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RAFIK HARIRI CENTER
FOR THE MIDDLE EAST

THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 on Either Shore of the Mediterranean

Karim Mezran · Emily Burchfield · Paolo Alli · Emadeddin Badi · Haykel Ben Mahfoudh · Alessia Melcangi



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Cover image: The Strait of Gibraltar provides a natural physical barrier between the countries of Spain (north) and Morocco (south). In geologic terms, the 10-mile (16-kilometer) strait that separates the two countries, as well as Europe and Africa, is located where the two major tectonic plates—the Eurasian Plate and the African Plate—collide. This high-oblique, northeast-looking photograph shows the mountainous northern coast of Morocco and the coastal mountains of southern Spain, including the dagger-shaped, snow-covered Sierra Nevada Mountains of southeastern Spain. The Guadalquivir River flows from east to west along the base of the Sierra Morena Mountains in southern Spain. The famous British city of Gibraltar is located on the wedge-shaped peninsula on the east side of the bay in the southernmost protrusion of Spain. The city of Ceuta is a Spanish enclave on the extreme northeastern coast of Morocco. Ceuta, a free port with a large harbor, has remained under Spanish control since 1580. Source: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/nasa2explore/9364207155/>

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Introduction

Karim Mezran and Emily Burchfield

The COVID-19 pandemic has wreaked havoc on almost every nation of the world, creating new challenges and exacerbating preexisting ones. Attention has been focused on the health sector, as it was the first impacted by the pandemic. However, various actors rapidly utilized the effects of the health crisis for political purposes. At the same time, the pandemic has become a decisive factor in many countries' economic, political, and social development. This necessitates deeper analysis to understand the pandemic's long-term impact in the various regions of the world. The states of North Africa and the broader Mediterranean region are no exception; in each one, the crisis has become a central factor around which old and new forces have converged. Understanding the interplay between these states' responses to the pandemic and their struggles to manage conflicts, economic problems, migration, and protest movements is vital for the public and policymakers alike.

The purpose of this issue brief is to assess systemic changes in the Mediterranean region—redistribution of power, economic relations, and migratory flows—as a

consequence of the impact of COVID-19. Currently, the Mediterranean region's power system highlights the predominance of the north shore, but some have posited that the spread of COVID-19 could lead to a redistribution of power projection. Others have pointed to the effects on broader geopolitical power struggles in the region.

The crisis caused by COVID-19 is unlikely to recede anytime soon. There is a foreseeable future in which the political, economic, and societal impact of the crisis—and states' responses—could facilitate a further breakdown in European solidarity, leading to the failure of a “European agenda” toward the Mediterranean, and thereby a rise in conflicts and tensions on the southern shore of the Mediterranean Basin. These dynamics will be further complicated by the US presidential election in November 2020, which could alter the course of foreign policy in the region in one way or another. With this in mind, this issue brief illuminates the key challenges faced in the Mediterranean community, and warns of the undesirable outcomes ahead if international inaction toward the region persists.



A member of a medical team is seen beside a banner for the Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, as he sprays disinfectant as a precautionary move amid concerns over the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) outbreak at the underground Al Shohadaa “Martyrs” metro station in Cairo, Egypt March 22, 2020. REUTERS/Mohamed Abd El Ghany/File Photo

The European Union (EU) and the Mediterranean Region

Paolo Alli

In recent years, Europe has experienced a surge of nationalist political forces everywhere. The basis of their propaganda has been a vehement stance against immigration, while the real problems affecting European institutions, as well as Europe's positive potential, have been overshadowed. The most obvious examples have been Italy, Germany, and Hungary, but northern countries, like the Netherlands and Sweden, have also been affected by this trend.

The positioning of migration at the heart of political debate has rewarded some leaders, like Hungary's Victor Orban and Italy's Matteo Salvini, and weakened others, such as Germany's Angela Merkel. This was achieved thanks to the widespread misperception of the phenomenon of immigration, fueled by populist propaganda and based on the citizens' sense of insecurity.

The COVID-19 pandemic has completely changed priorities in Europe. A new and dramatic sense of insecurity has captured the populations of all countries: the concern for one's own health and for one's own survival. The topic of immigration has suddenly disappeared from the public debate and from the governments' agendas, radically changing the political scenarios. As an example, the Italian populist party led by Salvini lost almost 10 percent in polls in just three months; at the same time, the approval of the ruling prime minister has grown, despite his questionable management of the emergency.¹ Meanwhile in Germany, Chancellor Merkel conducted a very effective fight against the coronavirus, and the approval for her work has grown to the highest level in years.²

The political forces that used immigration as a flag are now desperate for new propaganda themes, focusing on mistakes, actual or perceived, in the management of the health emergency. The COVID-19 issue is the new ground of political contest.

The European institutions—the parliament, commission, and central bank—have so far done even more than their limited

powers would have allowed. On the other hand, fierce confrontations are taking place between the different European states, which are once again locked into their own national egoisms. This phenomenon dramatically feeds the negative perception of Europe among many citizens, and provides new pretexts for nationalist propaganda.

Europe will emerge from the challenge of the pandemic either strengthened or destroyed. If collective interest prevails over the self-interest of individual countries, the European project will be relaunched; otherwise, history will declare its failure. This scenario could have serious consequences on the relationship between the European Union and Africa. The EU has often represented the most credible and attentive interlocutor for the African continent, both for the geographical proximity and for the strong historical, economic, and cultural links.

