

# SECURITY INSIGHTS



## **Preexisting Conditions: The impact of COVID-19 on Middle East stability and global security**

By Dr. Tova Norlen

The collapse of democratic aspirations and the consolidation of authoritarian regimes during the post-Arab Spring era has had a chilling effect on a generation of Middle Easterners. While they must have understood that revolution would not be easy, the almost complete reversal of any legitimate democratic progress that had been made in the aftermath of the uprisings seems to have left citizens across the Middle East apathetic.

According to most indicators, political expression and press freedoms have regressed since the uprisings in almost all Arab societies. Some countries, such as Libya, Syria and Yemen, saw an outbreak of civil war. In others, authoritarian regimes quickly adjusted to ensure even greater societal control through use of the military. The Arab Spring disproportionately benefited the political elites, while further marginalizing the middle class and the poor. While the 22 countries that are normally counted as part of the Arab world are vastly different in terms of resilience and resources, most share a history and political culture of authoritarianism, sectarianism, and military kleptocracy. They also face interlinked regional and transnational threats, such as terrorism, political fragility, religious extremism, and sectarianism.

Arab governments have grown accustomed to meet citizen discontent with strong security measures. As living conditions have declined and economic opportunities dwindled, governments have responded by tightening their grips on society without providing needed political reforms or educational opportunities, social protection or adequate health care. Few countries in the Arab world provide their citizens with adequate health services, if at all. Millions of people are either unemployed or stuck in the informal labor market, where incomes are unreliable.

Arguably, at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, the region was more vulnerable than ever to political, religious and social instability. Civil wars in Libya, Syria and Yemen, continued threats from Salafi-Jihadi extremism, massive displacement, sectarianism, and rising inequalities between the rich and the extreme poor are partly to blame for such vulnerability. COVID-19 is



exacerbating known conflict drivers, impacting human rights and the rule of law negatively, and causing a rise in unemployment and economic inequalities. Whether rich or poor, all states in the region have had to redirect some of their societal responses from preexisting vulnerabilities to the fight against COVID-19.

Recently, the Middle East security environment has also seen global and regional geostrategic shifts. Disengagement by the United States and growing interest from Russia and Turkey suggest that the region might once again become a pawn for both regional and great power competition. It is still too early to tell whether the newly concluded Abraham Accords between Israel and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) — and the subsequent U.S. arms deals with Bahrain, Morocco and Sudan — will have a positive effect on regional stability. On one hand, the rapid arms procurement by some of the most powerful states in the region (with an interest in regional stability) could usher in a new Arab regional order, which might in turn lead to a more stable and prosperous future. On the other hand, arms sales risk spurring a security dilemma along previous sectarian lines, resulting in the militarization and possible nuclearization of additional states in the region, with serious global ramifications.

The stability of the Middle East in the medium and long terms will depend on how the region recovers from these shocks and the willingness of regional powers and global actors — including the new U.S. administration and its allies — to invest more heavily in processes that support equitable economic development, social justice, and comprehensive civil and political rights. For the U.S. in particular, this means balancing economic and security interests against increasing competition from destabilizing global and regional actors, such as China, Iran, Turkey and Russia. This is especially important as more countries in the region — including some that are at high risk for political instability — acquire more sophisticated military technology.

### **Conflict, state fragility and regional insecurity**

Research on global conflict and violence shows that although there has been a downward trend in global conflict incidents since the Cold War, there was a new spike in conflict fatalities over the past decade, mostly concentrated in the Middle East. In fact, since the 1980s, the Middle East has been the region with the most armed conflict and the region with the largest relative increase in state-based conflicts. In addition, it remains a trouble spot for various types of nonstate organized violence, including civil wars, insurgencies and terrorism. Data show that since the Arab Spring, half of all newly emerged conflicts around the world are in the region, as are half the world's terrorism events.

