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COVID-19 and the Arab World – Between a Rock and Hard Place

Dalal Najib

In 711 C.E., Tariq Ibn Ziyad, a Moorish army commander, led a small force to the Iberian Peninsula and landed on the massive rock now called Jabal-Tariq¹ (Gibraltar). He then ordered his ships to be burned, looked his soldiers in the eye, and told them: “Behind you is the sea; before you, the enemy.” This expression continues to be used in Arabic, the equivalent in English of being caught between a rock and a hard place. It describes well the unenviable position in which many Arab government officials find themselves as they grapple with the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on public health, the economy, and society in general.

COVID-19 took the entire world by surprise, the Arab region included. The first cases reported in the Gulf region were mainly due to its geographic proximity to Iran, an early hotspot of the disease. Several Arab countries reacted by swiftly imposing strict measures in an effort to curb infection rates and avoid overwhelming local health systems. For example, the Lebanese government closed schools shortly after the first few cases were confirmed. In Jordan and Morocco, a full lockdown was imposed with the closing of airspace and land border crossings

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to all commercial passenger travel. Until mid-summer, containment measures across the region appeared to be successful. However, as national lockdowns were gradually lifted, the number of cases began to rise exponentially. As of early November 2020, nearly 2.2 million people had been infected across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA),² although the mortality rate remains lower than the global average, mainly due to the relatively young population.³

The public health crisis and lockdown measures have had catastrophic effects on the regional economy impacting oil prices, tourism, remittances, and more. As a result, the region's economy is expected to contract by 5 percent, amounting to an overall loss of US\$152 billion. In addition to the looming economic crisis, Arab countries are facing daunting challenges such as the saturation of a fragmented and outdated healthcare system, limited and unequal access to education for 110 million students, the exacerbation of conflict and humanitarian crises, and increased societal disparities. In Syria, health infrastructure has been crippled by years of conflict, with only 64 percent of hospitals still operational and 70 percent of Syrian healthcare workers displaced as refugees or migrants.⁴ Government interventions are further hampered by the spread of misinformation in a region where 23 percent of adults are illiterate.⁵

For many years, local leaders have acknowledged the need to invest in Research and Development (R&D), update ailing healthcare infrastructure, and revamp a dysfunctional education system. Yet, with very few exceptions, too little has been done too late and the Arab region is now facing one of its worst public health, societal, and economic crises in decades. Against a pre-pandemic backdrop of staggering unemployment rates, deeply entrenched social inequalities, a prolonged refugee crisis, and controversial human rights records in some countries, the COVID-19 pandemic could be the straw that breaks the camel's back. As the poorest and most vulnerable face increasing economic hardship, louder grievances could potentially destabilize a fragile post-Arab spring semblance of calm and, as such, pose a threat to the positions of political leaders who find themselves between a rock and a hard place. Not only are they being held accountable for difficult policy decisions made during this crisis, but also for their lack of preparedness and leadership failures prior to the pandemic.

Does it mean the situation in the Arab world is all doom and gloom? Not necessarily. The current health crisis could be a pivotal moment for stakeholders, a chance to step up and take aggressive measures to address deeply rooted structural weaknesses, starting with reducing inequalities, investing in young people, harnessing science and technology (S&T) innovation, and strengthening regional science diplomacy.