In recent years in Europe, the need for a major Marshall Plan for Africa has been affirmed, under pressure of the migration problem. The risk now is that this project will be abandoned. Because of the pandemic, migratory flows around the world are ebbing, or even reversing.³ Locations traditionally considered attractive because they are safe, such as rich countries or large urban areas, have suddenly become places of contamination in migrants' perception; as an example, many migrants from Ethiopia and other African countries have left cities to return to their villages of origin.⁴

Migrations flows from Africa to Europe are already demonstrating this reversed trend. Official data relating to Italy, the main landing destination of the central Mediterranean route, are highly significant. In January and February, the most difficult months of the year for the maritime crossing, the number of migrants were 1,342 and 1,211, respectively, while in March and April, which normally see values three to four times higher, the numbers dropped, respectively, to 241 and 671.⁵ In May and June, the values increased to 1,654 and 1,831, respectively, half of those in 2018 and

1 Frida Ghitis, "How COVID-19 Scrambled Italy's Politics and Dented Salvini's Appeal," *World Politics Review*, May 7, 2020, <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/28742/how-covid-19-scrambled-italy-s-politics-and-dented-salvini-s-appeal>.

2 Sabine Kinkartz, "Coronavirus: Angela Merkel's Approval Ratings Up Amid Health Crisis," *Deutsche Welle*, April 3, 2020, <https://www.dw.com/en/coronavirus-angela-merkels-approval-ratings-up-amid-health-crisis/a-53001405>.

3 "COVID-19 Crisis Through a Migration Lens," World Bank Migration and Development Brief 32 (2020), <https://tinyurl.com/y3mwbjqn>.

4 "Migration Data Relevant for the COVID-19 Pandemic," Migration Data Portal, June 26, 2020, <https://tinyurl.com/yxu8pnzw>.

5 "Europe—Mixed Migration Flows in the Mediterranean," International Organization for Migration Displacement Tracking Matrix, June 11, 2020, <https://dtm.iom.int/reports/europe-%E2%80%9494-mixed-migration-flows-europe-monthly-overview-april-2020>.



A rescued migrant carries a child onboard an Armed Forces of Malta vessel in Senglea, in Valletta's Grand Harbour, as the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) outbreak continues in Malta August 3, 2020. *REUTERS/Darrin Zammit Lupi*

comparable to 2019, when the Italian government closed the harbors. If one considers 2017, which was one of the worst years in terms of migrant flows, those numbers are thirteen times lower. However, in July the number of migrants to Italy jumped up to 7,067 after the country demonstrated control of the pandemic. This figure was four to six times higher than in 2018 and 2019, and not far from 2017. The trend seemed to be confirmed in August. It is very difficult to predict what will happen in the near future, and how the pandemic will continue to influence this trend in migration. Certainly, the health crisis will not end soon, and the perception of insecurity of Europe will very likely prevail over the attractiveness of its well-being. In this context of rapid and unpredictable weakening of relations between Europe and Africa, the stabilization of the Mediterranean region will presumably see new actors enter the fray.

Totalitarian regimes are increasingly seeking leading roles in international affairs, in order to strengthen the fiduciary relationship between their leaders and the people, while domestic factors create rifts. Coronavirus is creating serious consensus problems for both Russia and China; for Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping, the Mediterranean region is an ideal scenario to expand their spheres of geopolitical and economic influence. It is no coincidence that both these countries have immediately shown solidarity with Italy, considered their Trojan horse to Europe. Russian and

Chinese aid has consolidated in Italian public opinion the idea that they are friends, while Europe is again perceived to be an enemy.

In Turkey, Recep Erdogan is facing an increasingly complex domestic situation, ranging from the traditional Kurdish problem to the dire economic crisis. His mismanagement of the pandemic, which caused the highest number of infections after the United States and Europe, even exceeding Iran, is another tough test for the Turkish president. Therefore, an even more aggressive approach by Turkey in the Mediterranean region is predictable in the coming months, and is already playing out in Libya.

The most solid actor to ensure stability in the region appears to be NATO, which since 2017 has established a hub for Southern Europe within the Allied Joint Force Command Naples. In recent months, NATO has been perceived by the public as an important entity in managing the COVID-19 crisis, thanks to the use of its own personnel and equipment for the transport of medical tools to the most affected areas.⁶ But, the real added value of the Alliance is still in its ability to adapt quickly to changing scenarios, providing interventions and solutions to project stability and safety. At a time when ruptures in EU solidarity risk further exacerbating fallout from the crisis, NATO could be a key to ensuring stability in the Mediterranean region.

⁶ "NATO's Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic," NATO, April 14, 2020, https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2020/4/pdf/200401-factsheet-COVID-19_en.pdf.

COVID and Conflict in Libya

Emadeddin Badi

Libya has been continuously befallen by tragedy for the past nine years. The country's hopes for a thriving post-revolutionary transition toward democracy have been turned to ash by the greed of its political elites and the jockeying of regional powers enabling and abetting them. The COVID-19 crisis is but a new layer of desolation for Libyan citizens and migrants transiting through the North African country. Both are already bearing the brunt of the fallouts from the pandemic as the country's under-resourced authorities attempt to contain a growing outbreak. With more than 12,629 cases at the time of writing, a debilitated health sector, and a diminishing testing capacity, the structural deficiencies hampering an efficient public health response will be compounded by the dysfunction associated with the country's internationalized civil war and its geopolitical reverberations.

