalist principles of social policy are applied mainly in the provision of commodity or fuel subsidies. The shortcomings of this approach are evident: MENA governments traditionally have spent too much on subsidies and other short-term poverty alleviation policies. Those are not the kinds of investment that lead to long-term growth or address the structural causes of poverty and social conflict.

Arguably, the most important sources of non-state social welfare services for vulnerable

populations across the region, particularly those employed in the informal sector, are religious welfare organizations. Some of these are international aid organizations, like Islamic Relief and Caritas, that have large budgets and serve tens of thousands of beneficiaries. Others, such as Hezbollah and the Muslim Brotherhood, are based in the region, have been in operation for decades, and have become entrenched in their societies. Often they are linked to larger networks of schools and hospitals. Although they may charge fees for some of their services, they provide both cash and in-kind assistance to the extremely poor.

These groups frequently rely on religiously based fund-raising activities, notably during the month of Ramadan. Muslim groups invoke religious teachings about paying *zakat* (annual charitable contributions considered obligatory for the observant), helping orphans, and supporting the family as the basic unit of society. In societies divided along sectarian lines, as in Lebanon and Iraq, these social welfare organizations are often linked to religious and political leaders and parties. In such cases, their activities may deepen social divisions, even if they offer services to the needy or to members of other sects. For this reason, they are no substitute for a comprehensive government-run social protection system that covers all citizens, and thus builds social trust.

## SEEKING LEGITIMACY

The policy rationales for social welfare programs in the MENA region vary from one institution to another. They may be classified, broadly, as having political functions (enhancing state legitimacy), welfare functions (promoting equality and wealth redistribution), or economic functions (developing human capital and productive capacities).

Promoting economic growth, rather than creating an equitable society, has typically been considered the main purpose of public policy in the region. MENA countries' long-term planning statements and development programs regularly make this priority clear. Social concerns have traditionally been relegated to the domain of the family, via the male-breadwinner model.

To serve the growth imperative, employment creation is the primary concern of social policy in the region, followed by investment in education. The latter can be seen, for example, in the Gulf states' expansion of international partnerships in higher education. This so-called productivist approach is reinforced by the institutional

configuration of social policy, in which non-state actors such as the family, religious groups, and commercial enterprises play key roles in welfare provision.

A second rationale for social policy in MENA nations is boosting the state's political legitimacy in order to avert social unrest. This has become more evident since the Arab Spring, with almost all Arab states embarking on major social protection and employment reforms or increasing social assistance services.

Historically, the extension of social insurance and the introduction of public works programs and other types of social policies have been driven by concerns about the need to promote state legitimacy. The MENA region is not alone in this regard, of course. In the welfare states of Western and other developing countries, political considerations have also served as rationales for social policy. But the Arab uprisings a decade ago, which challenged the legitimacy of autocratic states, have made such concerns especially acute for policy-makers in the region.

The third and least-developed rationale for social policy in the MENA countries is the welfare function. This is what should offer a response to the calls for dignity and social justice that arose during the Arab Spring. But it may be the most complex aspect of social policy to deliver on, since it requires institutional and political reform.

In these respects, the evolution of social policy in the MENA region is similar to the situation of sub-Saharan African states, such as Nigeria or Sierra Leone, that analysts say have not yet forged a genuine social contract with their citizens. In such cases, grassroots mobilization may be the only way forward for improving relations between state and society and creating space for citizens to claim their social rights. Changes of this kind have occurred in developing regions, such as Latin America (in Mexico and Argentina, for instance), not as a result of development policy being transferred from international donor agencies, but because of local grassroots action.

There has been a lot more grassroots activity in the MENA region in recent years, certainly since the Arab Spring. Notable groups include Lebanon Support and Arab Renaissance for Democracy and Development in Jordan. But the effort has not

matched rising unemployment and living costs, not to mention the prevalence of civil unrest and armed conflict. These problems have been further magnified by the COVID-19 pandemic.

## PATCHWORK RESPONSE

The pandemic has confronted the MENA countries with the same challenges as other developing nations. Starting with weak economies and public health institutions, higher levels of informal labor, and populations earning just enough to get by, they now face huge losses in revenue and jobs as a result of shutting down economic activity to stop the spread of the coronavirus.