However, even the Middle East has seen some recent improvements. Since 2017, when Syria's civil war led to the deadliest year from conflict since 1991, with almost 80,000 conflict fatalities, battle-related deaths have fallen significantly. In addition, data analyzed by researchers at the Peace Research Institute of Oslo (PRIO) show that the Middle East saw 10 state-based conflicts in 2019 (one interstate war, five civil wars and four internationalized civil wars), down from 12



in 2018, which itself was the highest number recorded since 1946.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, the number of nonstate conflicts in the Middle East has declined since 2014. However, battle-related deaths continued to increase and reached an all-time high in 2017, largely due to ISIS activities. Although there was a drastic increase in one-sided violence from 2018 to 2019, mostly due to terrorist attacks in Iraq, and Syria, the total number of deaths from terrorism declined in 2019 due to the de-escalation of the Syrian conflict. Data from the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism show a corresponding 59% reduction of terrorist attacks since the peak in 2014.<sup>2</sup> This is consistent with the finding that over 96% of all terrorist events occur within the larger context of an ongoing conflict.

In addition, the nature of violence is shifting. Evidence suggests that violence is now more local and factional than transnational and national. An Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development study found that there is tremendous subnational variation in conflict dynamics and patterns globally, and countries are often affected by multiple and different forms of conflict and violence simultaneously.<sup>3</sup> The Institute for Economics and Peace's "Global Peace Index 2020" found the Middle East to be the least peaceful region in the world because of a drop in some of the most significant markers for safety and security, political stability and potential for political terror. The Middle East and its immediate vicinity include 10 out of the 15 least peaceful states in the world, with Yemen, South Sudan, Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan comprising the bottom five.<sup>4</sup>

While the large guns may have been silenced, the data suggest that the violence in the Middle East is not over, and new risk factors for renewed violence are poorly understood or overlooked. The region still suffers from the fallout of the past decade's civil wars, along with rising human and economic insecurities. The absence of a registered conflict does not mean that a country is not fragile. State fragility is an accumulation of risk factors and resilience to those risks.

The long-term consequences of conflict, such as the loss of societal cohesion and trust, the breakdown of inclusive political processes and the erosion of economic security, will make it almost impossible for these countries to weather the macroeconomic shocks and rising inequalities brought on by the pandemic. Fragile states lose the capacity to protect their citizens, and terrorist groups can easily exploit grievances and needs. Regimes in turn use repressive tactics to clamp down on illegitimate and legitimate political expression. Tacit support from the

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<sup>1</sup> See Siri Aas Rustad et al., "Conflict Trends in the Middle East, 1989–2019," PRIO Paper, 2020

<sup>2</sup> Institute for Economics & Peace. Global Terrorism Index 2019: Measuring the Impact of Terrorism, Sydney, November 2019, <http://visionofhumanity.org/reports>

<sup>3</sup> OECD <https://www.oecd.org/dac/conflict-fragility-resilience/publications/OECD%20States%20of%20Fragility%202016.pdf>;

<sup>4</sup> See GPI 2020, [https://visionofhumanity.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/GPI\\_2020\\_web.pdf](https://visionofhumanity.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/GPI_2020_web.pdf)



international community has allowed authoritarian elites to deflect attention from genuine grievances to regional geopolitical tensions and counterterrorism.

While the major terrorist groups affiliated with ISIS and al-Qaida have lost strength, both groups continue to be active and maintain safe havens in fragile security climates, particularly in Egypt's Sinai Peninsula, Iraq, Libya, Syria and Yemen. Al-Qaida affiliates have remained resilient in Idlib province in northwest Syria, and local security forces in Iraq are reporting that ISIS-affiliated cells operate and recruit in a largely unguarded area between Kurdish Peshmerga forces and Iraqi government troops. Given the devastation on the ground and the lack of economic opportunities, the promise of spiritual rewards and a salary will be difficult for many to resist, especially given the powerful ideological and religious narratives that Salafi-Jihadi groups use to justify violence.