The internationalization of the Libyan crisis since the launch of Khalifa Haftar's offensive on April 4, 2019, has not only exacerbated the country's domestic troubles, but has also cemented Libya's position at the epicenter of wider regional crises. The surprise offensive—greenlit by Washington—quickly drew in Turkey, which acted as a buffer against a transnational coalition of states backing Haftar to overthrow the UN-backed Government of National Accord (GNA) in Tripoli. Ankara's reactive, but swift, involvement was initially within the context of its wider geopolitical rivalry with the United Arab Emirates (UAE), a competition underpinned by ambitions for intra-Sunni hegemony in the Middle East and North Africa.

The prospect of a proxy battle failed to trigger decisive action by European states, which apathetically spectated, assuming the conflict would remain contained to Libya's own borders. While states like France backed Haftar's offensive militarily and politically, other EU states prioritized their bilateral ties with Haftar's Gulf backers, in turn denying their diplomats the opportunity to constructively tackle the conflict when they could.⁷ Europe's initial assumption proved misleading, as Libya became the intersection of other regional rivalries that bled into one another. The signing of a controversial maritime agreement between the GNA and

Ankara produced the contemporary reality, one in which Libya's military and political spheres have become the battleground to settle disputes related to gas exploration in the Eastern Mediterranean.⁸ Moreover, the growing involvement of Moscow—which significantly scaled up its military footprint in Libya by transferring mercenaries and jets to support Haftar—has now also placed Libya at the center of a cynical game of great-power competition between the United States and Russia.⁹

The confluence of the aforementioned geopolitical developments with the outbreak of COVID-19 has several implications, not least for Libya's energy sector. Taking stock of the pandemic from the perspective of Libya, a rentier state, is important, not least because the virus has unleashed a devastating blow to the global economy. It has also induced an oil-price collapse, with uncertainty remaining very high. This dynamic has played into the international community's indifference toward—if not support for—the blockade on oil exports imposed by Haftar since January 2020.¹⁰ The blockade, engineered to look as if it was imposed by tribes, is in fact a symptom of economic warfare. It was designed by Haftar as a way to gain leverage over the GNA by starving state revenues and diminishing the resources available to it. The *laissez-faire* attitude displayed by international powers—particularly the United States—toward Haftar's blockade is more indicative of a policy influenced by the COVID-induced price collapse than it is a desire to entertain his ambitions to illegally sell oil on the international market.

As a global black-swan event, the COVID-19 pandemic and its fallout were also utilized as a window of opportunity by proxy powers to advance their foreign policy agenda against other adversaries. This manifested itself as a significant escalation in foreign-operated airstrikes, as well as the transfer of weapons and mercenaries to Libya in the months during which most proxy meddlers—such as the UAE, Turkey, and Russia—experienced a surge in cases back home. The COVID-induced economic turmoil and perceived domestic uncertainty also acted as catalysts for interventionism in the case of Turkey, whose involvement in Libya is primarily driven

7 Emadeddin Badi, "Russia Isn't the Only One Getting Its Hands Dirty in Libya," *Foreign Policy*, April 21, 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/04/21/libyan-civil-war-france-uae-khalifa-haftar/>.

8 Ariel Cohen, "Turkey-Libya Maritime Deal Upsets Mediterranean Energy Plan," *Forbes*, January 8, 2020, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/arielcohen/2020/01/08/turkey-libya-maritime-deal-upsets-mediterranean-energy-plan/#807a6ef6bee4>.

9 "US Says Russia Sent Jets to Libya 'Mercenaries,'" *BBC*, May 26, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-52811093>.

10 "Pro-Haftar Forces Say Will Maintain Libya Oil Blockade," *Defense Post*, July 12, 2020, <https://www.thedefensepost.com/2020/07/12/haftar-oil-blockade-libya/>.



Members of Libyan National Army (LNA) commanded by Khalifa Haftar sit inside a tent at one of their sites in west of Sirte, Libya August 19, 2020. Picture taken August 19, 2020. *REUTERS/Esam Omran Al-Fetori.*

by its perceived geoeconomic interests. Indeed, the pandemic's impact cemented Ankara's view that militarily intervening in Libya would not only serve to counter the UAE ideologically, but also yield long-term economic benefits, which may contribute to offsetting Turkey's COVID-compounded economic challenges. In this sense, the pandemic has contributed to significantly reshaping the regional landscape in the Middle East and North Africa. Turkey's permanent footprint in western Libya will be utilized as a springboard for further expansion, but it will also have an impact on energy politics. Indeed, Ankara will seek to import more oil from Libya, but it will also utilize its memorandum of understanding with the GNA to negotiate the redrawing of maritime borders in the Eastern Mediterranean.

The latest COVID-related Libyan development that may wake European policymakers from their slumber is the

cluster of cases discovered in Libya's southern region of Fezzan. The rapid increase of cases in Libya's south, known for being a smuggling and transit hub for migrants and goods, will likely send shockwaves through Brussels, which will once again seek to reinforce the European Union's border-externalization policies. Over the years, these have done little but exacerbate instability in Libya while perpetuating migrants' and refugees' suffering. More broadly, the piecemeal and reactive nature of EU's migration-centered policymaking toward Libya has only further alienated Europe from meaningfully influencing the country's landscape. With no sign that Europe will break away with its long-standing and ill-considered policy of containment toward Libya, the implication is that Europe would be sacrificing its political capital in favor of other regional players that will take matters into their own hands—to the detriment of Libya and Euro-Mediterranean countries alike.