In a March 2020 report on the regional response to the COVID-19 crisis in Arab countries, the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) estimated that a further 8.3 million people currently in the middle-class income bracket will fall into poverty due to loss of income and remittances from relatives working abroad. There are also some 26 million refugees and internally displaced people in the region who are at even greater risk in the pandemic.

Governments' responses have varied. Most MENA countries have made more people eligible for existing social assistance and cash transfer programs. But lack of access will still limit the effective-

ness of such aid measures, especially when they offer only short-term support—and when the share of the population in need of help is very large.

Since there is such a large number of informal workers who remain ineligible for social insurance programs, many have no access at all to health care and thus face a high risk of premature death. Many countries in the region lack the health care infrastructure to meet the needs of their populations. People spend as much as 50 percent of their disposable income on health-related costs.

One of the main initiatives commonly launched by MENA countries in response to the pandemic was to extend sick leave for formal workers. In Lebanon, hospital workers who test positive for COVID-19 receive paid sick leave for the required isolation period. But informal workers generally receive no sick leave.

Countries including Jordan and Lebanon have relieved private sector employers of the requirement to contribute to employment-based social

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*Even after the Arab Spring, social welfare systems remain biased toward the interests of political and urban elites.*

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insurance programs. Some governments have introduced new cash-based schemes to support vulnerable parts of the population. In Egypt, a monthly grant of 500 Egyptian pounds for three months was offered to informal workers registered in a government database. Payment was to be made through post offices and banks. The program was expected to cover 1.5 million workers employed in construction, the ports, agriculture, fishing, plumbing, electricity, and similar sectors.

Topping the list of pandemic concerns is food insecurity, long a major focus of the UN agencies working in the region. Some governments have acted to provide food aid to vulnerable households. In April 2020, the Iraqi Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs launched a program called One Million Food Baskets for the Poor, which targets poor households registered in the Cash Transfers Program database.

Women all around the world have been severely affected by the pandemic. As elsewhere, many women in the MENA region work on the front lines of providing health and social care to others. Meanwhile, they face increased risk of domestic violence at home during lockdowns, in addition to deepening poverty.

The UN-ESCWA has called for regional collaboration in response to the pandemic, but that may not be so easy, given ongoing tensions over political and economic differences. Egypt and Sudan, for example, have been embroiled in a dispute over management of the Nile River, a vital source of water for both countries.

Some collaborative efforts have proceeded nonetheless. The Islamic Development Bank set up a \$730 million Strategic Preparedness and Response facility to help Muslim countries deal with the health and social consequences of the pandemic. Other regional bodies, like the Islamic Trade Finance Corporation and the Arab Export Credit Insurance Scheme, are working to develop trade relations.

## MISSING INGREDIENT

The pandemic has starkly illustrated how social protection systems are a vital ingredient for peace and prosperity. A crisis will, by its very nature, magnify social problems that already exist. Inequalities in health care and social security will only deepen in an emergency.

Social protection chiefly concerns two elements: providing essential services and strengthening social cohesion. Each supports the other. A

state forges a direct link to its people through its social and public services.

Like a healthy immune system, a social protection system can inoculate a society against afflictions big or small. For Middle Eastern countries, many of which have faced dire emergencies or conflicts in the past, whether in war and other overt violence or through the more silent, structural effects of inequality, social protection matters. It is a right that every citizen and resident should be able to claim.

Civil society and non-state actors have a role to play. The MENA region has a wealth of experience in civil society action. The region also has a history of philanthropic activity, both religious and secular. This means that principles of social solidarity are well established and the resources to put them into practice are available. But political will is required for government action to build up social protection systems in the region.

Social protection should not be understood merely as an instrumental tool in times of conflict or crisis. It encompasses a range of programs to cover every citizen's life cycle, from child, disability, and unemployment benefits to old-age pensions, funded by both general taxation and social insurance contributions.

Calls for a universal basic income are also rising in the global discourse on social protection. Various governments around the world have seen political wisdom in a universalist approach to social policy and found the fiscal space to support it. In Kenya and Nepal in recent years, universal provision—of health care, pensions, or child benefits—has resulted in significant increases in long-term social investment.

Social protection is not a luxury or a safety net: it is the minimum support that a state can provide to all its citizens at all times. The International Labor Organization (ILO) calls this the Social Protection Floor. The ILO advocates for increasing social security coverage for the entire population over time, and for the provision of universal health and education.

