REPORT: COVID-19 PANDEMIC COMPOUNDS CHALLENGES FACING MENA RESEARCH

By Nermin Allam, Gail Buttorff and Marwa Shalaby

Researchers of Middle East and North African (MENA) politics have long faced considerable ethical, methodological, and logistical challenges conducting fieldwork in the region. Scholars encountered obstacles to access study sites and research subjects due to political instability, the prevalent repressive practices of autocratic regimes, general mistrust in foreign researchers and entities, and regimes' arbitrary exercise of power coupled with linguist and cultural differences (Clark and Cavatorta 2018).[1] The shifting political landscape following the Arab uprisings in 2011 revived questions relating to the safety and security of conducting research in conflict and politically sensitive contexts.[2] Recently, the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has imposed an additional layer of uncertainty and complexity on MENA research and researchers with the enforcement of travel restrictions, freezing of research funds as well as the shift to remote data-collection and research dissemination. These heightened uncertainties will have both short and long-term negative impacts on MENA research and researchers as outlined in this short contribution.

To better understand the adverse effects of the pandemic on scholars' productivity and research plans, we administered an online survey between May 26th and July 28th, 2020. The online survey was shared with academics and researchers working at regional and international institutions through academic listservs, personal networks, and various social media platforms. [3] More than 200 researchers and academics in the social sciences and humanities responded to the survey, 59% of whom identified as female. Almost three-quarters of respondents hold tenure-track positions (assistant, associate, or full professor, or equivalent), with the vast majority working at public (56%) or private (25%) research universities. Respondents worked at institutions in 32 countries in North and South America, Europe, Africa and the MENA.[4] Half of our respondents carried out research on the MENA region (n=107). In addition to the survey data, we conducted eleven qualitative interviews with international and regional scholars of Middle East politics to further explore the challenges facing academics studying the MENA region.
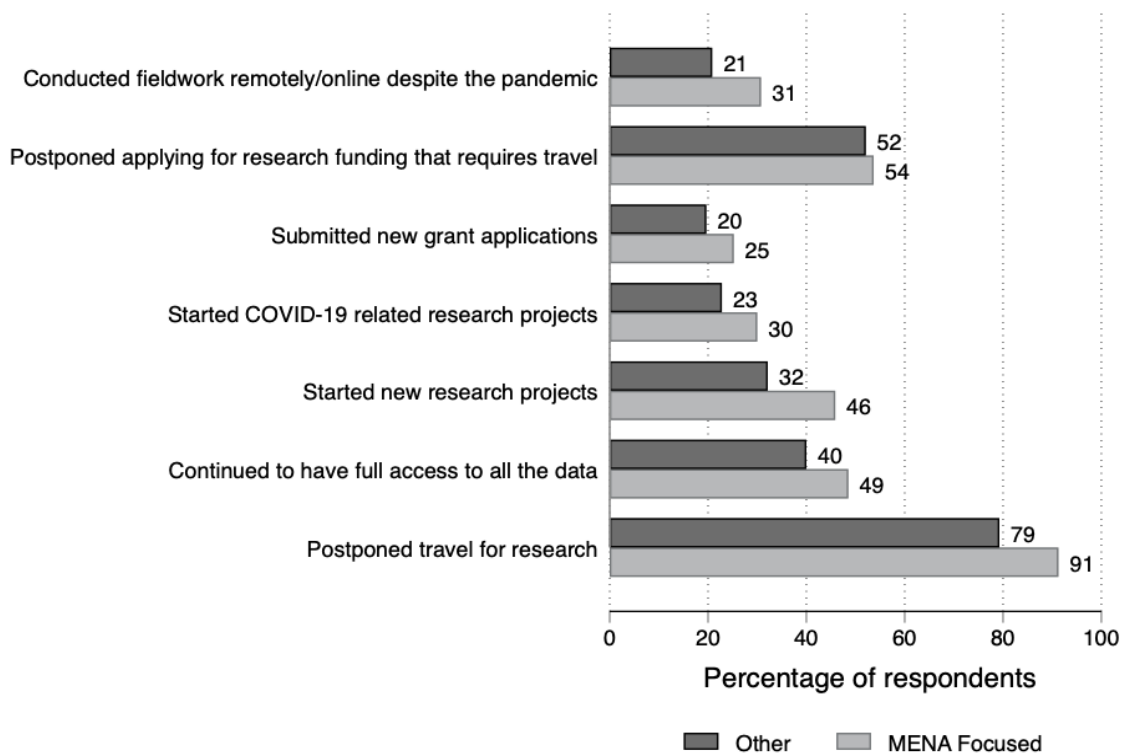
Our data shed clear light on the adverse effects of the pandemic on scholars' research productivity and ability to conduct research worldwide. Yet, the results provide considerable evidence that MENA researchers will have to deal with higher levels of uncertainty relating to conducting research and fieldwork in the region compared to scholars studying less autocratic settings. The first part of the memo highlights the short-term effects of the pandemics–mainly the shift to remote modes of data-collection, inability to access research sites, and acquiring research funding–on scholars' ability to conduct research. The second part of the memo deals with the long-term effect of the pandemic on MENA scholarship and publications as well as scholars' careers. It concludes with a discussion on the ethical and practical implication of the findings.