Politics and Pandemic in Tunisia

Haykel Ben Mahfoudh

In Tunisia, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic coincided with the advent of a new government in February 2020 after difficult political consultations that followed the October 2019 legislative elections. The government swiftly implemented an emergency preparedness plan to mitigate the spread of the virus. The state of emergency was reinforced and extended—having already been in place since 2015, in response to the threat of terrorism—by a presidential decree based on Article 80 of the constitution relating to the “state of exception,” a legal regime that gives the president of the republic enhanced powers in times of crisis.¹¹ The Tunisian government adopted vital and evidence-based public health measures to help control the spread of COVID-19.¹² A country-wide lockdown was introduced, shuttering restaurants and businesses and grinding economic activity to a halt. Public services were reduced to the minimum, prioritizing health and security services. Educational institutions closed, as well as sea and air borders. The country became completely isolated.

Despite the rigorous nature of the confinement measures and restrictions imposed on the freedom to work and move freely, in the first months of lockdown “the government... received no push-back from its citizens. Tunisians support the government’s actions.”¹³ This period was also marked by an important surge of solidarity from civil-society organizations. Another important aspect of the pandemic was the rush to digitalize services, after decades of slow, incremental transformations.

Given the urgency of the pandemic, the government asked the parliament for an authorization to issue decree laws (government acts taken in the legislative sphere) for two months under Article 70 (2) of the constitution, in order to facilitate a more efficient response.¹⁴ The rationale behind this request was to ease the administration’s action and

overcome various legal impediments of a bureaucratic nature. The parliament was not receptive to the first request. The Chamber of Deputies even entered into a debate with then-Prime Minister Elyes Fakhfakh, arguing that the parliament had to maintain its legislative action during this period. In reality, the leading parliamentary majority was trying to gain legitimacy by presenting itself at the forefront of combat against the spread of the pandemic. Finally, the enabling act was passed for a period of two months, as provided for in the constitution, after amendments and political compromises. Therefore, it was the government that finally set the pace of the response to COVID-19.

From the outset, the Ministry of Health adopted a transparent communication strategy toward the population by communicating daily on the pandemic situation and providing figures showing the evolution of the pandemic in the country.¹⁵ However, the main concern remains the risk of collapse of the public health system, due to preexisting structural weaknesses and regional inequalities, despite the generally recognized quality and involvement of public health personnel in Tunisia. The government has pledged its commitment to health-sector reform and implemented exceptional measures, including the allocation of an open budget line and the establishment of a voluntary fund to counter COVID-19.

After months of well-tolerated lockdown, the public health crisis in Tunisia is gradually improving; the country recorded zero new coronavirus cases for almost a month, and the government is further relaxing restrictions on movement and businesses.¹⁶ In an interview with French media, Fakhfakh spelled out his government’s main goals for the post-COVID period: saving jobs and reforming the economic model, “stressing that the priorities are the health crisis and the recovery of the economy,” and not “politicking.”¹⁷

11 Tunisia’s Constitution of 2014, Article 80 (1): “In the event of the imminent danger threatening the nation’s institutions or the security or independence of the country, and hampering the normal functioning of the state, the President of the Republic may take any measures necessitated by the exceptional circumstances, after consultation with the Head of Government and the Speaker of the Assembly of the Representatives of the People and informing the President of the Constitutional Court. The President shall announce the measures in a statement to the people.”; Haykel Ben Mahfoudh, “L’article 80 de la Constitution et ‘l’état d’exception Sanitaire,’” *Leaders*, March 23, 2020, <https://tinyurl.com/yyt5lhm9>.

12 “UNHCR Tunisia COVID-19 Emergency Preparedness and Response Plan,” United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, April 11, 2020, <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/75345>.

13 Hussein Solomon, “The Impact of Covid-19 on the Middle East and North Africa,” *Institute for Contemporary Affairs* 20, 6 (2020), <https://jcpa.org/article/the-impact-of-covid-19-on-the-middle-east-and-north-africa/>.

14 Haykel Ben Mahfoudh, “Il est Temps de Passer aux Décrets-lois,” *Leaders*, March 21, 2020, <https://www.leaders.com.tn/article/29424-haykel-ben-mahfoudh-il-est-temps-de-passer-aux-decrets-lois>.

15 “COVID-19,” Government of the Presidency of the Republic of Tunisia, <http://covid-19.tn>.

16 Tom Allinson, “Tunisia Nears Zero Coronavirus Cases as it Eyes Tourism,” *Deutsche Welle*, June 13, 2020, <https://www.dw.com/en/tunisia-economy-hopes-for-tourists-after-coronavirus/a-53790180>.

17 See the full interview: Marc Perelman, “‘We’ve Managed to Keep Covid-19 Under Control in Tunisia,’ PM Tells France 24,” *France 24*, May 13 2020, <https://www.france24.com/en/africa/20200513-we-ve-managed-to-keep-covid-19-under-control-in-tunisia-prime-minister-fakhfakh-says>.