In the humanitarian realm (such as relief assistance for Syrian and Palestinian refugees), which is of immediate concern to many MENA countries, existing social assistance provisions can be scaled up to increase benefits and extend coverage to new groups. The greater the capacity countries have to cover citizens and residents, including refugees, the better prepared they will be to mobilize resources in response to shocks such as the

pandemic. A time of crisis can also be an opportunity to reform institutions and build capacity for providing more effective and comprehensive social protection.

Most MENA countries are not poor; they have rich philanthropic traditions, as well as long-established welfare and social insurance systems. But many of them are riven with internal political conflicts that pit state and non-state actors against each other. Too often they also allow a small political and economic elite to benefit disproportionately from national resources.

The response to the COVID-19 pandemic has reinforced the traditional approach of MENA countries to social policy—one based on crisis management and short-term social assistance. Unless trust can be rebuilt between states and citizens (and residents, including migrant workers and refugees), pandemic lockdown measures will only intensify already rising inequalities and deepen the region's social and political divisions. Developing more comprehensive social protection systems is the most practical means of rebuilding this urgently needed trust. ■

# Egypt's Old Affliction of Aloof Rulers

KHALED FAHMY

Since Egypt recorded its first case of COVID-19 on February 14, 2020, official figures as of September 21 indicated that the country had seen a total of more than 102,000 confirmed cases, of which 5,787 were fatalities. Given the overall size of the population, which is slightly over 100 million, this put Egypt in 31st place globally, with an incidence rate of 99 per 100,000 population, according to the Johns Hopkins University COVID-19 dashboard. That compared with rates of 2,328 cases per 100,000 population in Kuwait, 2,180 in Israel, 1,114 in South Africa, 847 in Saudi Arabia, 429 in Lebanon, and 275 in Morocco.

In this light, there is some reason to believe that Egypt managed to weather the first wave of the pandemic relatively little scathed. Based on these official figures, one could agree with Health Minister Hala Zayed's recent affirmation that the country is well prepared for a second wave.

But there are also good reasons to doubt any positive assessment of the Egyptian government's handling of the pandemic, and to question the accuracy of the official figures announced in a daily press release by the Ministry of Health. Back in June, for example, when the pandemic peaked in Egypt, the government insisted that its hospitals had not reached maximum capacity. Yet there were widespread reports that people with severe symptoms were being turned away, and that many failed to find affordable hospital treatment.

There have also been consistent complaints of insufficient and faulty testing. According to the Committee for the Right to Health, an independent nongovernmental organization, only 0.13 percent of the Egyptian population has been tested for COVID-19. That is a very low percentage by global standards, and may in turn explain the relatively low rate of positive cases.

Moreover, the BBC reported in August that Egypt was relying on antibody tests, rather than polymerase chain reaction (PCR) tests, which are more reliable, according to the World Health Organization (WHO). (Antibody tests are meant to detect whether someone has already had the virus and developed an immune response to it—but not necessarily whether they currently have the virus, which is what PCR tests are meant to detect.) Egyptian officials relied on antibody tests to check arriving passengers at airports for the virus. They were also used in hospitals to test health workers. According to the BBC, the reliance on this type of test may have inadvertently allowed the virus to spread further, since it yields a high number of false negative results.

Most seriously, right from the beginning of the pandemic, there were widespread complaints from health care workers that they were not being adequately protected. They accused the government of being callously negligent in failing to have them properly tested, provide them with adequate personal protective equipment, or lay out credible and equitable staffing protocols. As of September 18, there had been 171 fatalities among doctors—in a country that has a very low density of physicians. Egypt has 0.8 physicians per 1,000 people, whereas the WHO estimates that at least 2.3 health workers per 1,000 people would be needed to achieve coverage of primary health care needs. This is a country that can hardly afford to lose so many doctors.

Rather than address the doctors' concerns, Prime Minister Mostafa Madbouli blamed them for rising fatalities, accusing them of not reporting to their hospital jobs. This triggered a standoff with the Doctors' Syndicate, an independent union. When one doctor demanded that the prime minister apologize for his unfounded accusation, he was arrested. Soon thereafter, several other doctors were arrested for raising questions about how the government was responding to the pandemic.

