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## Views: Covid-19, the Crisis Compounding the Fragility of an Exhausted Region

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## **Views: Covid-19, the Crisis Compounding the Fragility of an Exhausted Region**

Messaoud Romdhani

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Each new day brings news of more cases of Covid-19, with a mounting number of infected people and a mounting death toll. In recent months many countries have abandoned the comprehensive lockdown measures instituted at the pandemic's onset due to their impact on the economy, which has undergone an unprecedented contraction that experts say has caused a global economic crisis more acute than that of 2008. The social and health ramifications of the crisis and the inability of developed countries to provide basic health care to citizens have occasioned urgent appeals for a reinvigorated welfare state.

Developed countries with advanced economies and strong institutions now fear an unprecedented economic crisis,<sup>1</sup> perhaps coupled with social shocks that could impact their deep-rooted democracies and spell more populist and extremist waves. In contrast, countries of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA)—a global hotspot with its armed conflicts, social uprisings, political risks, and authoritarian regimes, as well as fragile economies and accumulated debt—face an unknown future of many possible trajectories. Indeed, significant shifts already loom on the present horizon, the Covid-19 pandemic having exposed the fragility of their health, economic, and social systems, and their anaemic economies.

### **The Economic Situation**

Although it is difficult to identify the exact number of coronavirus infections and related deaths, especially in conflict and civil war zones, the MENA region certainly has not experienced the magnitude of casualties seen in the United States and Europe. Nevertheless, given the nature and fragility of MENA economies and their inability to cope with crises, many experts with good knowledge of the region firmly believe that difficult straits lie ahead.

Due to weak national economies and the decline in oil prices (down by two-thirds), the International Monetary Fund (IMF) anticipates a downturn not seen in fifty years, asserting that

the region ‘faces an unparalleled crisis and a double shock to its economy during the lockdown measures’.<sup>2</sup>

Unemployment will be one of the most important manifestations of the socioeconomic crisis in the region. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) projected that the first and second waves of the pandemic would push unemployment levels to more than eleven per cent by late 2020—higher than the levels seen in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis and fifty per cent higher than unemployment in December 2019 (5.2 per cent).<sup>3</sup> There are portents that the situation in the MENA region, especially in Arab countries, will be much worse. In addition to acute financial shocks, the collapse of oil prices will adversely affect state budgets in countries that depend mainly on energy resources.<sup>4</sup> According to an Arab League report issued in May 2020, these countries will lose about 1.7 million jobs. The pandemic will push about eight million middle-class people into poverty, and the GDP of these countries will contract by forty-five per cent. Youth and women will be the most affected by the conditions produced by the pandemic.<sup>5</sup>

### **Hollowing out the Welfare State?**

Multiple studies have indicated that the failure of MENA states to confront Covid-19 is partly due to the erosion of the welfare state, which was at its peak in many countries of the region in the 1960s and persisted in the Gulf states throughout the oil boom before declining with the drop in oil prices and military spending. In my opinion, the social welfare state—which has atrophied for more than two decades in capitalist countries—emerged in a period in which production doubled, industry flourished, and the role of professional unions increased, during the Cold War and with the rise of socialist ideas. It was the social contract that undergirded major state projects, state control of the economy, and the state’s commitment to spending on health, education, and social security, before globalization prevailed with its liberal ideas of limiting the state’s role and freeing the hands of multinational corporations.

In contrast, in most MENA countries, the regime, whether civilian or military, dominated all levers of state and adopted central economic planning for decades. Nevertheless, regime instability, social oppression, and the absence of accountability and good governance, as well as rampant corruption in the public sector and its ossification and even bankruptcy, led these regimes to appeal to international financial institutions for help. These institutions in turn dictated compliance with liberal policies and a gradual abandonment of public sectors, demanding austerity in public spending as a condition for loans and assistance.

I therefore believe that the welfare state, in its comprehensive sense, requires an indivisible set of measures. The welfare state does not only guarantee health, education, and social security; as defined by British sociologist T.H. Marshall, it is a state of ‘socio-economic citizenship’ whose mission is to provide every citizen with ‘a known right to material resources and wealth, as well as the right to practice politics’, through the full democratic process involving free elections and freedom of opinion, thought, association, etc. It is an entire package of conditions he called ‘full citizenship’.