The last Salafi-Jihadi "wave" came at the end of a long struggle in the Arab world to rid itself of the tyrants who rode their nations' energy wealth to power in an oil-based world order. When hopes of creating a new system based on responsive political institutions and inclusive governance were brutally crushed in the name of countering the terrorist threat, the threat gradually became self-fulfilling. Usage of military force against civilian targets was justified in the name of counterterrorism, and terrorist groups rose to the challenge. The enormous allure of the Islamic State and the apocalyptic promise of the "caliphate" have to be understood within that context. A similar vacuum of leadership may arise in the wake of COVID-19 if states continue to use militarized responses against political dissent.

As the Sudanese rose up against their government in response to increasing bread prices in December 2018, many scholars argued that history was repeating itself. A series of similar protests took place in a number of other countries, including Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan and Lebanon. The triggers for these protests were similar to those that led to the Arab Spring, i.e., deteriorating living conditions, failing economies and corrupt political systems that favor a small elite at the expense of the masses. Ten years later, despite the democratic promise, data show that the region is even worse on major economic development indicators, including poverty, inequality, political freedom and health.

### **Preexisting conditions and vulnerabilities**

While there are major differences in the abilities of the 22 Arab states to weather the current crisis, the three tiers of countries (roughly divided into oil-producing, oil-importing, and fragile or conflict-affected states) are all facing interlinked economic and demographic shocks. Because the region as a whole is ill-prepared to deal with the possible wide-reaching consequences, the impact of those shocks will be felt across the entire region, with the biggest toll on the most vulnerable.

Despite brief hopes for change after the Arab uprisings, all the major socioeconomic and political indicators reveal that most countries in the region have been on a path of steady decline since 2011. The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) is the only region of the world where



extreme poverty rates have risen over the past decade, with 50 million people already undernourished at the start of the pandemic and an additional 8.3 million people likely to fall into poverty as a consequence. Fragile and/or conflict-ridden countries, including those that have taken in large numbers of refugees (such as Jordan and Lebanon), will feel this most acutely.

The 60% drop in oil prices since January 2020 has had a significant impact on the region's economic activity. As the wealthier, authoritarian Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states have redirected their resources to COVID-19-containing measures and provided stimulus money to their own citizens, promises of disaster relief or financial bailouts for non-oil producing countries have dried up. The International Monetary Fund projected that gross domestic product (GDP) across the region was expected to drop by an average of 4.7% by the end of 2020, and by as much as 13% in fragile and conflict-affected states. Fiscal deficits will likely raise GDP-to-debt levels to 95% on average among fragile and conflict-affected states.<sup>5</sup> This threatens the resilience of countries that are already vulnerable, such as Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and Libya. Lebanon is particularly at risk because the country endured multiple shocks in 2020, including the Beirut Port explosion on August 4. In May, Lebanon defaulted on its sovereign debt for the first time in history and since then the Lebanese pound has lost about 80% of its black-market value.<sup>6</sup> While Jordan enjoys far more political stability than Lebanon, its finances are similarly troubled.

Except for in the major GCC economies, stimulus packages offered across the region have been minimal or insufficient, and there has been little help for small and medium-size businesses that often form the backbone of economic activity. But even if provided, such support would give scant relief for the losses to the informal economy, which ground to a halt due to COVID-19 lockdown measures. In Egypt alone, where the Arab Spring was most prominent, the informal economy accounts for as much as 50% of GDP and provides almost 60% of total employment. Workers in the informal sector are often day laborers who lack even the most basic social protections. Job creation has been sclerotic in most Arab states even pre-pandemic, and work is even harder to attain during current restrictions.

Middle-income and fragile and conflict-affected states will also suffer from a significant drop in remittances from citizens employed in the Gulf. The World Bank expects this revenue source to