Right from the very beginning of the crisis, the government indicated clearly that it would not

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tolerate any criticism. In March, it announced that it would impose a fine of 20,000 Egyptian pounds (roughly \$1,250) on anyone who spread false rumors about the pandemic. In June, Amnesty International reported that at least six doctors and two pharmacists had been arrested after criticizing the government's handling of the coronavirus. In July, the Associated Press reported that rights groups had documented the cases of ten doctors who were arrested for the same reason. These doctors have been accused of "membership in a terrorist group," "spreading false news," and "misusing social media"—the cocktail of default charges for anyone who criticizes the government.

Ever since President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi seized power in a 2013 coup, his regime has imposed stifling restrictions on speech, which have only tightened during the pandemic. Before long, it was not only doctors but all dissenting voices that were being silenced. The authorities started with foreign journalists. In March, the *New York Times*' Cairo bureau chief, Declan Walsh, was censured for "showing bad faith to harm Egyptian interests." Also that month, Ruth Michaelson, the *Guardian*'s correspondent, was expelled from the country. Both had questioned the official tally of cases.

The government then turned to Egyptian journalists. In May, police arrested Lina Attalla, the editor-in-chief of news website Mada Masr, who was recently chosen by *Time* magazine as one of the 100 most influential people of 2020. The following month, it was the turn of Nora Younis, editor-in-chief of another website, Al-Manassa. Mohamed Monir, a journalist who had appeared on Al-Jazeera, was arrested "for spreading false information." He was released ten days later, after it was discovered that he had contracted COVID-19, reportedly while in pretrial detention. He died shortly thereafter.

It was evident that the government would retaliate harshly against anyone who dared criticize its handling of the crisis. In this, it was following a noticeable trend around the world of governments taking advantage of the pandemic to justify—or to divert attention from—crackdowns on press freedom. It is worth mentioning that Egypt was already the world's third-leading jailer of journalists in 2019.

## ABOVE IT ALL

But there is another, more sinister aspect of the Egyptian government's handling of the COVID-19 crisis, one that has deep historical roots. Briefly put, it seems to me that this government, like all previous governments in Egypt's modern history, is not really concerned about the well-being of Egyptians, nor is protecting their health during pandemics one of its priorities. Rather, the Egyptian state acts apart from and above society, with no accountability or transparency. The state acts to protect its own interests, even when it provides basic services like public health.

Now, this may sound like a wild claim, so a few words of explanation are in order. I am a scholar of modern Egyptian history, and for over a decade I have been studying how the country's public health system was created in the nineteenth century. The British, who invaded the country in 1882, thus launching a seventy-two-year-long occupation, claimed that it was only thanks to them that modern medicine was introduced in Egypt. Lord Cromer, the de facto ruler of Egypt

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*This government is not  
really concerned about the  
well-being of Egyptians.*

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for the first quarter-century of British military occupation, famously boasted, paraphrasing Molière, "With characteristic Anglo-Saxon energy, the Englishman set to work to make the Egyptian '*un médecin malgré lui*' (a doctor in

spite of himself)."

But the truth of the matter is that the foundations of Egypt's modern medical and public hygiene systems were laid at least half a century before the arrival of the British. In 1821, when Mehmed Ali Pasha, the Ottoman ruler of the country, made the momentous decision to create a conscript army with which to carve out an independent realm for himself and his progeny, Egypt's manpower assumed singular importance. The pasha and his assistants became acutely concerned that the available manpower might not be sufficient to till the soil, Egypt's ultimate source of wealth, and to carry arms to defend the new realm.

The beginning of Egypt's health system was intimately linked to that army. All medical and public hygiene measures that were introduced in the first half of the nineteenth century, such as collecting vital statistics, vaccinating against smallpox, building hospitals and public clinics, imposing quarantines, and so forth, were introduced by Mehmed Ali and his assistants—that is, by the state—to

protect the country's manpower in order to make sure that the army would be strong enough.

Needless to say, the Egyptian people did benefit from these measures. Smallpox was contained; the plague, which for the previous six centuries had visited the country once every nine years on average, disappeared after the 1835 epidemic; cholera epidemics became less and less deadly; and life expectancy was considerably improved. But these benefits were never intended to be conferred for their own sake, nor were they delivered in response to any humanitarian calls emanating from society at large.