Reducing Inequalities

First, it is important to acknowledge that the Arab region is far from homogenous and the response to the crisis has varied from country to country. For example, Gulf countries such as the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar were able to marshal multi-billion-dollar stimulus packages to boost their national economies, as opposed to the modest amounts put forward in middle-income countries like Egypt or Lebanon. Within Arab countries, there are dramatic inequalities across race, gender, socio-economic classes, and geography (urban vs. rural). Refugees and displaced populations have been the hardest hit as they rely heavily on humanitarian assistance. In addition, women and migrant populations in the workforce (particularly the informal sector) are suffering the most from the consequences of this crisis. According to a report by the Moroccan High Commission for Planning (HCP),⁶ the disparity in access to education between males and females, and between residents of urban and rural areas, is striking: in 2014, 60.4 percent of rural women and 35.2 percent of rural men were illiterate, roughly twice the percentage in urban areas. The dropout rates in rural areas are particularly alarming for secondary school⁷ and these rates have been exacerbated during the pandemic since the Ministry of Education implemented distance learning. A study by the HCP in May of 2020 showed that 29 percent of Moroccan students in rural areas do not follow online lessons, compared to 13 percent in urban areas. This can largely be attributed to the digital divide between cities and villages and the limited internet connectivity in rural areas. According to the World Bank,⁸ in 2015, less than half of the rural population in Morocco had access to the internet compared to 76 percent of urban households, and many rural students do not have access to hardware such as tablets and laptops at home. If not addressed first, disparities such as these will continue to hamper recovery efforts in Arab societies. Therefore, proposed policies for recovery must allocate significant resources towards reinforcing social protection of the most vulnerable.

Investing in Young People

People under 25 years of age constitute more than half of the population of the Middle East and North Africa.⁹ Unfortunately, unemployment among Arab youth remains the highest and fastest-growing worldwide, increasing from 19.5 to 23 percent from 2012 to 2020. Unemployment among young Arab women is more than twice that of young men, reaching 42.1 percent. The situation has only worsened during the COVID-19 pandemic, given that 85.1 percent of young working-age Arabs were employed in the informal sector, the hardest hit by the

crisis.¹⁰ In addition, the disruption of formal education is depriving young people of the opportunity to learn and acquire marketable skills, thus further limiting their employment prospects in the future.

At the same time, young Arabs are creative, resourceful, and hardworking, and they have the potential to become agents of change in their home countries. To unleash this untapped potential, policymakers must ensure equitable access to education and inclusive participation in the job market by investing in training and capacity-building programs. Governments should also focus on retaining highly educated young people, namely scientists, engineers, and medical professionals, by providing them with job opportunities and working environments to conduct quality research. This is particularly important to counter the “brain drain” of disillusioned Arab professionals to OECD countries. Isn’t it ironic that the US COVID-19 vaccine program has until recently been spearheaded by Dr. Moncef Slaoui, a Moroccan-American, when Morocco ordered millions of doses of the vaccine from the Chinese company Sinopharm?¹¹ With long-term strategic investment in education and R&D, Arab countries could potentially make the most of the remarkable potential of its young population and turn them into the region’s strongest asset.

Harnessing Science and Technology Innovation

Policymakers in Arab societies must also harness science and technology innovation to address structural weaknesses across sectors, starting with reducing the digital divide and promoting innovative homegrown technologies.

In the education sector, for example, countries such as Jordan, Lebanon, and Morocco have been developing creative multi-pronged approaches to distance learning. The Ministry of Higher Education in Morocco has partnered with state television networks to broadcast educational material across the nation, including in remote underserved communities. In Jordan, a public-private partnership between the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Digital Economy and Entrepreneurship, and a private company resulted in the creation of “Darsak,”¹² an educational portal that delivers classes for all grades following the Jordanian curriculum. At the same time, there is a significant rise in the development of homegrown education technologies and mobile apps such as Rawy Kids in Egypt or Kitabi Book Reader in Lebanon.¹³ These efforts demonstrate that structural change in the region’s educational framework is indeed possible through innovative thinking and cross-sectoral partnerships.

Similarly, the COVID-19 crisis is demonstrating the potential of digital solutions in the healthcare sector for the prediction and mitigation of infectious diseases outbreaks. For instance, Qatar made it mandatory for all citizens and residents to install Ehteraz, its coronavirus contact tracking app, on their mobile devices when leaving their home, allowing the government to track if users have been in close contact with an infected person.¹⁴ In the UAE, a healthcare start-up called Nabta Health is using artificial intelligence to assess the risks of COVID-19, focusing on women with underlying health conditions.¹⁵