In the Arab region, political dominance typically entails the domination of all economic resources, which inevitably leads the ruling authority to strictly control and manage wealth through repression, the lack of transparency, the spread of corruption, and the deterrence of free initiatives. Even what has been termed the social contract between the government and its citizens is typically based on a trade—(some) social rights are given in exchange for loyalty, obedience, and silence—rather than the rule of law, respect for rights, and defence of public and private freedoms.

Many non-oil MENA countries have instituted so-called structural economic reforms since the 1970s, aimed at joining the global economy, encouraging investment and privatization, and reducing the role of the state. These reforms, however, have failed to achieve the necessary growth for several reasons. For one, economic reforms were not coupled with political reforms to ensure accountability and the independent oversight of public money. In addition, privatization was confined to a narrow circle close to power, which exacerbated corruption and fuelled popular anger, manifested in frequent uprisings that reached their peak in late 2010 and early 2011.

Hence, the pandemic comes amid already very difficult economic and social conditions: sluggish economic growth, non-existent development, severe geographic imbalances within the same country, continuous protest movements in many countries, and since 2011, civil and sectarian wars that several international and regional parties have actively inflamed.

### **Women in the Region and Precarious Economic Conditions**

An American report issued in late April 2020 on the conditions of women around the world under lockdown and quarantine raised the alarm about women's vulnerability to domestic violence, which has been greatly exacerbated by their partners' constant presence in the home. Reports of domestic violence in the United Kingdom, for example, increased 700 per cent. The report also highlighted the economic violence experienced by women working in precarious sectors such as restaurants, hotels, and tourism.

In the Middle East and North Africa, women face multiple challenges, most of which are related to the traditions of patriarchal society and its view of the role of women in the family and society. In addition, they face high unemployment and job precarity, especially in the private sector, as well as various forms of violence, particularly domestic violence. Indeed, domestic violence has proliferated with the Covid-19 crisis, lockdowns, and the closure of schools, kindergartens, and public parks, which in turn means more domestic stress.

According to 2018 World Bank data, unemployment and illiteracy are among the most important challenges facing women in the region, especially in the Arab countries. Women represent 49.7 per cent of the total population, but female unemployment stands at roughly fifty per cent,<sup>6</sup> compared to a global average of no more than twelve per cent. The high rate in Arab countries can be explained by the high rate of illiteracy among Arab women, which reaches nearly fifty per cent in countries such as Yemen or other countries debilitated by civil wars and ethnic conflicts.<sup>7</sup> In turn, these same conflicts have contributed to the spread of gender-based and sexual violence and increased the rates of widowhood. In Yemen, for example, 4.5 million children and

pregnant or breastfeeding women suffered from acute malnutrition in 2019,<sup>8</sup> which has been exacerbated by the pandemic. Higher poverty rates have meant increased rates of early marriage. Before the civil war, underage marriage accounted for fifty per cent of marriages in Yemen; it has now risen to seventy-five per cent.<sup>9</sup>

In addition, women are more vulnerable to the coronavirus since in most countries of the region they constitute a large proportion of nursing staff,<sup>10</sup> which exposes them to stress and greater risk. They also assume household chores during lockdown. But female unemployment remains one of the most significant challenges during the crisis. Women are more likely to be fired during the pandemic and may lose as many as 700,000 jobs around the Arab world, according to the UN Economic and Social Commission for West Asia. This is logical since women typically work in insecure informal economic sectors. In fact, the rate of female employment in the formal sector in the MENA region does not exceed twenty per cent.

The most serious issue is that ‘self-isolation measures and movement restrictions in place in most MENA economies also exacerbated women’s exposure to domestic violence’.<sup>11</sup> For example, Tunisia, where the parliament approved a law to combat violence against women in summer 2017, has witnessed an unprecedented spike in domestic violence since the government-ordered lockdown. From the beginning of the lockdown until April 2020, 7,000 cases were reported, according to the Ministry of Women, Childhood and the Elderly—five times the rate of violence during the same period in 2019. Incredibly, the increase in violence against women coincided with the decision of the Supreme Judicial Council to postpone all court hearings, which has prevented and hindered battered women from filing complaints, exacerbated the physical and psychological impact, and posed a threat to family life.