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<sup>5</sup> *International Monetary Fund Country Focus*, "Five Charts That Illustrate COVID-19's Impact on the Middle East and Central Asia," July 16, 2020, <https://www.imf.org/en/News/Articles/2020/07/14/na071420-five-charts-that-illustrate-covid19s-impact-on-the-middle-east-and-central-asia>; IMF, "COVID-19 crisis response in MENA countries," *OECD Tackling Coronavirus (COVID-19)*, <https://www.oecd.org/coronavirus/policy-responses/covid-19-crisis-response-in-mena-countries-4b366396/>; See also *World Food Program*, "Impact of COVID-19 in the Middle East, North Africa, Central Asia, and Eastern Europe," September, 2020, p. 7, <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/WFP-0000119040.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> Kareem Chehayeb, "Lebanon was on life support. Now it's in free fall," *The Washington Post*, Dec. 29, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2020/12/29/lebanon-explosion-pandemic-economy-crisis/>; <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-lebanon-crisis-banks-idUSKBN2401WS>



shrink by almost 20% as a result of the pandemic, to \$47 billion in 2020.<sup>7</sup> To put this into perspective, Egyptian media reported that about 4.5 million Egyptians work in the Gulf, with 2.5 million in Saudi Arabia alone. Repatriated workers (both skilled and unskilled) become an additional strain on their home economies, further marginalizing poor communities and shrinking the share of wealth held by the middle class. The same countries have also experienced precipitous drops in tourism, shrinking employment opportunities further. Since March 2020, international tourism has dropped by 95% across the Middle East, and by the end of April 2020, revenues were already down \$40 billion, hitting developing economies the hardest. However, tourism has also been an important part of the efforts of GCC states to diversify their economies. Saudi Arabia was predicted to lose as much as \$12 billion in revenues from the canceling of the yearly *Hajj* and *Umrah*, or 20% of its annual non-oil GDP. In addition to the blow to the country's coffers, it puts the Saudi labor force in jeopardy, a large number of whom are low-skilled foreign workers who may not have the ability to return home. This creates logistical problems and resentment that may lead to social unrest.

The effects of the pandemic will be felt unequally across the region as preexisting socioeconomic inequalities are exacerbated within and across countries. Although difficult to measure due to large informal economies and ongoing civil wars, income inequality rose significantly in MENA countries after 2014, with pre-pandemic rates already the worst in the world. Since the early 1990s, the population of the MENA region has doubled while the average income has only grown by 18%. In Egypt, the income share of the bottom 50% has decreased as a result of policy changes since the 1990s. Unemployment remains the highest in the world, especially among youth. Given that 60% of the MENA population has not yet reached the age of 30, dampening the impact of the pandemic on young people may be critical for the region's future. Surveys among the youth have shown that a majority are dissatisfied with the lack of economic opportunities and limited access to higher education, and many see anti-government protests as the only effective means for political change.

In addition to economic hardship, a widespread COVID-19 outbreak will overwhelm limited infrastructure and health capacity, which are already suffering a shortage of medical doctors, hospital beds and sanitation. The International Monetary Fund estimates that countries "on the edge" together house 17.2 million internally displaced people and 2.7 million refugees.<sup>8</sup> Many of these people live in camps or other precarious conditions where virus containment is not feasible. Some countries may not recover for years.

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<sup>7</sup> "COVID-19 Crisis Through a Migration Lens: Migration and Development Brief 32, The World Bank, April 2020, <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/bitstream/handle/10986/33634/COVID-19-Crisis-Through-a-Migration-Lens.pdf?sequence=5>

<sup>8</sup> "COVID-19 Poses Formidable Threat for Fragile States in the Middle East and North Africa," *IMF Country Focus*, May 13, 2020," May 13, 2020. <https://www.imf.org/en/News/Articles/2020/05/13/na051320-covid-19-poses-formidable-threat-for-fragile-states-in-the-middle-east-and-north-africa>



Legitimate political dissent in the Middle East has far too often been quashed with repressive force. In addition, citizens learned bitter lessons from watching neighboring states descend into civil war. Thus, even as economic conditions worsened and there was little improvement to overall governance and political participation, the protesters have retreated. Bloated public sectors have been allowed to expand further, and bureaucratic abuses have gone unchecked. In many countries, military and political elites have become largely symbiotic, and the lines between national defense and domestic security have been erased through the increasing use of military force against domestic populations. According to the Freedom House index, Tunisia is the only country in the MENA region that has shown any democratic progress since the Arab Spring.