A demonstrator waves the flag of Tunisia as he attends a demonstration held near the building of the Assembly of the Representatives of the People (ARP) in Bardo, Tunis. *Reuters/Hans-Lucas*

The country completed its deconfinement plan between May 4 and June 14, opened its borders for tourism starting June 27, and resumed economic activity.¹⁸

While COVID-19 may be under control in Tunisia, the pre-existing challenges highlighted by the crisis persist. Now, two main dangers await the country: a serious economic recession, with a risk of an implosion of the public deficit and debt servicing; and further political deadlock following Fakhfakh's abrupt resignation on July 15.¹⁹

Although the crisis strengthened feelings of national solidarity for a time, Tunisia's post-pandemic political future does not look bright. Fierce competition between parties resumed within the government and parliament as soon as the spread of the virus was contained, culminating in the prime minister's departure following a campaign led by the

main Islamist party, Ennahdha, to oust him with a vote of no confidence. In the process, Fakhfakh took down with him six government ministers belonging to Ennahdha. Although the resignation was purportedly aimed at preventing further political conflict, this episode gives an impression of deep malaise, which nothing can prevent from turning into a real institutional crisis if voices of wisdom and a sense of responsibility do not prevail over ideological considerations and personal incompatibilities. The president must nominate a replacement to start consultations to form a new government, but—if recent history is any indicator—this process will not go smoothly.

The competition between the government officials on one side and the political class on the other has resulted in real fractures. In a speech given while attending an Iftar dinner with the security forces during his visit to the city of Kebili

18 Yasmina Abouzzohour, "Tunisia May Have Beaten COVID-19, but Challenges Persist," Brookings, July 30, 2020, <https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/tunisia-may-have-beaten-covid-19-but-challenges-persist/>.

19 Hamdi Alkshali and Angela Dewan, "Tunisia Prime Minister Abruptly Resigns," CNN, July 15, 2020, <https://www.cnn.com/2020/07/15/africa/tunisia-politics-elyes-fakhfakh-pm-resigns-intl/index.html>.

(in southwestern Tunisia), President Kais Saïed hammered the dividing line between “them” and “us.” He also heavily criticized the attempt to amend Article 45 of the Rules of Procedure of Parliament to ban partisan tourism among the parliamentary groups—a prevalent phenomenon in Tunisian politics. Political infights will not solidify the social pact. What government and international institutions, especially the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF), will do for the country will have important implications for the democratic experience.

Beyond domestic politics, COVID might impact Tunisia’s standing in regional dynamics. Whereas many European countries have proven to be more vulnerable and extremely affected by the pandemic, Tunisia has so far successfully contained the virus and avoided the heavy human toll some of its neighbors to the north endured. Given this context, there might be a shift in the debate on migration and the relationship with the European neighborhood.

However, Tunisia will also continue to come under pressure because of the shifting positions in the region toward

the conflict in Libya. Despite intensive efforts from both Tunisian diplomats and their French counterparts to pass a draft resolution before the United Nations Security Council calling for “immediate cease-fires in major conflicts that are on the Security Council agenda, from Syria and Yemen to Libya, South Sudan and Congo,” and for all parties to armed conflicts “to engage immediately in a durable humanitarian pause for at least 90 days to deliver aid,” the draft resolution was rejected by the United States. The initiative is now taken up by Germany, taking care to separate the duty of European solidarity from the obligation to provide humanitarian aid.²⁰ Tunisia’s engagement on the Libya conflict could enhance its position in international affairs, but only if it is not consumed by its own domestic political turmoil.

The post-COVID period will test political will and capacity to rebuild the economy of the country and overcome renewed forms of polarization. There are reasons to worry about backsliding in Tunisia’s development process; however, it is also clear that a vigilant intelligentsia and civil society are taking a strong stand against the retraction of freedom.

20 Edith M. Lederer, “UN Council Tries Again to Agree on COVID-19 Resolution,” *Associated Press*, May 13, 2020, <https://apnews.com/9f229ec3e785bd5d8742fc94b0d3ac41>.

Regime Responses in Egypt and Algeria

Alessia Melcangi

With the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic to the Mediterranean region, there is a real risk that the economic and political consequences may weigh on their already-vulnerable systems much more than the immediate health costs. In Egypt and Algeria, in particular, the pandemic has exacerbated preexisting tensions, triggering a series of political and economic crises that, in the medium term, could have a significant impact on governance and on state-society relations.

In Algeria, the pandemic arrived in a phase of political instability marked by the new presidency of Abdelmadjid Tebboune, elected in December 2019 by a narrow 20-percent margin. It also coincided with a large opposition movement, *Hirak*, which continues to reject Tebboune and his association with *Le Pouvoir*, the popularly discredited power system that has ruled Algeria since its independence.²¹ For this country and its forty-three million inhabitants, the spread of the virus has combined with the government's lack of legitimacy, a weak public health infrastructure, and a stagnant economy dependent on oil revenues to have strong repercussions on vital sectors.

Meanwhile, in Egypt, the authoritarian regime created by President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi since 2014 is squeezed between a close-knit system of police control and a slight and tenuous economic recovery for a country of one hundred million people. The state could suffer heavy consequences if it is not able to react effectively to the challenges posed by the new situation. In general, despite the differences between Egypt and Algeria, they share some common features, such as the inadequacy of the public health-care systems and the shortage of available resources. The worsening of the pandemic led the two countries to take unprecedented steps, albeit late, including confining the population to their homes; shutting down schools,

universities, and places of worship; banning collective prayers; and closing air and land borders. These restrictions reinforced doubts about the reliability of the official figures on COVID cases and deaths (which researchers say were underreported), together with the suspicion that the governments were denying reality in an attempt to minimize the threat. The subsequent increased repression of dissidents or those who spread “rumors” about the pandemic—considered by the state to be fake news and a threat to national security—have demonstrated how these regimes intend to politicize the crisis in order to tighten their grip over society and information.²²