### **Migrant Hardships**

The pandemic has not only increased the suffering of women, but has also complicated the situation of migrants in a region with boundless economic, social, and political crises, irregular migration, and millions of refugees. Neither strict European measures and deportation policies nor the dangers of the sea crossing in death boats have succeeded in deterring migrants.

For the last two decades, strict European security policies at sea and land borders did not reduce the flow of migrants, but only increased their suffering, while also spurring smugglers to search for more expensive, more dangerous maritime and overland routes.<sup>12</sup>

Tunisia, by virtue of its location and social conditions, has always been a transit point for migrants from Sub-Saharan Africa, Egypt, and Libya. It is also a starting point for Tunisian youth exhausted by years of waiting for the Tunisian revolution to change their social conditions, and despairing of a better future.

With irregular migration reaching unprecedented levels during the pandemic, the Italian authorities pressured the Tunisian government to stanch the flow. The UN High Commissioner for Refugees announced on 26 July 2020 that irregular migration from the southern Mediterranean, as

of July 2020, had reached more than 11,800 people, three times the number in 2019, half of them Tunisians.<sup>13</sup>

The situation of migrants and refugees is no less miserable in North Africa given the absence of a central state as in Libya or the lack of laws that protect those pushed by political, economic and climatic conditions to leave their countries in search of protection or work.

In Libya, the Covid-19 crisis has exacerbated the conditions of thousands of migrants and asylum seekers in detention centres, where in some cases the central authority is completely absent, leaving militias to act without even minimal oversight.<sup>14</sup>

In Tunisia, dozens of detainees live in the Ouardia holding centre in Tunis in poor conditions, compounded by the health crisis and overcrowding, which increases the risk of infection—and this in a country that has been careful to emphasize social distancing and hygiene and apply strict preventive measures to prevent infection. The situation prompted Tunisian and international human rights organizations to demand the release of all detainees, criticizing the government's carelessness and lack of concern. Conditions in the centre make it 'impossible to implement preventative measures to avoid the spread of the disease', according to Amnesty International.<sup>15</sup>

### **The Neediest Children in the World Live in the Region**

The coronavirus affects all social groups, but its impact is most profound within the most vulnerable social groups. It is perhaps children in the MENA region, most of whom face barriers in their lives and studies as a result of poverty and civil wars, who have been most affected by isolation measures and school closures. The growth of remote education necessitated by the lockdown has only benefited those who have the proper capacities (a computer, the Internet, and a comfortable space). According to UNICEF, twenty-five million needy children live in the region, including refugees and displaced persons, who are thus deprived of the right to education.<sup>16</sup>

To take one example, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development referred to a survey carried out by UN agencies in Jordan in early April 2020, which found that forty-one per cent of families confirmed that their children were able to benefit from Darsak ('Your Lesson'), the site launched by the Ministry of Education to continue public education.

Even without the Covid-19 crisis, education in the region suffers from alarming problems that promise a more dangerous future. Reports indicate that one in five children does not receive an education in the first place, and that sixty-three per cent of children at the age of ten cannot read and write a simple text. This is to say nothing of the wars and domestic crises have deprived three million children of schooling. In recent years, wars have destroyed 8,850 educational institutions in Syria, Iraq, Libya, and Yemen.<sup>17</sup> The Covid-19 crisis has thus only worsened the educational situation.