Although the connection between public health and the military was a peculiar feature of Mehmed Ali's reign in the first half of the nineteenth century, this link left a lasting mark on the Egyptian state. Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, whether it was ruled by Mehmed Ali and his descendants, by the British, or by post-independence nationalists, the state was never accountable to its citizens in any way. This was always an aloof, alien administration—concerned, above all, with its own survival and its own well-being.

The intolerance that the Egyptian state currently exhibits toward any criticism of how it is dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic therefore is nothing new. Rather, this is part of its DNA. The Egyptian state deals with Egyptians not as rights-bearing citizens, but as a hindrance, a nuisance, even a danger.

And nothing represents the way our government deals with us better than the bizarre, even obscene, New Administrative Capital, a multi-billion-dollar megaproject in the middle of the desert to the east of Cairo. It is designed as a garrison city, where the state's agents can be ensconced behind fortified walls while the Egyptian people are kept safely at bay. Think Louis XIV's Versailles, multiplied by 100.

In the midst of the pandemic, when millions of Egyptians were anxious about their health and their jobs, the prime minister decided to pay a visit to the site on September 19. His announcement to the press left no doubt about where the state's priorities lay. "The biggest challenge" the government was facing, he said, was "to stick to the original schedule" for finishing construction of the New Administrative Capital. ■

# Late Ottoman Intrigue and Legacies Across the Mediterranean

JOSHUA LUSTIG

An exiled North African statesman spends his final years in Florence, consumed with complex litigation to preserve his estates from confiscation by the political rivals now in power. His intricate, drawn-out legal (and extralegal) maneuvers pit him against governments, throw him into strange alliances, and expose him to betrayals by his own hired fixers. The battle spills into secular and religious courts in multiple jurisdictions and continues for decades after his death. By this time, his homeland has been taken over by a foreign power. Though he leaves no recognized spouse or children, his shrewd estate planning creates a set of heirs who enjoy the wealth he had fought so fiercely to shield, while the state ends up with nothing but responsibility for his debts.

This may sound like an all too familiar tale from today's news—elites from developing nations using tax havens to squirrel away embezzled fortunes and retire in Mediterranean splendor while their countrymen languish in poverty. But this particular North African, a former Tunisian grandee known as General Husayn, lived in the nineteenth century. And for all the parallels his case might seem to have with contemporary examples, his were very different times indeed. The most notable difference might lie in his personal origins: Husayn was a freed slave.

In the world he knew, the Ottoman Empire, which sprawled from the Balkans through its Turkish heartland and across the Middle East and North Africa, it was not entirely unusual for a slave to rise to high rank and fortune. For centuries, the imperial bureaucracy and the military leadership had been staffed by a remarkable,

quasi-meritocratic system: slave raids into outlying Christian lands snatched young boys who were then groomed for office. Some eventually became admirals, provincial governors, even grand viziers.

Husayn, like many of these slave-officials, came from the Caucasus; he had been abducted from his family in Circassia, on the northeast coast of the Black Sea, then sent to

military school in Tunis. There, slaves like him were known as Mamluks, in the tradition of the warrior dynasties that had ruled Iraq and Egypt in earlier centuries. Husayn would rise to the highest levels of the provincial administration in the mid-nineteenth century. He and his associates were inspired by the reformist impulse emanating from the center of the empire at that time, when the Ottoman sultans and their advisers, recognizing the need to regenerate the empire to withstand the challenge of the rising Western European powers, encouraged the adoption of new ideas and systems of governing—giving rise to a sweeping program of change known as the Tanzimat reforms.

Husayn's story shows how these winds of change reached even the semi-independent provinces at the edges of the empire. It also shows how the Ottoman influence continued to shape the lives of people in those lands even after they had fallen under European colonial rule. But does this complex mixture of historical legacies still linger in today's North Africa?

By closely examining Husayn's life and the afterlife of his estate, Tunisian historian M'hamed Oualdi seeks to raise many such questions in *A Slave Between Empires*. For a rather short book, it carries an ambitious agenda. But the core premise is simple and ingenious. By tracing one late Ottoman's literal legacy—his posthumous estate—Oualdi wagers that it will be possible to grasp what it was like to live through successive imperial

**A Slave Between Empires:  
A Transimperial History of  
North Africa**  
*M'hamed Oualdi*  
*Columbia University Press, 2020*

regimes, and how mentalities and social structures were reshaped by the transition. We may even be able to follow remnants of the same thread into the next century and beyond. This is not biography, but microhistory: a close study of a representative case that encapsulates larger historical trends at the human scale.