The extraordinary measures put in place by al-Sisi to manage the pandemic seemed more focused on silencing those who talk about the virus and criticize the state's response than containing the pandemic itself.²³ This is confirmed by the fact that the regime decided to expel correspondents from some of the main international media that published reports on the subject, accusing them of “spreading false news” and threatening them with a sentence of up to five years in prison.²⁴ Egyptian prisons, known for their poor healthcare and unhygienic conditions, have become the sites of apparent outbreaks hushed up by the government.²⁵

On July 27, a presidential decree to extend the state of emergency in Egypt for another three months was approved by the House of Representatives; this is the thirteenth renewal of the law, which has been in place since 2017 in response to terrorist attacks. The state of emergency allows authorities to carry out additional security measures to fight both the virus and terrorism, including the enforcement of curfews and strict control over the media.²⁶ It is commonly posited by analysts and observers that al-Sisi is exploiting the state of emergency to consolidate his power. However, the regime has progressively moved

21 Karim Mezran and Alessia Melcangi, *Algerian Election and Legitimacy: Impossibility of Change*, Atlantic Council, December 17, 2019, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/algerian-election-and-legitimacy-impossibility-of-change/>.

22 Lewis Sanders IV and Ismail Azzam, “Coronavirus: Is Egypt Suppressing the True Outbreak Figures?” *Deutsche Welle*, March 17, 2020, <https://www.dw.com/en/coronavirus-is-egypt-suppressing-the-true-outbreak-figures/a-52801568>.

23 Maged Mandour, “Repression and Coronavirus Response in Egypt,” Carnegie Endowment For International Peace, July 15, 2020, <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/82304>.

24 Michael Safi, “Egypt Forces Guardian Journalist to Leave After Coronavirus Story,” *Guardian*, March 26, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/26/egypt-forces-guardian-journalist-leave-coronavirus-story-ruth-michaelson>.

25 “Egypt: Court Arbitrarily Extends the Pre-trial Detention of over 1,600 Defendants,” Amnesty International, May 7, 2020, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/05/egypt-court-arbitrarily-extends-the-pretrial-detention-of-over-1600-defendants/>; “Egypt: Apparent Covid-19 Outbreaks in Prisons,” Human Rights Watch, July 20, 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/07/20/egypt-apparent-covid-19-outbreaks-prisons#>.

26 “Egypt Extends State of Emergency for 13th Time,” *Middle East Monitor*, July 21, 2020, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20200721-egypt-extends-state-of-emergency-for-13th-time/>.



A Muslim wears a protective face mask inside the Al-Azhar mosque during the first Friday prayers after reopening it as the government eased restrictions to curb the spread of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19), in the old Islamic area of Cairo, Egypt August 28, 2020. *REUTERS/Mohamed Abd El Ghany*

toward a more articulated response to the emergency, giving a greater role to the civilian ministries, local government, religious institutions, and professional associations.²⁷

Algeria's reaction has somehow mirrored the Egyptian strategy. Among the measures introduced to prevent contagion, there is also the decision to suspend all popular protests—a decree that particularly affects the *Hirak* movement—and to criminally charge journalists who cover the protests or publish figures different from the official ones.²⁸ This move has intensified public distrust of the Algerian authorities' capacity to handle the health crisis, highlighting the impasse the government is trapped in: between

authoritarianism and a prudent attitude that could protect it from losing what little is left of its credibility.

In this context, the long-term effects are less clear: if the pandemic continues at the international level, severe economic crises, protests, and political conflicts risk coming to a head. The economic impact of the pandemic could lead Egypt and Algeria to face considerable challenges to their already-struggling economies. Egypt can ill afford a hard drop in revenues due to the decline in tourism, exports, maritime traffic through the Suez Canal, and remittances sent by Egyptians (they together represent around 14 percent of Egypt's GDP).²⁹ Already, Egypt's economic growth is predicted to slow to 3.1

27 Amr Hamzawy and Nathan J. Brown, "How Much Will the Pandemic Change Egyptian Governance and for How Long?" Carnegie Endowment For International Peace, July 23, 2020, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/07/23/how-much-will-pandemic-change-egyptian-governance-and-for-how-long-pub-82353>.

28 Hamid Ould Ahmed, "Algeria Bans Street Marches Due to Virus; Some Protesters Unswayed," Reuters, March 17, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-algeria-protests/algeria-bans-street-marches-due-to-virus-some-protesters-unswayed-idUSKBN2143UH>; "Algerian Journalist Merzoug Touati Arrested over Protest Coverage," Committee to Protect Journalists, July 17, 2020, <https://cpj.org/2020/06/algerian-journalist-merzoug-touati-arrested-over-protest-coverage/>.

29 Amina Abdel-Halim, "Long-term Implications of COVID-19," *Cairo Review of Global Affairs*, May 7, 2020, <https://www.thecaireview.com/main-home-page/long-term-implications-of-covid-19/>.