The private sector must also continue to mobilize to support national governments' efforts to meet the need for manufactured goods in the healthcare system. For example, companies in Morocco and Tunisia have redirected their production lines to supply the healthcare industry with medical gear and personal protective equipment (PPE). As a result, over seven million masks are now produced daily in Morocco, meeting the country's demand, and exporting the rest to Europe.¹⁶ In Jordan, Eon Dental, a company that normally produces 3D-printed dental braces, is now collaborating with the Jordanian Royal Scientific Society to manufacture spare parts for ventilators.¹⁷

A Valuable Opportunity for Science Policy and Diplomacy in the Region

The pandemic could serve as a valuable learning opportunity for governments in the region and an impetus for institutional reform. So far, science policy has been a nascent and somewhat limited field in the Arab world; most universities in the region do not offer a degree in this field and there is no systematic pipeline for scientists to inform policy. There is also a need for credible institutions to facilitate public outreach and provide transparent and independent science policy advice to governments. The COVID-19 crisis has made the need for such institutions even more urgent. Countries across the Arab region have shown unprecedented levels of intergovernmental coordination across ministries of health, interior, education, foreign affairs, and others. COVID-19 has also offered a clear opportunity for governments to gain the trust of their citizens by justifying difficult decisions with scientific facts and proving their ability to protect lives. In most cases, daily decisions have been evidence-based and government leaders are now recognizing the importance of scientific data in informing their policies.¹⁸ It is time to create a paradigm shift in governance and establish formal channels for Arab scientists, engineers, and medical professionals to actively engage in government decision-making and inform policies, now and in the post-COVID-19 era.

This is also an opportunity to reinvigorate science diplomacy in the region. Since the COVID-19 crisis began, international cooperation has been largely limited to the long-standing nodes of power of science (the United States, China, and Europe), leaving behind countries from the Global South.¹⁹ As exchange programs with European and U.S. partners have been significantly reduced, the Arab world must now look inward and foster regional collaboration by promoting brain circulation, sharing resources, and opening access to research facilities and centers of excellence. Luckily, there are a few noteworthy regional initiatives that could serve as a starting point for regional science diplomacy. For example, the Middle East Desalination Research Center (MEDRC)²⁰ has been conducting high-quality research on desalination and transboundary water resources management while building the capacity of scientists and engineers across the region. Over the past decade, the Arab-American Frontiers of Science, Engineering, and Medicine program, led by the U.S. National Academies,²¹ has served as a vibrant platform for US-Arab and Arab-Arab research collaboration and knowledge exchange and resulted in numerous fellowships, joint publications, and institutional partnerships among Arab countries. The 2017 World Science Forum on Science for Peace in Jordan emphasized the role of science diplomacy in the region and called for efforts “to focus scientific capacity to address regional challenges.”²² In Saudi Arabia in the fall of 2020, King Abdullah University of Science and Technology (KAUST) hosted the S20 Summit under the overarching theme *Foresight: Science for Navigating Critical Transitions*, highlighting how “science can be used as a tool to guide humanity through critical global transitions.”²³

The current crisis could indeed be the impetus for the creation of regional or sub-regional initiatives to provide expert advice to national governments and inform future strategies to combat emerging threats not only in public health but also in climate, food security, and disaster management, to name a few. A regional or sub-regional science and technology policy fellowship (e.g., in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) or the Maghreb) could be valuable, particularly if modeled after similar programs in the Global South, namely the successful ASEAN S&T fellowship in Southeast Asia.²⁴ In addition, there has been a renewed interest in establishing local S&T advisory bodies or Academies of Sciences to provide expert independent advice to governments. The UAE recently launched the Mohammed bin Rashid Academy of Scientists to serve as “a link between the science community, government and industry through supporting evidence-based policies.”²⁵ A regional S&T advisory body is obviously a more ambitious undertaking and will only be successful in its mission if it is independent and funded adequately. While this is not a new idea, the effort would most likely garner support from other Arab states if led by a stable country with a neutral position in regional politics. Kuwait, for example, is well primed for this leadership role, as it has long played the role of a catalyst for progress in the region while

skillfully mediating the GCC crisis.²⁶ Last, if successful, the new regional S&T advisory body could help support the region's roadmap for recovery and improve its preparedness for the next crisis, which may be just around the corner. **SD**

Endnotes

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