## **When Health Care is Absent, Oppression is Present**

Such critical circumstances clarify the severity of the health situation; the coronavirus pandemic has exacerbated the hardships faced by citizens, be they health-related, economic, or social. Most MENA states had no option but to institute lockdowns, sometimes with draconian strictness. In addition to closing schools, institutes, and kindergartens, preventing gatherings, and declaring states of emergency and curfews, the lockdowns were accompanied by severe penalties in cases of non-compliance, from unjust fines to imprisonment, as was the case in Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and the United Arab Emirates.<sup>18</sup>

In Morocco, as of late April 2020, 41,000 people had been prosecuted for violating lockdown. The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet called the application of lockdown in Morocco ‘very worrying’, saying that the police were using harsh enforcement methods.<sup>19</sup> The security services in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories maintained constant surveillance of people via their mobile phones without a court warrant, and sophisticated applications were used to spy on Palestinians without any legal basis.<sup>20</sup>

## **Risk of Perpetuating the Temporary**

In his book *Discipline and Punish*, the French philosopher Michel Foucault observed that power exploits epidemics to be ‘present and visible’ everywhere and confine the individual to a fixed place in order to observe him. The truth of this observation was demonstrated in the first months of the coronavirus pandemic, as regimes in the MENA region quickly exploited restrictive measures and punished all violators, while people swiftly responded to restrictions such as curfews and a state of emergency.

Although these measures are common to most countries of the world, in the MENA region the absence of a counter-authority and independent institutions, restrictions on media freedom, and the prosecution of activists all suggest that such temporary measures may become permanent, and that the limitation of freedoms will continue beyond the pandemic as long as people do not again rise to demand their rights.

## **What Is Hoped for Vs. What Exists**

It was hoped that the pandemic and the jolt of its rapid spread and serious repercussions would give the region’s governments the opportunity to reconsider many of their policies. This is especially true of health care policies, after the health sector was shown to be in a state of profound structural crisis in many countries. Yet it applies as well to water and electricity problems in many remote and deprived areas, geographic imbalances between regions of the same country, and the lack of adequate housing in marginalised informal neighbourhoods that surround the cities, which suffer from a lack of minimum health standards. The pandemic also offered a unique opportunity for ruling elites to understand the scale of the devastation wrought by authoritarianism and

oppression, from the fragility of a public sector that could not withstand the contagion to increasing poverty rates that are extending to the middle classes, to the weakness of the private sector and small enterprises that could not survive the lockdown measures.

For example, the limitations of the health sector in the three Maghreb countries--Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco--were demonstrated by the severe shortage of medical equipment and personnel and the inequitable geographical distribution of health care, the result of neglecting the sector as evidenced by its modest budget. The 2019 budget for the Ministry of Health represents only five per cent of the public budget in Morocco and seven per cent in Tunisia, both much less than the twelve per cent recommended by the World Health Organization. Although Tunisia was relatively successful in curbing the first wave of the pandemic, successive governments have not succeeded in closing the health gaps between the coastal regions and the deprived interior regions. For example, there is no resuscitation medicine in the province of Tataouine or Kasserine. Successive governments since the revolution have made no break with health policies biased to the private sector and have taken no significant step to mend the regional disparity in the right to health.

The latest Global Health Security Index accurately diagnoses the health situation and predicts more complications, ranking the MENA region as the second lowest in the world in health care and the last in epidemiological research, emergency preparedness, and response planning. ‘The COVID-19 outbreak has exacerbated these pre-existing vulnerabilities and risks in the widely-mismanaged economies of the MENA, where medical systems are under-resourced and much-needed infrastructure either destroyed or lacking’, the report said.<sup>21</sup>

It is true that the strict—and sometimes harsh—measures taken by governments such as compulsory isolation, preventing movement, closing governorates, schools and places of worship, preventing gatherings and travel, and imposing states of emergency and curfews have paid off in many countries of the region by limiting the spread of infection, despite reservations raised by human rights organizations. At the same time however, these measures have further aggravated economic and social conditions, as already low growth in the region is projected to contract further. Based on preliminary estimates, the World Bank and IMF project a growth rate of negative 4.2-4.7 per cent in 2020. Moreover, increased poverty, social inequalities, and unemployment will necessitate additional borrowing from international financial institutions which will make the reforms dictated by these institutions mandatory<sup>22</sup> and possibly painful.<sup>23</sup>