### FREE AGENTS

Although Oualdi provides glimpses of Husayn as a younger official energetically committed to implementing Tanzimat-style reforms to modernize Tunisia, the book's main focus is on his later years in exile, as a older man obsessed with the fate of his fortune and uninterested in engaging with Florentine society, apart from availing himself of the courts. He makes for a fairly unattractive protagonist, yet there is something compelling in his grim determination to get the better of the various states maneuvering to appropriate his wealth as soon as he dies—something redolent of a Balzac novel, perhaps, with another level of pathos deriving from his past as a slave.

In his telling of Husayn's story, Oualdi emphasizes that North Africans found different ways to exercise agency during the late nineteenth century—that is, to act in their own interests under Ottoman and then French colonial rule. In some cases, as in the legal saga over Husayn's estate, they exploited the overlap of Ottoman and French influence. But Oualdi cautions against the simplistic (or romantic) view that any agency on the part of North Africans was necessarily a form of resistance to colonial oppression.

As with Husayn and his heirs, sometimes people acted out of self-interest, or to keep property in the family—even if the family was loosely defined, like Husayn's. Oualdi argues that the officially childless Husayn's expedient construction of a household to shield his estate drew on regional traditions whereby families were flexible units that readily incorporated outsiders. Husayn named two girls raised in his household (one of whom seems to have been his daughter with an Italian servant) and the two sons of an Islamic scholar in his circle as his heirs.

One of Oualdi's key points is that historians should pay as much attention to such Ottoman legacies in North Africa as they do to French

colonialism. After all, much of the region was part of the Ottoman Empire for several centuries, albeit the provinces were often effectively independent territories under strong local rulers. By comparison, the period of French colonization was a blip in the historical record. But given how decentralized the Ottoman system was, how lasting an influence did it leave behind?

In fact, Oualdi argues, the empire did not just go away after the French colonized Algeria in the 1830s and then invaded Tunisia a half-century later. Not only did the Ottomans continue to claim North Africans as imperial subjects, but also, "Istanbul sought to re-Ottomanize Tunisians." This belated centralizing push was part of the Tanzimat reforms. Oualdi says that for North Africa, "in parallel to the French conquest of Algeria, the era of Ottoman political reforms during the second half of the nineteenth century needs to be reappraised as a watershed in its own right."

Another aspect of those reforms that had an impact on North Africa, according to Oualdi, was the Ottoman attempt to rationalize the imperial finances. Disruptive new tax regulations issued from Istanbul threw the Tunisian administration into a debt crisis that ended in its financial affairs being put under the control of a European-dominated oversight board. The Ottoman debt itself would soon fall prey to a similar takeover—a brazen form of Western financial hegemony foreshadowing the heavily conditioned bailouts of the International Monetary Fund in the next century.

Husayn appears to have been embittered by the failure of the Tanzimat reforms to take root in Tunisia, but he remained a loyal Ottoman subject—oddly enough, perhaps, for someone who had been enslaved by the imperial recruitment system, though he also profited handsomely from that system's provision of social mobility for its loyal and competent servants. But Istanbul's persistent efforts to exert influence over parts of the empire that were slipping from its control suited Husayn's purposes in his endless litigation by adding another layer of complexity to the question of his identity. Was he a French, Italian, Tunisian, or Ottoman subject? As long as that question was too complicated to resolve, his estates would be safe.

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*North Africans found different ways to act in their own interests under Ottoman and French rule.*

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## EXILE NETWORKS

Although Oualdi shows that Husayn was preoccupied with this legal wrangling, he also fleetingly suggests that the exiled statesman retained some of his earlier political passions: “Under his influence, the city of Florence became a political hub for North African and Ottoman reformists.” Oualdi notes that Husayn funded “underground action against French colonial domination,” but he neglects to clarify this tantalizing bit of intrigue. He also mentions a couple of times that Husayn funded the influential though short-lived Arabic newspaper *Al-‘Urwah al-Wuthqa* (The Trustworthy Bond), published by two preeminent Islamic reformists of the era, Jamal al-Din al-Afghani and Muhammad ‘Abduh. Unfortunately, little more is said of this remarkable-sounding excursion into journalism.