COVID-19 lockdowns have given already repressive regimes a legitimate justification for curbing political freedoms and civic participation. In Egypt, President Abdel-Fattah el-Sissi recently expanded emergency regulations that will grant him and the security forces additional powers to ban public and private meetings, protests and celebrations indefinitely in the name of COVID-19 mitigation. Across the entire region, press freedoms have been severely curtailed and journalists and news outlets have been fined or jailed for sharing medical information about the pandemic. Research shows that political repression and socioeconomic disempowerment can be powerful drivers for political polarization and dissent, but that a trigger, such as a galvanizing event or a worsening crisis, is often needed for people and societies to engage in violent mobilization. For already fragile states, the pandemic — and its socioeconomic and political fallout — might provide such a trigger.

### **Regional rivalries and security dilemmas**

Given its unique strategic role as an epicenter of international, Cold War rivalry, its natural resource wealth in oil and gas, and its abundance of deadly conflicts, it is no surprise that the Middle East is highly militarized and a key driver for the global arms trade. The Global Military Index shows that, except for Iraq, all Middle Eastern countries are among the most militarized in the world, with military expenditure-to-GDP reaching an average of 5.7% compared to the global average of 2.2%. During the latter half of the last decade, 35% of all global arms sales went to MENA states.<sup>9</sup> A mix of political and security incentives in the post-Cold War period spurred these purchases, including continued regional tensions, domestic insurgencies and terrorism, and economic incentives for military elites with the power to influence national procurement. Since the fall of the Soviet Union, the U.S. has been the single largest arms supplier to the region. Sales grew from \$11.8 billion in 2018 to more than \$25.5 billion in 2019, a whopping 118% increase. Of those sales, 56% went to GCC countries, including Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and the UAE.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Max M. Mutschler, Marius Bales, Global Militarisation Index 2019, GLOBAL, Bonn International Center for Conversion, [https://www.bicc.de/uploads/tx\\_bicctools/BICC\\_GMI\\_2019\\_EN.pdf](https://www.bicc.de/uploads/tx_bicctools/BICC_GMI_2019_EN.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.forbes.com/sites/dominicdudley/2019/12/16/arms-sales-middle-east-soar/?sh=6f576855fea8>



Arms sales are an important instrument of state power and can be used as leverage, to enhance the security of key allies, or to constrain and contain enemies. U.S. support for Israel was initially a key component in the strategy to balance Soviet influence in the Middle East, and more recently it was important for countering the Iranian threat. Arguably, the most current arms deal between the U.S. and the UAE could be seen as a reward for longtime support of U.S. counterterrorism operations against ISIS and as part of the larger strategy to deter Iran. However, external military support to a variety of actors in the Middle East also comes at some risk, especially as the region faces increased challenges. As COVID-19 worsens societal vulnerabilities and increases the fragility of many states, there is a risk that military equipment ends up in the hands of insurgents, terrorists and nonstate actors. In addition, in a region where most authoritarian regimes see militarization as a source of pride and identity, greater access to advanced military systems may create a security dilemma between midsized powers with conflicting agendas.

Indeed, an alarming number of states in the region are already involved in conflict, either on their own territory or in a neighboring one. According to SIPRI, at the height of the most recent instability in 2016, seven out of 18 MENA countries deployed combat forces in their own territory.<sup>11</sup> At least 11 states intervened militarily in another country's conflict, as the three civil wars in Libya, Syria and Yemen drew interventions, with five countries intervening in more than one. While the unresolved Israeli-Palestinian conflict continues to provide inspiration for violence and terrorism, the centuries-old Sunni-Shia sectarian divide continues to destabilize, driving the Saudi-Iranian rivalry, the GCC relationship with Qatar, and conflicts in Yemen and Syria. It also contributes to instability in the region's most fragile states, including Iraq and Lebanon.

It is impossible to know how much the international arms trade contributes to these conflicts, but it is clear that any transfer of weapons and military systems to the region will end up in the hands of leaders who have a role in one or more of the region's conflicts. To put it in perspective, only four out of 18 countries in the SIPRI dataset are not involved in an external conflict, but all four of these were battling insurgents in their own territory — not a single Middle Eastern country was entirely free from combat. The U.S. arms deal with Saudi Arabia in December 2020 received bipartisan criticism in the U.S. Congress because there is evidence that Saudi jets, using U.S. precision munitions, have bombed civilian targets in Yemen.