With the fragility of the health system and the lack of transparency about the pandemic and its casualties in many MENA countries, regimes have intervened to stop the truth about the pandemic from spreading. While the Egyptian minister of health declares that the health system in her country is ‘among the best in the world’, several doctors were reportedly arrested on charges of spreading lies, belonging to a terrorist organisation, and misusing social media after they criticized the government’s performance, the shortage of medical equipment, and the failure to protect medical personnel. Numerous news reports have also accused the Egyptian state of covering up the real number of infected people.<sup>24</sup> A Carnegie report summarized the Egyptian government’s response to Covid-19 as ‘a case study in repression, propaganda and misinformation’.<sup>25</sup>

## **Regimes in the Region Breathe a Sigh of Relief as they Redouble Restrictions**

The year 2019 saw the second round of Arab uprisings in many countries of the region. After the Sudanese revolution and the end of Omar al-Bashir's rule, people in Algeria, Iraq, and Lebanon continued to demonstrate on a near-daily basis, denouncing repression, abuse of power, financial corruption, growing unemployment, and poverty. This appears to be a call-back to 2011, despite the outcome of the first round of the Arab Spring, from civil war and the return of tyranny in some countries to economic and social failure in others. This means that the peoples of the region are still hoping for a better future, which will begin with the end of existing regimes.

In Algeria, Covid-19 stopped the popular movement, the Hirak, which staged demonstrations every week from 22 February 2019 to mid-March 2020. The regime took advantage of the situation to return to repression, curbing public freedoms and arresting and prosecuting activists, and exploiting the health crisis to restore security and judicial control. President Abdelmadjid Tebboune issued a law criminalising the publication of 'fake news', targeting independent media and social media platforms in particular, with fines of up to \$3,900.<sup>26</sup>

The Covid-19 crisis and the lockdowns have stopped all movement. In any system that is truly democratic or strives to be so, the crisis and its repercussions would be an opportunity to achieve a balance between, on one hand, respect for human rights, freedom of expression and opinion, guarantees for access to information, the transparency and credibility of government media, and the renunciation of hate speech and petty political tactics and, on the other, protection for citizens from the repercussions of infection by providing the necessary health care. The pandemic also could have provided an opportunity for dialogue between civil society, representatives of the Hirak, and opposition political parties on one hand, and the regime on the other.

Instead the Algerian authorities, facing profound economic problems—including falling oil prices and rising unemployment, in addition to the coronavirus crisis, which prompted it to amend the 2020 budget to raise taxes—chose to arrest and prosecute numerous activists and journalists, giving them harsh sentences. Ironically, in an index ranking freedom of expression and information published by Reporters Without Borders, Algeria scored worse this year than in the years of the dictatorship.<sup>27</sup> The International Federation for Human Rights expressed that while the world is facing the Covid-19 pandemic and an unprecedented health crisis, the Hirak (in Algeria) decided to declare a truce starting March 15, 2020 in order to combat the virus. The Algerian authorities, however, seem to have rejected this truce, since they continue arrests, harassment, and trials. Even the decision to release 5,000 detainees on 1 April 2020 did not cover any Hirak or human rights activists. On the contrary, they were given harsh sentences.

The situation was no different in the rest of the region. Not only did the Egyptian authorities suppress demonstrations and protests, they sought to cover up the number of infections and prevent any criticism of their efforts or lack thereof against the virus, launching a campaign against journalists that affected even foreign correspondents. The Egyptian State Information Service withdrew the credentials of *The Guardian* correspondent and issued a warning to a *New York Times*

reporter because he questioned the official numbers of infections. The oppression and harassment also affected health workers, who, according to testimonies they provided to Amnesty International, found themselves faced with two options: risk their lives due to the lack of protective equipment while on the job or complain and thereby risk imprisonment. Philip Luther, director of research for the MENA region at Amnesty International, commented, 'Instead of protecting frontline health care workers by addressing their legitimate concerns over their safety and livelihoods, the Egyptian authorities are handling the COVID-19 crisis with their usual repressive tactics'.<sup>28</sup>

With the declaration of a state of emergency and curfew in many countries, all protests and demonstrations were banned. Regimes took advantage of the situation to impose additional controls on the press and publishing, especially with regard to the health crisis and criticism of the poor performance of national and local authorities. Numerous activists in countries across the region were prosecuted for airing their opinions or criticizing health conditions.