The Adverse Effects of the Pandemic on MENA Research

The COVID-19 pandemic transformed the way we teach, work, and carry out research. For most scholars conducting comparative work, the ability to travel for data collection is essential not only for advancing their research agendas, but also for career advancement and promotion. Due to the lockdowns, travel bans and restrictions, and social distancing measures, researchers were unable to carry out fieldwork; others have indefinitely delayed their plans for data collection. The vast majority (80%) of our survey respondents indicated that they had to change, cancel, or postpone their summer research plans due to the pandemic. The ability to disseminate research and network has also been disrupted. Early on in the pandemic many conferences were cancelled, and many scheduled later in the summer and fall moved to virtual formats. Sixty-eight percent reported conferences being cancelled and only 60% noted that conferences had moved to virtual formats.

While the pandemic has negatively affected academics' research and fieldwork plans, our survey and qualitative interview data show evidence that MENA researchers are more likely to face increased challenges. As shown in Figure 1, scholars with a MENA focus were more likely to postpone travel for research (91%) and to postpone applying for funding that requires travel (54%) compared to other regional experts. Only a third of MENA scholars were able to conduct their fieldwork remotely (31%), and (46%) started new projects, including research related to COVID-19 (30%). Finally, less than half of the respondents (49%) were able to resume their research and secure access to previously collected data.

Figure 1. Effect of the Pandemic on Scholars' Research Plans and Fieldwork
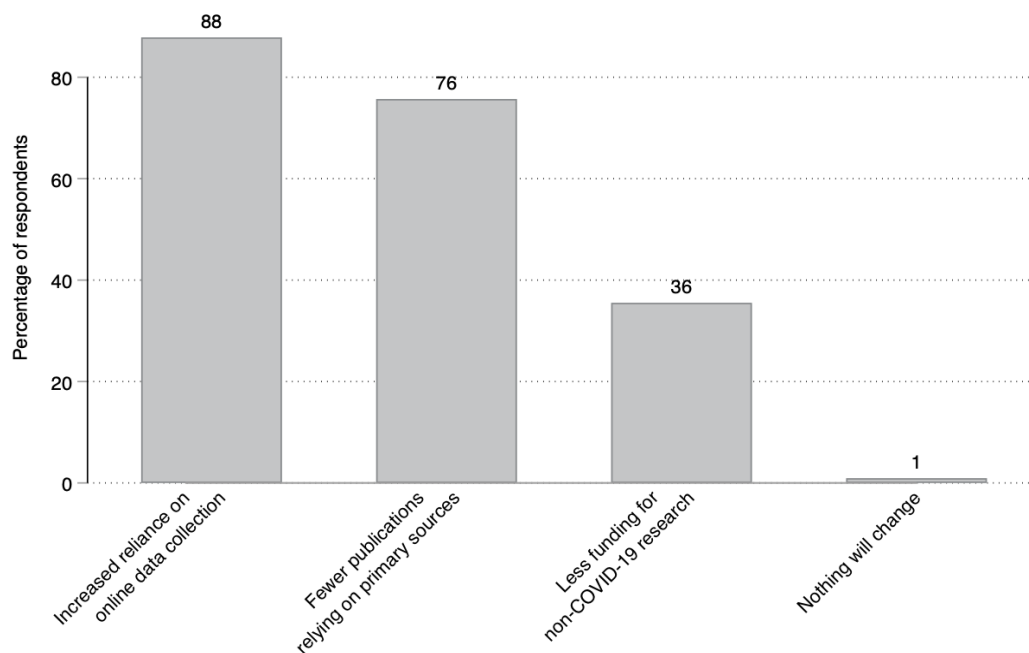
As universities around the globe cut their budgets and freeze research spending, these cuts will inevitably have an effect on scholars' research agenda. Eighty eight percent of MENA scholars reported that COVID-19 took a financial toll on their universities. Not surprisingly, then, the majority of MENA scholars (84 percent) were 'somewhat' or 'very concerned' about the ability to fund their research as a result of the pandemic.

Researchers based in MENA are in a further precarious position. Prior to the pandemic, resources dedicated to research and knowledge dissemination were already scarce and limited in most Middle East academic institutions.[5] For those scholars located at institutions in the region, approximately 60% reported research funding had been frozen or decreased by departments and universities, compared to 40% overall. As one of our respondents explained, "For scholars based in the Middle East region, research and funding were already a challenge and with the effects of COVID on universities, it will become even more challenging to be able to travel for conferences or to get grants for research." Researchers based in the MENA region might thus further fall behind in their research plan as they require not only access to data but also access to resources to carry out and disseminate their research.

Long-Term Effects of the Pandemic on MENA Research

Our survey respondents also expressed concerns over the long-term impact of the pandemic on their careers as well as on the field at large. This anxiety stems from twin challenges related to incertitude around resuming fieldwork as well as research funding. Eighty-eight percent of MENA scholars believe that, going forward, scholars will increasingly rely on online data collection and 76% believe fewer publications will utilize primary sources (Figure 2). Thirty six percent thought that funding and research priorities would shift toward COVID-19-related research. Less than one percent of respondents believed that nothing will change.

Figure 2. Long-Term effects of Pandemic on MENA Research[6]

In addition, researchers who conduct ethnographic studies and other qualitative data-collection methods in the MENA region expressed concerns that field research will not only be "delayed" but also "devalued," since "big data" and "regression" based research may not necessarily face similar challenges.[7] Such methodological divides will deepen, and as one respondent anticipated, it will become one of "the most important divide[s]" in the field. This disparity will have long term implications on scholars' careers. As an associate professor explained, researchers relying on qualitative data-collection are "really almost more like biologists who, you know, if they can't be in their lab, they can't write and they can't publish because they can't work."[8] Junior scholars who carry out qualitative work, one professor explained, will face at least "two, three years of repercussions."[9] In sum, the pandemic will have long term effects not only on scholars' research agendas, plans, and careers, but also on the field of Middle East politics at large.

Autocratic Politics and Research Ethics amidst the Pandemic

Most MENA scholars in our survey anticipate increased reliance on online modes of data collection (See Figure 2); however, the feasibility of these plans is still unclear. While online research designs—such as interviewing subjects over web-based video apps—have been hailed as the answer, they raise a number of serious ethical and practical concerns. Prior to the pandemic, researchers spent countless hours in the field with their subjects and interlocutors to establish networks of trust, appreciate the context, and ensure participants' safety and privacy as well as the ethical implementation of their research designs. This ability is almost non-existent in the new pandemic reality. Given the authoritarian nature of politics in most parts of the region, MENA researchers face security and ethical challenges associated with conducting fieldwork remotely. In our open-ended questions (as part of the online survey) and during interviews, participants unpacked some of the challenges associated with conducting online research in an authoritarian context. Salient among these challenges are security issues surrounding the use of digital

technologies, questions around access and inclusive research designs, and difficulties associated with doing research on vulnerable and displaced populations.

Digital technologies in the MENA often become mediums for state surveillance and crackdowns, raising concerns surrounding the security and safety of research subjects.[10] Many autocratic regimes are increasing their surveillance and control measures under the pretext of controlling the spread of the virus.[11] For example, a number of MENA governments launched contract tracing applications to trace the spread of the virus. Notwithstanding the importance of these applications for health measures, they can be abused by the regimes and used as tools for state surveillance in the absence of adequate privacy laws.[12] It is also unlikely that the regimes will relax their enhanced control measures once the pandemic is under control given their patterns of authoritarian consolidation.

Furthermore, researchers' overreliance on remote data-collection poses serious accessibility issues. Internet connectivity varies in accessibility and reliability across Middle Eastern societies, relying on online research design can thus result in further excluding the voices of disadvantaged research subjects who might not have access to internet and digital technology. In an online survey carried out by Al-Fanar media in 2019, almost half of the surveyed MENA-based researchers reported having unreliable internet connectivity.[13]

Finally, the challenge of online research design is further exacerbated for scholars who study vulnerable and displaced populations. One professor studying sex trafficking in refugee camps emphasized how it is impossible to secure "someone's trust that we see in refugee camp in Jordan to talk to me online about what happened….[i]t's not going to happen."[14] While digital technologies provide one way to mitigate the effects of the pandemic on research, they pose significant ethical and moral conundrums for MENA scholars.

To conclude, the outbreak of COVID pandemic created new barriers and exacerbated existing challenges to scholars who research the MENA region. Regardless of whether scholars utilize qualitative or quantitative methods, scholars of Middle East politics face distinct challenges. In the new COVID reality, challenges to field research will affect the knowledge produced about the region as well as scholars' careers and research agendas. Researchers based in MENA are in a further precarious situation, as budget cuts to the already scarce research funds will have long term effects on their research agendas.

At the same time, the global health crisis has opened possibilities for MENA scholars to explore new avenues of research. According to our survey, 46% of scholars specializing in MENA report starting new research projects and 30% of MENA scholars have started COVID-related research projects. In addition, there is a real opportunity to build and/or strengthen institutional and personal partnerships between Western and regional universities and scholars in a way that magnifies the work and voices of scholars in the region.

Endnotes

Allam, Buttorff and Shalaby Notes

1 Janine A. Clark and Francesco Cavatorta, *Political Science Research in the Middle East and North Africa: Methodological and Ethical Challenges* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2018).

2 Arne F. Wackenhut, "Ethical Considerations and Dilemmas Before, during and after Fieldwork in Less-Democratic Contexts: Some Reflections from Post-Uprising Egypt," *The American Sociologist* 49, no. 2 (June 1, 2018): 242–57, https://doi.org/10.1007/s12108-017-9363-z.

3 The survey was sent via email to about 600 scholars affiliated with the Middle East Studies Association. It was promoted by the APSA-MENA section, Arab Political Science Network (APSN), the Arab Social Science Network (ACSS) as well as the authors' social media networks.

4 65% of respondents work at institutions in the United States and Canada, 19% in Europe, and 13% in the MENA.

5 Al-Fanar Media, "Arab Researcher Survey," *Al-Fanar Media* (blog), accessed October 4, 2020, https://www.al-fanarmedia.org/tag/arab-researcher-survey/.

6 This figure reports distribution for MENA scholars only, n=107.

7 Author's Interview, Assistant Professor based in the United States, Jun 14 2020.

8 Author's Interview, Associate Professor based in the United States, May 30 2020.

9 Author's Interview, Assistant Professor based in the United States, Jun 14 2020.

10 Nathan J. Brown and Mark Berlin, "Steering the Wide Egyptian State: Ideology or Administration?," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, May 28, 2020, https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/05/28/steering-wide-egyptian-state-ideology-or-administration-pub-81924; Kanisha D. Bond, Milli Lake, and Sarah E. Parkinson, "Lessons from Conflict Studies on Research during the Coronavirus Pandemic," *Social Science Research Council* (blog), July 2, 2020, https://items.ssrc.org/covid-19-and-the-social-sciences/social-research-and-insecurity/lessons-from-conflict-studies-on-research-during-the-coronavirus-pandemic/.

11 Matthew Hedges, "Gulf States Use Coronavirus Threat to Tighten Authoritarian Controls and Surveillance," The Conversation, accessed October 4, 2020, http://theconversation.com/gulf-states-use-coronavirus-threat-to-tighten-authoritarian-controls-and-surveillance-136631.

12 Dima Samaro and Marwa Fatafta, "COVID-19 Contact-Tracing Apps in MENA: A Privacy Nightmare," *Access Now* (blog), June 18, 2020, https://www.accessnow.org/covid-19-contact-tracing-apps-in-mena-a-privacy-nightmare/.

13 Pakinam Amer, "Not Just Money: Arab-Region Researchers Face a Complex Web of Barriers," *Al-Fanar Media* (blog), December 3, 2019, https://www.al-fanarmedia.org/2019/12/not-just-money-arab-region-researchers-face-a-complex-web-of-barriers/.

14 Author's Online Interview with Adjunct Professor based in the United States, May 29, 2020

Lillian Frost Notes

[15] Author interview with an (adult) child of a Jordanian mother and Syrian father, February 2017.

[16] In this analysis, the Arab world refers to 17 countries in the Middle East and North Africa: Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates, and Yemen.

[17] These data are from the author's global dataset on discrimination toward women in state nationality laws from 2003–18. This dataset primarily draws from the findings presented in the following studies. Bronwen Manby, *Citizenship Law in Africa a Comparative Study*. New York, NY: Open Society, 2016. Equality Now, "The State We're In: Ending Sexism in Nationality Laws," January 2016. UNHCR's annual "Background Note on Gender Equality, Nationality Laws and Statelessness" from 2014–19. In the case of discrepancies between these datasets, the author consulted the respective nationality law directly.

[18] Although Algeria revised the provisions of its nationality law in 2005 to introduce gender equality in the conferral of nationality to children and spouses, Algerian Muslim women are banned from marrying, and as such, conferring nationality to men of other religions, and this restriction is not imposed on Algerian Muslim men. See Global Campaign for Equal Nationality Rights, "Countries: Middle East & North Africa," <https://equalnationalityrights.org/countries/middle-east-north-africa>.

[19] All statements regarding the content of these countries' nationality laws are based on the text of the most recent nationality laws in English, Arabic, and or French, unless otherwise noted. For greater detail on the contents of these laws in terms of women's nationality conferral, see Lillian Frost, "Brief on Women and Nationality in the Arab World," Boston Consortium for Arab Region Studies Series, April 2020, <https://f2b65c88-a185-4b0b-aa91-bb12b0500709.filesusr.com/ugd/55e102_2a01ee697d564fc7bea8723f67c13689.pdf>.

[20] In Iraq and Yemen this only applies when the child is born in-country. See Zahra Albarazi, "Regional Report on Citizenship: The Middle East and North Africa (MENA)," RSCAS/GLOBALCIT-Comp. 2017/3, November 2017