Algerians raise a banner bearing a portrait of journalist Khaled Drareni at a rally to protest against his imprisonment in the capital Algiers on 7 September 2020. Drareni, 40, editor of the Casbah Tribune news website and correspondent for the French-language TV5 Monde, was sentenced in August to three years in prison for “inciting an unarmed rally” and “endangering national unity” after covering demonstrations by the Hirak protest movement. Algiers Algeria: 7 September 2020. Photo by Louiza Ammi/ABACAPRESS.COM

percent in the fiscal year 2020/2021 due to the pandemic, down from the 3.5 percent forecast three months ago.³⁰ The government, therefore, negotiated a further loan from the IMF in order to counter the impact of the pandemic, securing \$5.2 billion under a twelve-month Stand-By Arrangement, following \$2.8 billion approved in May under the IMF’s Rapid Financing Instrument.³¹ This deal has raised warnings about the risks of trying to solve the economic crisis with foreign lending.³² Equally worrying is the pandemic’s impact on the stagnant Algerian economy, marked by a strong decline of foreign exchange reserves and high unemployment (around 12 percent),

especially among the youth (29 percent).³³ Now a predicted fall in revenues will weigh on state budgetary policies, long concentrated on the country’s defense sector rather than on health, education, or scientific research. The recent oil crisis could strike the final blow. The price war between Saudi Arabia and Russia, which provoked a collapse in oil prices, had a strong economic impact on Algeria, which is highly dependent on the oil and gas industry (hydrocarbon sales account for 93 percent of export earnings and 40 percent of revenues).³⁴ The convergence of these factors forced the government to slash the state budget by 50 percent.³⁵

30 Mahmoud Mourad, “Egypt’s Economic Growth Seen Slowing in 2020/21: Reuters Poll,” Reuters, July 21, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-egypt-economy-poll/egypts-economic-growth-seen-slowing-in-2020-21-reuters-poll-idUSKCN24MOMA>.

31 “Egypt Takes Proactive Approach to Limit the Pandemic’s Fallout,” International Monetary Fund, July 9, 2020, <https://www.imf.org/en/News/Articles/2020/07/09/na070920-egypt-takes-proactive-approach-to-limit-the-pandemics-fallout>.

32 “Egyptian Loans Raise Fears of Impact on Economy,” *Al-Monitor*, July 9, 2020, <https://tinyurl.com/y3cn7sbk>

33 “The World Bank in Algeria: Overview,” World Bank, October 1, 2019, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/algeria/overview>.

34 Sarah Feuer, “Corona in the Casbah: The Pandemic’s Destabilizing Impact on Algeria,” Washington Institute, April 22, 2020, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/corona-in-the-casbah-the-pandemics-destabilizing-impact-on-algeria>.

35 “Algeria Presidency Says State Budget to be Slashed by Half,” AFP, May 4, 2020, <https://tinyurl.com/y4musrpx>.

What has emerged from these patterns of response is that, in their fight to contain the pandemic, Egypt and Algeria seem to have invested in reinforcing statism, flexing authoritarian power to retain some semblance of legitimacy. The states' efforts to conceal the human cost of the pandemic, together with citizens' loss of faith in governance, will test resilience of these governments. The more they are limited in logistical capacity, infrastructure, and expertise—in a word, unable to handle the public health emergency—the more they will try to transform their response into a matter of national security through the use of extraconstitutional measures. Thus, while some other governments decided to securitize the pandemic itself by presenting it as “a war against an invisible enemy,” the need for these military regimes is to minimize the perceived risk of the virus, and instead securitize the response to the emergency.³⁶ That is, the pandemic remains a public health problem, but the response becomes a security issue to be dealt with by taking draconian measures. In the early weeks of the outbreak, after a first moment of silence, al-Sisi exploited the crisis to boost the image of a regime actively engaged in combating the contagion—giving more visibility to technical departments and ministries, civilian experts, and religious leaders, and not only to the military corps. A strategy aimed to protect the military from a possible failure and, at the same time, to give more credibility to the anti-pandemic measures.

In Algeria, President Tebboune, after a cautious delay in announcing severe containment measures, minimized the health crisis, but used it to seal off public spaces to popular protests and persecute activists and journalists.³⁷ The regime exploited this period of isolation to achieve a systematic purge of the military, police and security corps, to increase efficiency in defending the country's borders and to boost an economy severely disrupted by the pandemic.

So, at a political level, in these two countries, the COVID-19 crisis seems to have hastened the trends and patterns already in place, rather than inducing a radical change—mirroring what is happening on the global stage. However, the impact of the pandemic on the economy might produce serious and unpredictable effects, not only in terms of domestic stability, but also on the global and regional geoeconomic mechanisms and geopolitical regional rivalries. For Egypt, in particular, this crisis might possibly reduce its ambitions to regain its position of power in the Mediterranean region and in North Africa. It will likely diminish its ability to play a determinant role in the Libyan crisis, especially if the strategic disengagement of the United States from the region continues along with the evident reluctance of the European Union to better engage with the southern shore of the Mediterranean Basin. The impact of an Egypt turned inward on regional developments remains to be seen.

36 Adam Hoffman, “The Securitization of the Coronavirus Crisis in the Middle East,” Project on Middle East Political Science (POMEPS), April, 2020, <https://pomeps.org/the-securitization-of-the-coronavirus-crisis-in-the-middle-east>.

37 Borzou Daragahi, “How Algeria's Regime used Coronavirus to Crush a Revolution,” *Independent*, July 14, 2020, <https://www.independent.co.uk/independentpremium/world/algeria-coronavirus-protests-regime-government-a9618936.html>; Francis Ghiles, “Algeria's Army Strengthens Hold on Power, Hirak Fading Away,” *Arab Weekly*, July 27, 2020, <https://the arabweekly.com/algerias-army-strengthens-hold-power-hirak-fading-away>.

About the Authors



Paolo Alli is a nonresident Senior Fellow with the Atlantic Council's Middle East Programs. Alli previously served as President of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly from 2016 to 2018, after having served for two years as one of the Assembly's five Vice-Presidents. Within the Assembly, Alli served as a member of both the Political Committee (PC) and the Mediterranean and Middle East Special Group (GSM), and as Rapporteur of the Sub-Committee on NATO Partnerships and Vice-Chairman of the GSM.