### **Clampdown on the Media**

International human rights law grants governments the right to institute exceptional measures in times of danger for the safety of citizens and public health. Yet at the same time, it requires them to have a basis in law, be necessary, and be based on scientific evidence rather than security reports. International human rights law also stipulates that the measures should be effective and not arbitrary, discriminatory, or permanent, during the period of risk and subject to review in line with human rights.

Nevertheless, these values do not always apply in MENA countries because authoritarian governments take advantage of the circumstances to institute drastic measures to limit freedom, with no justification save further restriction and control. Many countries in the region have banned newspapers on the pretext of preventing the spread of infection, and they have denied journalists access to health centres and hospitals without permits granted by the security authorities without clear criteria. According to a report from the Centre for Defending Freedom of Journalists in Jordan, laws and orders issued by the government during the pandemic have limited the flow of information, and the curfew has restricted the movement of media professionals. 'The issuance of traffic and movement permits was not based on clear and publicized criteria', the report added.<sup>29</sup>

### **Palestinians and the Covid-19 Crisis**

The pandemic has multiplied the suffering of Palestinians, whether those inside the Israeli borders, where they experience racism even when receiving treatment, or in Ramallah, which is subject to military control, or in the Gaza Strip, which is under permanent siege. A UN report issued prior to the pandemic declared the Gaza Strip unliveable given its difficult and dangerous conditions, especially after successive air strikes have destroyed its infrastructure. Unemployment in Gaza stands at fifty-two per cent, while fifty-three per cent of its citizens live below the poverty line.

This is in addition to a permanent shortage of medicines, water contamination, and constant power cuts.<sup>30</sup>

The political situation has made matters worse, considering the difficulty, if not impossibility, of reaching a resolution that ends the suffering of the Palestinian people in light of the status quo of Israeli threats to tighten the blockade and annex the West Bank with the blessing of the US, an international public unconcerned with what is happening in the region, and efforts by Arab countries like the UAE, Bahrain, and Sudan to normalize relations with Israel without guarantees for a just peace. Indeed, the US is pressuring Gulf states to establish an Israeli-Gulf axis to confront Iran and Turkey.<sup>31</sup>

## **Findings**

However long the Covid-19 crisis lasts, its impact will ultimately diminish like previous health crises, wars, and humanitarian catastrophes. But before taking up possible changes in the future, it is first necessary to understand the outcome thus far.

First: The pandemic has exposed the dysfunctional state of public health in most countries of the world, especially in the MENA region, where countries like Iraq, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia have seen high rates of infection and slow reactions. Most MENA countries have tried to compensate for the shortfalls in health support with strict lockdowns, declaring states of emergency and curfews, which heightens the fear of greater authoritarianism and more limited civil freedoms in countries known for their authoritarian regimes. I believe that the peoples of the region, who in many countries have already embarked on a new round in the struggle for democracy, freedom, and justice, will continue to take action in order to achieve fair governance, a democratic system, and elected institutions.

Second: Poverty rates have doubled and unemployment has increased due to the impact of the pandemic on economic activity and the fragility of economic and social conditions. It has also been shown that the absence of good economic governance and the weakness of state institutions has impeded a rapid response to the crisis.

Third: The new behaviours imposed by the spread of the virus, such as virtual communication, rapid testing, modern technologies, and remote education, require, in addition to keeping pace with technological developments, resolving the substantial social disparities between different regions and social classes. It has been shown that the current governments in the region are still unable to do this. Indeed, the looming economic crisis may deepen social and regional inequalities.

Fourth: The current health crisis has demonstrated the danger of not diversifying the economy in the oil- and gas- exporting countries and promises an even bleaker future given the worldwide search for alternative energy and greater reliance on renewable energy, which now accounts for one-third of global power capacity.<sup>32</sup> Most Western countries are working to develop renewables and prioritising them in the search for low-carbon economic development and in response to continuous pressure from protest movements advocating for environmental justice and a healthy environment.