Middle East wars also tend to be highly internationalized and include actors from outside the region, with troops or proxies supporting one or both sides of the conflict. Over the past decade, there have been interventions from the U.S., Russia, Turkey and various European states in MENA wars, including Iraq in 2003, Libya in 2006 and, more recently, against the Islamic State in Syria. Social science research shows that while international interventions in regional conflicts may sometimes be needed for humanitarian purposes, they often lead to higher lethality and

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<sup>11</sup> See Dan Smith, "The Middle East and North Africa: 2016 in Perspective," *Armed Conflict and Instability in the Middle East*, SIPRI 2017 Yearbook, Ch. 1, p. 76



longer durations of conflict. This is true even for more targeted counterterrorism operations with limited goals. While military force can be effective in rooting out terrorism if it targets key operators and leaders, repressive force tends to have a devastating impact on the humanitarian situation on the ground and breed more resentment among local communities or to simply export the problem to neighboring states. Previous U.S. and British military support to Sunni insurgents in Syria and Iraq has been blamed for fueling the rise of ISIS.

While some international interventions have been stability operations against illegitimate or terrorist actors, others followed more sinister agendas that did not align with humanitarian commitments. Securing their own economic and political interests is the primary objective of Turkish and Russian engagements in Syria (directly) and Libya (by proxy). Even if China's interest in the Middle East is primarily economic, Chinese state defense contractors have increasingly stepped in to fill military supply gaps, including drones and air defense systems to Saudi Arabia and the UAE.<sup>12</sup> The U.S. used such great power competition from China as a justification for the December 2020 sale of nearly \$500 million in precision bombs to Saudi Arabia.

Given this backdrop and the recent U.S. drawdown of troops in Iraq and Afghanistan, it is no surprise that the states with the most to lose from decreased U.S. engagement felt the need to create new security arrangements. The Abraham Accords were announced as a peace deal that would normalize relations between the signatory states (Israel and the UAE), but in hindsight it is clear that it was little more than an arms deal, albeit a significant one. The additional deal with Saudi Arabia further strengthens that argument. Notably, the Saudi deal also threatens to destabilize the region by prolonging the Yemeni civil war and, as many U.S. lawmakers pointed out, threatens Israel's qualitative military edge.

As long as the Abraham Accords remain in place and Iran remains a threat more ominous than Israel for both the UAE and Saudi Arabia, a strong investment in both the Emirati and Saudi defense sectors may help preserve the Middle East balance of power and create trust between major U.S. allies. Both countries have a profound interest in stability due to a need to preserve their sovereign wealth and increasingly diversified economies. The UAE has already demonstrated commitment to stability beyond its border through its support to international counterterrorism efforts against ISIS.

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<sup>12</sup> Camille Lons, Jonathan Fulton, Degang Sun, Naser Al-Tamimi, "China's Great Game in the Middle East," *European Council on Foreign Relations*, October 21, 2019,

[https://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/china\\_great\\_game\\_middle\\_east](https://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/china_great_game_middle_east); "Chinese military drone sales hover over Middle East," *Associated Press*, February 26, 2018, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/2134680/chinese-military-drone-display-united-arab-emirates>; See also Tom Kingston, "UAE allegedly using Chinese drones for deadly airstrikes in Libya," *DefenseNews*, May 2, 2019, <https://www.defensenews.com/unmanned/2019/05/02/uae-allegedly-using-chinese-drones-for-deadly-airstrikes-in-libya/>



However, even in the best-case scenario, where the accord would encourage economic integration and collaboration in industries such as technology and tourism, it is clear that its benefits to a majority of Arab citizens will be minimal and that normalization will mostly be an elite undertaking. The fact that a 2020 survey found that 97% of all Arabs still believe that Israel “is responsible for all ills” is concerning for a post-COVID-19 world because it proves how detached Arab leaders are from their societies. Indeed, if in the future, the authoritarian monarchies of the Gulf are toppled by extremist forces, we may find that we have created military monsters that are armed with F-35s and precision-guided munitions.

COVID-19 both enabled this new regional geopolitical security order and necessitated it. The pandemic broke the ideological restraint against ties with the Jewish state at a time when the most vocal opposition was not paying attention. The U.S. withdrawal of counterterrorism train-and-assist missions from Iraq and Afghanistan is taking place in an environment with increased discontent and growing risks of recruitment and radicalization by terrorist and extremist groups. With high-tech military equipment flooding the region, MENA monarchs and authoritarian leaders have set themselves up for further retrenchment and alienation. Some argue that external military support and intelligent diplomacy are needed more than ever to stem a new wave of instability and insecurity. Thus, now is not a good time for the U.S. to step away from supporting the bare-bones counterterrorism measures that are still in operation. U.S. Sen. Mitch McConnell remarked that such a withdrawal would “hurt our allies and delight the people who wish us harm.”

### **Conclusion: five recommendations**

Socioeconomic and political risk factors make it clear that the pandemic’s effects in the Middle East are likely to be profoundly destabilizing: State fragility will increase, economic opportunities will decline while inequalities rise, and political freedoms will be further curtailed. Conditions for renewed radicalization and extremism will likely ripen. A resurgence of Salafi-Jihadism would be compounded by the complex web of regional and global rivalries and abundant access to advanced military technologies. While it is too early to tell whether the administration of new President Joe Biden will significantly change the trajectory of U.S. engagement in MENA trouble spots, it is clear that diplomacy and targeted support is needed to avert disaster.

The first order of business is to identify the needs of fragile and failing states, and to begin serious processes to address them. It is a key U.S. and NATO interest that Lebanon and Jordan remain stable and that disintegration into civil war in those states and others is prevented. This requires addressing both the pressing socioeconomic conditions that give rise to anti-government sentiments, and the inefficient and corrupt political processes that benefit the few at the expense of the many.

Second, ungoverned remote areas and former conflict zones need to be better monitored to prevent Salafi-Jihadi groups from regrouping and recruiting. Marshall Center alumni active in the Iraqi security sector have reported that small ISIS cells are regrouping in an area that



straddles the line of control between Kurdish Peshmerga forces and government-controlled territory in the center of the country. The restriction on troop movement due to virus-containment measures and the lack of manpower due to quarantine has given terrorist groups more freedom to maneuver.

Third, the humanitarian disasters that are already taking place as a result of the region's devastating civil wars need to be addressed. COVID-19 is said to have reached unsustainable levels in some of the most war-torn areas of Iraq and Syria, including Idlib. The refugee crisis, the lack of economic opportunities and the dearth of adequate health services have set up these areas for immense suffering.

Fourth, the socioeconomic conditions and political factors that fuel political grievances and breed radicalization and extremism need to be taken seriously. There are known pathways between such risk factors and violent mobilization, and the links between similar grievances and the Arab Spring uprisings have been well documented. Economic inequality and the factors that exacerbate it, including increasing competition over water and the growing impact of climate change, will not improve unless political elites turn away from their privileged reality and focus on long-term sustainability.

Fifth and finally, given underlying sociopolitical and economic insecurities, regional and global rivalries and the military security dilemma need to be stemmed. Despite decreased state revenues as a result of the pandemic, the continuing militarization will likely continue unless the conditions driving it are mitigated. Most important, as long as the ruling elites do not suffer from the economic impacts of COVID-19, lucrative military contracts will continue to remain on the agenda. There is a need for the major arms suppliers (including the U.S., Russia, France and China) to reevaluate the devastating long-term impacts of maintaining this course. If the latest mass demonstrations for civilian government in Algeria and Sudan tell us anything, it's that the Middle East will remain vulnerable to significant regional instability for years to come. The devastating impacts of the pandemic in the Middle East are thus likely to endure and to present enormous challenges for regional and global security.



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