Alli was a member of the Italian Chamber of Deputies for the New Centre Right Party (NCD) from 2013 to 2018, serving on the Foreign Affairs Committee, the European Union Policies Committee, and the Joint Committee on the Implementation of Fiscal Federalism. From 2000 to 2013, Alli held several positions within the Regional Government of Lombardy. Alli has a background in business, engineering, international affairs, and Italian politics.



Emadeddin Badi is a Nonresident Senior Fellow with the Middle East Program at the Atlantic Council, where he focuses primarily on U.S and European policies towards Libya and the wider geopolitical implications of the conflict. Previously, he was a nonresident scholar at the Counterterrorism and Extremism Program at the Middle East Institute. Badi is an independent consultant who has worked with multiple development and international organizations with a focus on Libya. From 2015 to 2018, he gained hands-on experience programming the conflict-sensitive implementation of a flagship stabilization initiative implemented across Libya for UNDP. He also provides geopolitical risk analysis to private sector stakeholders on political risk and economic and development issues in Libya.

Badi has also worked on multiple research and policy-oriented projects with various institutions, with an extensive focus on Libya's non-state actors. Most recently, he co-authored a paper on the "Development of Libya's Armed Groups Since 2014 – Community Dynamics and Economic Interests" with the Royal Institute of International Affairs – Chatham House. He is also currently affiliated with the School of Transnational Governance at the European University Institute in Florence, Italy, where he focuses on EU policy towards Libya.



Emily Burchfield is an assistant director at the Atlantic Council's Middle East Programs, where she manages a wide range of projects aimed at promoting peace and security through scholarship and engagement. Her research focuses primarily on civil conflict, its regional implications, and its impact on US foreign policy. She is currently pursuing a Master's in Security Studies at Georgetown University's Walsh School of Foreign Service. She holds a Bachelor of Arts in Political Science and International Relations and a minor in Middle East Studies from the University of California, San Diego. Previously a program assistant at the Atlantic Council focusing on Syria, she also has experience as a researcher focused on political, security, and humanitarian developments in Iraq, and working with Syrian and Iraqi refugees in both Jordan and the United States. She has co-authored and edited Atlantic Council reports including *The MENA Region: A Great Power Competition*, *The Future of Northeast Syria*, and *The Arc of Crisis in the MENA Region*. A frequent contributor to Atlantic Council blogs *MENASource* and *SyriaSource*, her analysis has also been published in *World Politics Review*, *RealClearDefense*, *The National Interest*, *Georgetown Security Studies Review*, and regional outlets.



Haykel Ben Mahfoudh is a nonresident fellow with the Atlantic Council's Middle East Programs. Mahfoudh is the Director of the Center for Research in International and European Law and Maghreb-Europe Relations, a position he has held since 2013. He has been a member of the Scientific Board at the University of Carthage in Tunisia since 2014. From 2006 to 2009, he taught Constitutional Law, Administrative Law, International Law, and Human Rights Law at University of El Manar in Tunisia.

Mahfoudh is a founding partner Ben Mahfoudh & Co. Law Firm, where he worked from 1996 to 2011. He has been an Associate Expert the National Defense University's Near East South Asia Center for Strategic Studies since 2002 and has partnered with NATO in 2007 and 2018 on the topics of transparency and security in Tunisia. Mahfoudh has expertise in security sector reform programs, international development, constitution-building, and civil society. He previously contributed to the Atlantic Council as a nonresident fellow from 2014 to 2017.



Alessia Melcangi is a Nonresident Senior Fellow with the Middle East Program at the Atlantic Council and a Tenure Track Assistant Professor at the Department of Social Sciences and Economics (DiSSE) of La Sapienza University of Rome where she teaches History of North Africa and the Middle East and Globalization and International Relations. In 2008 she was a visiting research fellow at the Centre d'Études et de Documentation Économiques, Juridiques et Sociales (CEDEJ) and at the Dominican Institute for Oriental Studies (IDEO) in Cairo. From 2013 to 2014, she was appointed research fellow of History and Institutions of Africa at the Department of Political and Social Science, University of Catania. From 2017 to 2018 was a research fellow at the Department of Social Sciences and Economics (DiSSE), La Sapienza University of Rome. She joined the Research Projects of National Relevance (PRIN) 2010-2011 "Nation/States and minorities in Mediterranean Africa" funded by the Italian Ministry of Education, University and Research. Since 2016 she has collaborated with the Centre of Research on the Southern System and the Wider Mediterranean and she is part of the Steering Committee of the Master in Migration and Development, La Sapienza University of Rome; faculty member of the Master in Middle Eastern Studies at Catholic University of the Sacred Heart, Milan; and member of the Steering Committee of ReaCT – Observatory on Radicalism and Counter-terrorism.



Karim Mezran is director of the North Africa Initiative and resident senior fellow with the Rafik Hariri Center and Middle East programs focusing on the processes of change in North Africa. As a distinguished Libyan-Italian scholar, Dr. Mezran brings enormous depth of understanding to the transition in Libya and elsewhere in the region. In addition, Dr. Mezran is currently an adjunct professor of Middle East studies at the School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS), where he is teaching courses on the history and politics of North Africa. From 2002 to 2012, he was the director of the Center for American Studies in Rome. His analyses on the Middle East and North Africa have been widely published in Italian- and other-language journals and publications.

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1030 15th Street, NW, 12th Floor, Washington, DC 20005

(202) 463-7226, www.AtlanticCouncil.org