Fifth: The Covid-19 crisis and the accompanying quarantine, lockdown, states of emergency and curfews, and the closure of schools, institutes, nurseries and kindergartens have heightened the vulnerability of women in the MENA region, especially in the Arab region where women live in a strange paradox. Women constitute seventy per cent of health sector workers, staff the front lines against the virus, assume the lion's share of household work, and face growing domestic violence. They also endure unprecedented economic precarity, especially since many women work in the informal sector.

Sixth: Coronavirus and the resultant health crisis have proven the precariousness of the health situation, especially in Arab countries. Funds allocated to public health are much lower than WHO recommendations, which has resulted in a shortage of doctors, paramedic personnel, hospital beds, personal protection equipment, sample analysis laboratories, and patient reception and resuscitation rooms. This catastrophic deficiency arises in my opinion from two interrelated issues: first, the lack of interest in the public health sector as every citizen's right; and second, the austerity policies adopted by countries of the region in all public sectors, with the encouragement of global financial institutions such as the World Bank and the IMF.

Seventh: In recent years, the MENA region has become the most fragile and vulnerable to armed conflict. The Covid-19 crisis has brought additional hardship to citizens in Yemen, Syria, and Libya, who have been enervated by years of civil war, displaced, and seen the infrastructure of most public facilities destroyed. The health crisis has compounded these problems, especially given the difficulty of implementing quarantine measures in Syrian and Yemeni refugee camps and the lack of the bare minimum needed to combat infection. More than seventeen million Yemenis live without safe drinking and washing water, and warring militias in Libya have bombed more than one health complex in Tripoli and other cities. In addition, relief efforts and humanitarian aid have declined due to travel bans and restrictions and social distancing measures, which has exacerbated the suffering of citizens in conflict areas. Restrictions on the travel and movement of diplomats have diminished the likelihood of successful mediation and peaceful solutions advocated by UN bodies.

Eighth: The Covid-19 crisis brought stricter digital and security controls to monitor the spread of the virus, raising fears among those interested in human rights issues in the region that this surveillance—which must be exceptional, conditional, and time-bound—will be used to further monitor activists and dissidents without regard to legal conditions, citizens' privacy, or strong guarantees for the respect of human rights.

### **Conclusion: No Hope but Popular Movements**

Regimes in the region do not seem to have learned the lessons of past years, and they appear unwilling to relinquish their powers and privileges or the culture of plunder with which they approach governance. However, hope persists in the peoples of the region who have breached the wall of fear, flooded public squares, and defied the repressive apparatuses in Algeria, Iraq, Lebanon, and elsewhere in the region, repeating the same slogans of the Arab Spring, even if the

gleam of their movements has dimmed due to the lockdown. This same lockdown gave regimes an opportunity to catch their breath and return to their usual authoritarian measures. In Algeria, for example, President Abdelmadjid Tebboune took advantage of the health crisis to arrest and imprison many of the Hirak's leaders, media workers, and politicians, and to amend the constitution to expand his powers. But the severe economic crisis and its social fallout, including high rates of unemployment and poverty, will throw a wrench in the regime's plans and, in my opinion, force it to make the necessary concessions.

In Lebanon, the massive explosion that shook the Beirut port on 4 August 2020 has compounded the country's multifaceted crisis, sparking an unprecedented economic crisis and popular rage. Donor countries' suggestion that aid they provide will go directly to the Lebanese people without the mediation of the government is perhaps evidence that confidence in the authorities has run out, and not only domestically but internationally as well. This is encouraging for those striving for a different Lebanon that is not governed by sectarianism—one of the most important causes of the political crisis, in addition to regional and international interference.

Even before the coronavirus pandemic, the region was experiencing a multi-dimensional crisis: civil wars fuelled by regional and international parties, successive social crises manifested in near-daily protests led by young people who no longer had anything to lose in the face of rising unemployment and poverty, and political and military regimes lacking any legitimacy by virtue of their oppression and financial and political corruption. The pandemic has only exacerbated this crisis. It has thrown millions of middle-class people into the ranks of the poor and exposed the fragility of the public sector, especially in health and education, underscoring the need for profound changes in the region, though they may be some time in coming.

## About the Author

**Messaoud Romdhani** is a member of the Executive Committee of EuroMed Rights, and the former Chairperson of the Tunisian Forum on Economic and Social Rights.

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