Deprived of more detail on these promising side-notes, I would have liked Oualdi to indulge in a few more digressions to develop his interesting observation that “in both Western Europe and Istanbul, various versions of North African nationalism were born in exile, out of homelessness.” More detail on exile newspapers and journals would have put Husayn’s dabbling in the context of a great age of print and revolution. At more or less the same time, Alexander Herzen was editing *Kolokol* (The Bell), calling for an end to autocracy in Russia, while Ahmad Faris al-Shidyaq, the pioneering Lebanese journalist and novelist in Arabic, was moving peripatetically across North Africa and Europe, with a two-year stop in Tunisia, before finally winding up in Istanbul.

Husayn’s involvement in such activities suggests that Oualdi may be correct in discerning that the aging exile held fast to the Tanzimat ideals of his prime—to a vision of reforming Tunisia, or the broader Muslim world, to make it capable of competing with the fast-modernizing West. In that interpretation, what might seem on the surface to be a rich expatriate’s obsession with tax avoidance could take on a more selfless dimension: he was fighting so desperately to shield his estates so that they might serve the cause of reform and independence. He was what might today be called a financier of diaspora politics. Perhaps the stereotypical corruption of elites from the postcolonial world living in exiled splendor sometimes partakes of such mixed, even noble, motives?

A further missed opportunity for Oualdi to spice up his narration a bit comes later in the saga,

after Husayn’s death, when one of his chosen heirs marries another intriguing figure, Princess Nazli of Egypt. Oualdi mentions that the princess was famous for hosting an intellectual salon in Cairo that provoked conservative authorities by entertaining advanced views on the role of women and other issues. But again he avoids going into much detail. Nazli’s previous husband, the Egyptian-born Ottoman diplomat Khalil Bey, had caused a sensation as an art collector in Paris, notoriously commissioning erotic paintings by Gustave Courbet. Adding a bit more on their adventures might have illustrated other ways in which late Ottomans used Europe as a space for experimenting with new ideas.

Of course, it might be objected that such high-society types are unrepresentative of more general historical transformations. Yet Husayn himself, despite his past as a slave, ended up a wealthy and prominent political figure. One might equally question Oualdi’s claims that Husayn’s legal strategizing over his estate was representative of the kinds of action colonial subjects took in their own interests. Was such agency available only to a select few?

Oualdi does draw attention to various figures of lesser rank in Husayn’s retinue who maneuvered adroitly, if not always ethically, for a piece of his estate—clerks, translators, lawyers, fixers of various sorts. Husayn himself was not above ordering these unreliable assistants to forge documents for his complex legal machinations. These agents were clearly adept at operating in the interstices of old and new empires.

Does all this prove Oualdi’s case about the importance of enduring Ottoman legacies in the region? A book this slender—just around 150 pages, excluding the copious endnotes and bibliography—doesn’t allow room to present sufficient evidence. Oualdi spends too many of his pages stating and restating theoretical or historiographical propositions, and too few letting the story speak for itself. That said, there were areas where the reader would benefit from a deeper explanation of context. Further discussion of the international politics of sovereign debt in the late Ottoman Empire, for example, would have fleshed out the book’s emphasis on its role in the failure of Tanzimat reforms to take hold in Tunisia.

But one of Oualdi’s key points is both convincing and worth repeating: the work of North African scholars does not receive enough attention, and listening more closely to their perspectives



would enrich outsiders' understanding of the region—and of the ways in which North Africans have exercised independent agency throughout history. “The need to bring the Maghrebi people back to the center of North African history is a political necessity,” Oualdi insists, as “a way of countering the growing marginalization and dehumanization of Maghrebi immigrants” in Europe. He aims to “bring the Maghrebi populations' ability to act back into view” in order to counter the assumption, commonplace at least until the Arab Spring, that these are societies trapped in long-term stagnation and autocracy.

At a time when Turkey and France are jockeying for influence across the Mediterranean from Cyprus to Libya, *A Slave Between Empires* has an odd contemporary relevance. Historical legacies may elude capture in concrete examples, but it is hard to deny that former imperial powers tend to maintain a sense of obligation or entitlement to old spheres of influence. Yet influence is a double-edged sword, and former subjects are often adept at turning neo-imperial pretensions to their own advantage—just like their predecessors, including a certain determined ex-slave in late-nineteenth-century Florence. ■