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COVID-19 Tests the Limits of Arab State-Society Relations

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COVID-19 has hit many parts of the Arab world in the context of spreading into the Global South. This might be the right time to rethink many of the assumptions once garnered about state-society relations in the Arab world in the light of the spread of the pandemic and the measures taken to counter it. This includes political regime dynamics, be they democratic or authoritarian, as well as state institutional capacities, not the least in public health but also in education, security, communication, employment and supplies. It also addresses the role of the state as a public authority in relation to the economy, and the capacity to regulate markets or to even assume a direct role in the production and distribution of goods and services in times of emergency.

There are many analyses out there that aimed at capturing and forecasting the impact COVID-19 and the measures taken to counter it would have on the world as we know it. Some are asserting the ongoing crisis would undermine the hegemony of neoliberalism, pushing for the redefinition of how states would be related to the market on the national and global levels. Some have even gone as far as anticipating how COVID-19 would eventually reconfigure the global division of labor and redefine the scope and scale of globalization. On my part, I think it might be a bit too early for such assessments. The long-standing impact of the current global crisis will depend on its length and depth, which will be revealed in the coming few months. Moreover, many analyses are hasty and with exaggerated senses of hope or fear on what would befall existing economic and political structures in a manner comparable to the Great Depression or the two World Wars.

I will hence develop some observations and insights about state-society relations in the Arab world and the limitations that the pandemic has thus far revealed. I also address the potentially transformative role the pandemic might have on the present and future roles of the Arab state as well as the perceptions and constructions of it among Arab peoples.

To start with, neither natural nor manmade disasters occur in a vacuum. Rather, they happen in concrete political contexts that bear institutional legacies governing the interaction between state and society. They also bear economic and political arrangements, social relations and linkages between the global and the domestic. Hence comes the greatly variegated manifestations and influences or global crises from one national or regional context to another, even if simultaneously facing one and the same global outbreak.

This is exactly what this article tackles by exploring how COVID-19 would impact states in the Arab world. The state here is neither an abstraction nor an ideal type. It is rather dealt with as an integral part of a complex sociopolitical reality that carries with it the historical evolution of state institutions and how they were articulated with social classes and constituencies in addition to historical patterns of interaction with external factors, be they global or regional. Such patterns may be old as the founding junctures in the early 20th century or following the end of WWII. They

can also be more recent as is the case with the Arab revolutions and the civil and regional conflicts and rivalries that ensued in their aftermath.

The recent unfolding of events is somehow similar to Naguib Mahfouz's novel *The Guilty* (Al-Muthnibuun). In the novel, the investigation of the murder of a promiscuous actress revealed many other unrelated crimes committed by almost every person. The pandemic and the measures taken to counter it in the Arab world have put on dramatic display the well-entrenched patterns of interaction and practices that have tied Arab states, in the capacity of being public authorities allegedly pursuing some notion of the public good, to their societies. It might well open the floodgates for transforming such relations and the notions through which people perceive and think of them.

Strong state versus authoritarian state

The ongoing crisis is a reminder of an old debate in political sociology about the Arab state dating back to the 1990s. Nazih Ayubi's influential book *Overstating the Arab State* was iconic of that debate. He argued that Arab states could combine being authoritarian, garnering considerable autonomy of their societies. These states enjoyed a broad capacity to repress and sometimes even to employ wide-ranging violence to retain power or to impose the elites' choices on their populations. However, these same states have been quite weak with limited capacities to penetrate, regulate and rearrange social and economic relations in the societies they dominate. Three decades ago, Ayubi talked about the limited ability to extract resources through taxation. Today, rampant economic informality stands as a staggering example of such limited state capacities, in addition to attesting to poverty, underemployment and the need of millions in the Arab world -and elsewhere in the Global South- to join labor markets on a precarious basis. This is the case with irregular laborers and the self-employed who often occupy low-wage, low-productivity jobs that lack minimal social protection or job security.

The scale of informality, which reaches 40 or 50 percent in some cases in the Arab world like Tunisia, Morocco and Egypt among others, reveals the actual limited role of states in regulating production, employment and consumption. Much activity happens off any official record and is not subject to laws or regulations. In the present context, informality stands as a major obstacle to coordinating counter-pandemic efforts. It reveals that authoritarianism is not enough. This political-economic legacy that created such structures with these precarious, low-productivity jobs will come back to haunt the Arab states. This is at least a major problem for oil-poor and heavily populated ones as the oil-rich ones face different problems, being the source of income to be distributed to their populations. They are also more often than not with very small populations, making handling them in times of emergency relatively easier.

