

COVID-19

ANALYTICAL BRIEFING



USAID
FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

INTRODUCTION

The following report is a meta-analysis of the biweekly news and analytical digests compiled under CISAR from May-December 2020. MSI summarizes regional high-level trends and themes exploring the impact of COVID-19 on governance issues and conflict dynamics while synthesizing its secondary effects. This report includes considerations for USAID for further monitoring and/or interventions. The report includes summaries covering nine countries and the West Bank/Gaza.

CHALLENGES TO DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS AND GOVERNANCE

Across the [MENA region, the pandemic further exposed fragility](#) in governance and human rights. Governmental [responses to the virus have varied](#) from draconian to technocratic to laissez-faire. The MENA region is considered the “[toughest and most dangerous](#)” region for journalists, countries such as Egypt and Syria have taken advantage of the pandemic to consolidate power by [suppressing journalists and imposing blackouts claiming disinformation](#). A trend arose of military mobilization as a response to the pandemic. In Tunisia and Lebanon, citizens reported positive responses towards [military support for COVID-19](#) responses. [Egypt’s use of military and harsh tactics](#), however, including increased arrests and violence to enforce COVID-19 restrictions and undermine protests has fueled unrest.

Polling from the [Arab Barometer](#) found citizen support for a range of government restrictions during a public health crisis. Public acceptance of tight restrictions without clear expiration timelines may support the durability of authoritarian governments across the region.

Considerations for USAID: Monitor suppression of journalism, freedom of expression, media, civil society engagement, and new laws or emergency restrictions that serve to consolidate authoritarian power.

EXACERBATING FRAGILITY AND CONFLICT

COVID-19 is now widely understood to amplify existing conflict drivers. [Political protests in Iraq and Lebanon](#) have drawn global attention as protestors advocate for political and economic reform and an end to corruption in the wake of COVID-19, the Beirut blast and Lebanon’s disaster response. Also, COVID-19 may [act as a multiplier effect](#) on conflict drivers as militias, terrorists and other armed sub-state groups work to improve their reputation and gain territory by providing services to local communities.

Considerations for USAID: Monitor government policies and reforms to address previous and existing tensions as these may further fuel fragility and conflict. Explore additional opportunities for inclusive national dialogues and work to build community responses to emerging conflict to avoid escalation of localized conflict dynamics.

VIOLENT NON-STATE ACTORS ADAPTING TO THE PANDEMIC

The pandemic presents [challenges and opportunities for violent non-state actors \(VNSAs\)](#) across the region. For example, Hezbollah in [Lebanon](#) assisted civilians in response to the pandemic. In contrast, ISIS is using a more opportunistic approach through [rhetoric](#) claiming the pandemic is [punishment against the West](#); they used the [popular video-sharing app TikTok to recruit youth](#). In April 2020, there was a [significant increase \(approximately 69 percent\) in ISIS-led armed activities and attacks](#) in Syria and Iraq. Despite lockdown responses to COVID-19, VNSAs are also still active in [drug trafficking operations](#) to fund their activities.

Considerations for USAID: VNSAs are adapting recruiting efforts to take advantage of governments' focus on the pandemic and the public's increased time spent online. Disruption and redirect efforts can undermine renewed recruitment efforts. Monitor financial flows to support violent actors and shifts in messaging and public perception.

GENDERED IMPACTS OF COVID-19

Analysts at the [Atlantic Council](#) note that women play a critical role in building resilience post-pandemic due to their role as caregivers and small/informal business owners. Given this understanding, advocates have highlighted [gender gaps that exist in public leadership around the world](#)—namely, the absence of women in top government positions. Since the pandemic's emergence, CISAR has reviewed reports focused on four [emerging risks to women's political participation](#): (1) increasing economic risk and a return to traditional gender roles; (2) greater reliance on informal practices that reinforce male political dominance; (3) inequities in access to online platforms; and (4) decreased public visibility of women. Additionally, while men face increased rates of serious illness and death from COVID-19, women are experiencing an increase in gender-based violence and are expected to [suffer the longer-term consequences](#) of the pandemic.

Considerations for USAID: Leverage opportunities to promote women's sustained involvement in politics, such as by supporting online participation or other remote options and promote the continued importance of women's involvement in decision-making, including in COVID-19 response efforts.

CHILDREN AND YOUTH

The pandemic has amplified the harmful effects children face in conflict-affected areas. [Among the contributing factors in regional conflict spots](#) are the collapse of both the health and education services, mostly due to targeting by conflict actors, particularly in Libya, Yemen, and Syria. The disruption of schools and nurseries, along with increased poverty and inequality, threaten children's mental health. There is a real possibility that the pandemic will lead to "a lost generation." The widespread economic impacts and the increases in unemployment and underemployment disproportionately impact youth populations across MENA. These economic pressures threaten to drive [economic migration from youth populations](#), as 40 percent of this population is reported to be considering leaving their country of origin.

Considerations for USAID: Provide mental health support to children, youth and families, particularly in conflict-affected areas. Promote the engagement of youth in COVID-19 response efforts and review negative impacts of virtual learning to mitigate the risks they present to youth.

MIGRANTS

Migrant populations have been severely impacted by COVID-19 and government responses. Pandemic-related order closures and restrictions [have stranded 2.75 million migrants](#) around the world, with the MENA being the worst affected region (1.275 of the total 2.75 million). An estimated 1 million [Egyptian returnees](#) will shock an already distressed national labor market system, with unemployment rates expected to increase by an additional 11-16 percent. For many labor migrants, especially domestic workers in MENA, issues of violence and labor rights abuses have come out in the open. COVID-19 has [exposed the deep global neglect](#) for labor migrants, especially domestic workers.

Considerations for USAID: Monitor changes in migration patterns and human trafficking. Advance human rights awareness campaigns for migrant workers and disrupt human trafficking of vulnerable persons. Support reintegration of migrant workers to their countries of origin to catalyze economic growth and decrease pressures that may escalate conflict. Support government policies and practices to address health concerns of returning migrants.

RISING CHINESE INFLUENCE

[COVID-19 is the newest tie that binds China and the Middle East](#), a relationship that has expanded in recent years as China has championed its Belt and Road Initiative and as regional countries have turned towards diversification in economic and [pandemic diplomacy](#). An outpouring of mutual support, paired with deliveries of medical aid and some [questionable loans](#), characterizes Chinese-Middle Eastern discourse during COVID-19. China seeks to build “[strategic fulcrums](#)” to extend influence across the region. These shifting dynamics are likely to continue to [impact United States government policy](#) responses in the region.

Considerations for USAID: Monitor ongoing contributions by the Chinese government to initiatives across the region and evaluate the impact on public perception and political influence the investments yield. Where appropriate, build positive messaging campaigns and alternative activities to counter influence.

EGYPT

The [Egyptian government's response to the COVID-19 outbreak is](#) a case study in repression, propaganda, and misinformation designed to consolidate authoritarian power. Ranked 166th out of 180 countries on the 2021 World Freedom Press Index, the government exercises almost total control over the media through very restrictive press freedom laws and regulators ([2021 World Freedom Press Freedom Index](#)). Government actions are rooted in the security apparatus' control over civilian institutions and the zero-tolerance approach to dissent. For example, three doctors reporting on the government's COVID 19 response challenges were arrested and accused of spreading false news, joining a terrorist organization and misusing social media. The ability to provide verified information in Egypt is an ongoing challenge. When Egyptian government acknowledged COVID 19 as a challenge, it would present the virus to [citizens as a security challenge](#) to be met by Egypt's most effective institutions, especially the military. This response deepened the concerns of analysts and advocacy groups that [Egypt's situation is similar to before the 2011 revolution](#): stable on the surface, but with deep structural problems and simmering social grievances.

IRAQ

In Iraq, where COVID-19 cases have soared, the [pandemic is aggravating inequality, poverty and insecurity](#), threatening to stall progress toward the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) after decades of sectarian violence. Three overlapping segments of the Iraqi population—the forcibly displaced, women, and children—have been disproportionately impacted by the health and socioeconomic impacts of COVID-19. Reports indicate that [ISIS may be using the current focus on the pandemic](#) and a lull in security to regroup, increasing the likelihood for future violence and displacement. Combined with [low oil prices affecting oil and gas producers](#), the Iraqi government has been under increasing pressure from the effects of the pandemic. The situation has only exacerbated the tensions that erupted with the October 2019 demonstrations when [protesters in Baghdad and central and southern Iraq](#) called for the downfall of the government due to poor services, health and education, and lack of viable job opportunities.

JORDAN

Jordan is tied with Saudi Arabia as having the [highest number of concerning developments](#) in the Middle East during the pandemic. The government of Jordan declared a state of emergency, enabling the justification of strict lockdowns and increased police violence. Jordan [dropped one position on the Press Freedoms Index](#) this past year as journalists and broadcasters were arrested and publication bans reinforced existing measures. Otherwise, overall the government's measures to stop the spread of COVID-19 has helped to [contain](#) the virus. Such measures have also led to severe economic and societal impacts as both personal debt and unemployment increased. The perception of the government's handling of the virus faltered somewhat as [case numbers spiked](#), attributed to the rapid spread of a COVID 19 variant. However, the [economic outlook](#) in Jordan is better compared to other countries in the region.

During the past year, Jordanian officials [praised China's support of anti-coronavirus measures](#) through donations of medical equipment and vaccines. Support from other countries for pandemic protection and phased re-openings can counter emerging Chinese influence.

LEBANON

[Protests are resuming](#) after multiple lockdowns in Lebanon. Protestors are standing against high unemployment, a failing economy and corruption. Lebanon's former status as a shining light in the region for freedom of the press faces significant challenges. The worldwide index for freedom of the press ranks [Lebanon at 107](#), down five places from 2019. Physical attacks on journalists by protestors and police are [increasingly common](#).

Discrimination against refugees has increased during the pandemic. [Stories of refugees and migrant workers being mistreated](#), isolated, beaten and/or detained for having COVID-19 abound, inhibiting testing and treatment. Palestinian refugee women in particular face discrimination and violence, including [increased sexual and domestic violence](#). The economic crisis and COVID-19 contributed to a sharp increase in the cost of food and other items and placed an even [greater burden on refugee families](#). As in other countries, migrants were particularly impacted by pandemic-related restrictions. Without protections, [workers are often left in limbo](#) with wages held. These incidents, combined with ongoing frustration with government corruption and political stalemates, are likely to further stress fragile governing arrangements.

In the wake of the pandemic and the Beirut port explosion in August 2020, crisis-hit Lebanon sought financial assistance from the international community overall, and the Gulf States in particular, without much luck. Meanwhile, the People's Republic of China's influence has risen as a result of Chinese

investments in infrastructure projects and Chinese peacekeepers [provision of emergency medical aid](#) after the port explosion. Subsequently, [Lebanon became more open to ongoing investments](#) from China, with Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah suggesting in a June 16, 2020, televised address that Lebanon should welcome Chinese investments in key infrastructure projects. Chinese-led projects include [building needed power stations](#). Analysts note China may effectively displace the United States as the [country's dominant outside actor](#).

LIBYA

Libya's health care system, although somewhat better funding than its neighbors due to oil income, is fragile after years of conflict. At the onset of the pandemic, fighting near Tripoli severely hampered relief efforts; a hospital designed for COVID-19 patients was [bombed in April 2020](#). Also, [water and power shortages](#) occurring both as a result of fragile infrastructure and as tactics of war, exacerbated COVID-19's impacts on the population. [Vaccine rollout started in April 2021](#), but there are concerns that favoritism and a lack of a unified government effort countrywide has impacted vaccine rollout and other public health initiatives.

The COVID-19 crisis has exacerbated migrants' ongoing strife as they seeking passage across Libya into Europe. One hundred and eight [Ghanaian migrants were stranded](#) in Libya for five months due to COVID-19 restrictions. In May 2020, [Malta signed an agreement with Libya's Tripoli-based government](#) to "prevent people from reaching Malta," which further exposed migrants to brutal treatment when they were returned to Libyan refugee camps.

MOROCCO

The Republic of Morocco's response to the [coronavirus pandemic was strong and proactive](#) (i.e., closing borders, mandatory general lockdown, and social distancing). This response was well coordinated with the military, civilian, and government actors and initially resulted in relatively low number of cases and deaths. The [Royal Armed Forces](#) collaborated with government entities to provide targeted support. As in other countries, economic loss associated with COVID-19 response measures prompted lawmakers to relax restrictions and the number of cases rose. As COVID-19 cases continue to rise, the government is attempting to strike a balance between recovering the economy and saving lives.

Similar to other middle-income countries, [Morocco's COVID-19 economic strategy](#) prioritized supporting economically vulnerable citizens and businesses through aid, repayment plans, and loan packages and an increase in healthcare expenditure. Morocco hopes that Chinese laboratory [Sinopharm's vaccine](#)—and an effective rollout program—will support economic recovery.

SYRIA

After months of under-reported cases and relaxed lockdown measures, COVID-19 [gripped government-held areas](#). Humanitarian workers fear a further [rise in novel coronavirus cases](#) would be disastrous in northwest Syria, where almost 1.5 million people live in overcrowded camps or shelters and experience poor basic services. Returns of [Syrian refugees from abroad](#) was temporarily halted to address the spread of COVID-19 but resumed in June 2020.

Despite ongoing frustration with poor government services, Syrians responded to the pandemic with [renewed volunteerism and community support](#). In southern Syria, including both Daraa and Sweida provinces, in the absence of many state security apparatuses, volunteers came together to launch wide-

reaching initiatives, financing them by tapping into expatriate and refugee communities. These activities may serve to strengthen pockets of communities. At the same time, observers note that the [Assad regime](#) may use COVID-19 response measures to consolidate power and [ISIS](#) may use disorder and lack of attention to regain strength and plan attacks.

China was active in its support of Syria throughout this time with [multiple batches of anti-coronavirus medical aid](#) and offers of [support to strengthen the healthcare system](#). Syria represents a potential key node in [China's infrastructure, telecommunications, and energy-driven Belt and Road Initiative](#). