

Covid-19 and MENA Political Science: Impacts on Research and Region

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The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated existing challenges and created new barriers to research in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. Scholars studying the MENA region will face far more challenges relating to conducting research and fieldwork compared to those studying less autocratic settings.¹ In addition, budget cuts to already scarce research funds in MENA states will have short- and long-term effects on the career advancement and research agendas of scholars based in the region. Indeed, recent reports highlight the considerable effects of the pandemic on further limiting research resources, accessibility, and funding,² as well as adversely affecting the quality of instruction³ in academic institutions. Shifting the focus from research to the region, a number of important studies highlight the adverse effects of the pandemic on residents across the MENA region, including women,⁴ migrants and foreign workers,⁵ and other vulnerable populations.

This symposium builds on these studies by collecting perspectives on how both researchers and the populations they study have been affected by the pandemic. First, Sultan Alamer, Rana Mamdouh, and Nathan Brown examine the experiences of Egypt and Saudi Arabia to demonstrate that differences in technological advancements, institutional infrastructure (the “muscle memory” of state behavior), and relationships with healthcare workers influenced these authoritarian regimes’ response to the pandemic and shaped their policy outcomes.

Başak Yavçan adds a local politics perspective to studies of Syrian asylum-seekers in Turkey during COVID, finding vast variation based on their host

¹ See Nermin Allam, Gail Buttorff and Marwa Shalaby, “COVID-19 Pandemic Compounds Challenges Facing MENA Research,” *APSA MENA Politics Newsletter*, 2020; Gail Buttorff, Marwa Shalaby, and Nermin Allam, “A Survey Reveals How the Pandemic Has Hurt MENA Research,” *Al-Fanar Media*, 13 September 23, 2020; and Caroline Krafft, “Academic Challenges in the Time of COVID-19: Arab Social Scientists and Humanities in Focus,” Arab Council for Social Sciences, 2020.

² Melanie Swan and Tarek Abd Al-Galil, “Health and Economic Crises Threaten Arab Funding for Research.” *Al Fanar*, 7 July 7 2020: <https://www.al-fanarmedia.org/2020/07/health-and-economic-crises-threaten-arab-funding-for-research/>

³ See Ahmed Abdel-Tawwab, “Covid-19 and Education,” *Ahram Online*, 1 May 2020: <https://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContentP/4/368212/Opinion/Covid-and-education.aspx>; and Zohra Lassoued, Mohammed Alhendawi, and Raed Bashitialshaaer, “An Exploratory Study of the Obstacles for Achieving Quality in Distance Learning during the COVID-19 Pandemic,” *Journal of Education Sciences*, Vol 10, No. 9, 2020.

⁴ Aseel Alayli, “COVID-19 Magnifies Pre-Existing Gender Inequalities in MENA,” Arab Barometer, 1 December 2020: <https://www.arabbarometer.org/2020/12/covid-19-magnifies-pre-existing-gender-inequalities-in-mena/>.

⁵ Omer Karasapan, “Pandemic Highlights the Vulnerability of Migrant Workers in the Middle East,” *Brookings* (blog), September 17, 2020, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/future-development/2020/09/17/pandemic-highlights-the-vulnerability-of-migrant-workers-in-the-middle-east/>.

municipality's connections to international donor networks. Yavçan demonstrates how municipalities that had already established policy implementation networks through the 2016 EU-Turkey Migration Deal led them to develop response mechanisms for addressing vulnerable populations such as LGBTQI+ and disabled individuals, leaving them better equipped to respond during the pandemic in protecting both Syrian migrants and host communities. By focusing on the meso-level of analysis, her research shows how local municipalities, international donors, and civil society networks play a key role in shaping subnational variation in health outcomes and pandemic responses.

Aida Essaid similarly adds an important perspective to scholarship on the effects of the pandemic on vulnerable MENA populations. Drawing upon her role as Director of the Information and Research Center at Jordan's King Hussein Foundation, Essaid cautions that it is problematic to attempt to measure the impact of COVID on refugee populations independently from vulnerable members of the host population. She presents preliminary findings from a longitudinal study of child marriages among Syrian and Jordanian girls to suggest that the pandemic quickly reversed the effects of an intervention designed to decrease child marriages for both populations. Essaid also explains how and why vulnerable members of the host society were left with fewer resources for weathering the pandemic than refugees.

Finally, Robert Kubinec illustrates one perhaps unexpected benefit of the forced adaptation to the realities of COVID-19: the heightened awareness and appreciation of the utility of online modes of data collection. Drawing on recent experience implementing surveys using Facebook ad targeting, Kubinec details the increasingly popular technique of multilevel regression with post-stratification (MRP), which researchers can use to adjust online surveys to correct for known biases.

These contributions on the effects of COVID on both the MENA region and the researchers who study it demonstrate the many questions the pandemic raises for political scientists. How can MENA scholars, particularly those who engage in fieldwork, effectively pivot to leverage alternative methods of gathering and analyzing data? From a different perspective, can this be an opportunity to amplify voices from the region that are sometimes overshadowed by scholars at Western academic institutions? How should universities, journal editorial boards, and platforms like this newsletter respond to the heightened challenges that all these scholars face? Given the current research focusing on the effects of the pandemic on vulnerable populations, how can scholars conduct what Sarah Parkinson and Milli Lake term "methodologically robust, ethical, context-sensitive research"⁶ that avoids burdening over-researched groups such as refugees and victims of violence? Researchers have long contemplated these logistical issues and ethical dilemmas in their studies of and in the region, but the outbreak of pandemic pushes them to the

⁶ See Sarah Parkinson and Milli Lake's Advancing Research on Conflict Consortium: <https://advancingconflictresearch.com/aboutus>. On the impact of the pandemic on research assistants of color, see Aymar Nyenzi Bisoka, "Disturbing the Aesthetics of Power: Why Covid-19 Is Not an 'Event' for Fieldwork-based Social Scientists," Social Science Research Council, 28 May 2020: <https://items.ssrc.org/covid-19-and-the-social-sciences/social-research-and-insecurity/disturbing-the-aesthetics-of-power-why-covid-19-is-not-an-event-for-fieldwork-based-social-scientists/>.

forefront. Further, the vast variance in official and public responses to the pandemic – from initial precautionary measures (not) taken to vaccine accessibility – also presents opportunities for comparative analysis from the international to the local level. As political scientists and the people we study emerge from the pandemic, as we reckon with losses incurred and perspectives gained, the creativity, connectivity, and conscientiousness developed in the face of COVID's challenges can better position us to tackle the many important puzzles the MENA region continues to pose.

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