The ongoing crisis seems unprecedented, even compared to previous episodes of wars and popular uprisings. This time, the response to the pandemic puts to the test state-society relations in the broadest sense ever. On the one hand, coordinating collective action requires a capable public authority that can regulate the tiny details of individuals' behavior, rather than just dealing with certain sectors or regions within the state. On the other, this can be quite challenging to the state, not just with regards to financial and human resources but also the legitimacy that states enjoy in

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the eyes of the general public who have historically been cast aside politically and economically. Pressure now mounts on how trustworthy state institutions are for the majority of people so as to enable the former to collect relevant information not just about infections but basically about daily interactions and actions of individuals and households. This hinges on the willingness of the people to cooperate offering information and observing state decrees without much resistance.

This is the moment of truth for many states worldwide and not just in the Arab world. The challenge seems immense here though with the biggest concentration of authoritarian regimes in the globe where there isn't much room for mutual trust and cooperation between state and sizable swathes of society. This comes at a time when the possibility of coordinating collective action on a big scale as the one required to counter such a pandemic depends increasingly and exclusively on state authority. Social distancing and lockdowns are effectively suspending much of the social and informal channels and mechanisms of coordination that until quite recently occupied much of the scene, especially for the urban poor and other marginalized segments.

Hence, states in the Global South, but also in the Global North as was revealed with the millions of irregular workers in the United States for instance, have now to bear the burden that they have eluded for decades, intentionally or not. They have to find the resources for disbursing some form of universal income or subsidized public services during emergency times that might extend for months. Moreover, states have to come up with channels to reach out to households and communities that were once totally marginalized in order to deliver badly needed goods and services. They also have to find ways to coordinate action with the broad base of micro and small businesses, many of which have always operated informally. Now, states have found it necessary for a semblance of regulation for the self-employed and the precarious workforce lest they starve in the event of an extended lockdown and find themselves forced to breach it in the search of a living.

The one big problem here is that states cannot create badly needed institutional capacities or patterns of interaction with their societies overnight. Their ability to respond to this pressing development rather depends on already existing arrangements. Hence diverge national and even local responses to the one and same threat. In that sense, the states that have accumulated in the past not just hospital beds and ventilators and competent medical staffs but also relations and arrangements that enable mass coordination and mobilization, are at an advantage compared to those who have not.

Celebrating China's successful authoritarianism

There seems to be nowadays an Arab infatuation with China's successful authoritarianism that managed to contain the spread of the virus and put the country back on track. Not only could this reaction be found in official Arab discourses but also among social constituencies that hope for a good-side of authoritarianism like the one that exists in China. Indeed, China looks quite impressive: a totalitarian regime that could manage a competitive economy and that possesses highly efficient and world-standard public institutions in healthcare, education, research and communication. Such formidable capacities came to the rescue when the outbreak happened allowing the state to exercise tight control over the daily lives of literally hundreds of millions of

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people in the continent-sized nation. Conversely, this is exactly what seems missing in the developed western world. Values like democracy and individual freedom seem to confirm the fears of having states that are too weak to control the behavior of their citizens. They have healthcare systems that got early on overwhelmed with an endless stream of elderly patients who have been dying in the hundreds. The situation does not look less ugly in the United States either. The Trump administration appears not to be able to make its mind on the priority of either saving the lives of millions or keeping the economy going. For those following the news in the Arab world, this is a reminder of a Neo-liberal capitalist model that has been working off the bounds of any national concern as long as profits are attained. To the contrary, China is portrayed as a more rational, coordinated and state-led model of capitalism (ironically led by a Leninist party) where clear priorities in issues of public health were never contested.

Most Arab citizens live today in states that combine the worse of the two worlds: authoritarianism with weak capacities to regulate or deliver for their societies. This rather old fact has made its way back to the scene in the wake of the COVID-19 outbreak. The analysis itself, as sound as it may be, might be the most useful thing with the pandemic hitting and the need for collective responses becoming dire to limit its risks and losses. However, in the event of facing a prolonged crisis that is unfolding everywhere at the same time, the consciousness of many around the globe will likely and significantly transform on a great many issues. The crisis would make fairly-educated and wired citizens in the world live through real-life models of comparative political systems where they could critically compare and contrast states based on their public policies and institutional capacities. It might open the door for the redefinition of how social groups are related to states and markets. In the same vein, it might make it possible for the incorporation of marginalized constituencies through formal arrangements that could supply them with minimal social protection and healthcare or at least mitigate the precariousness that marked their integration into the economic system of the day.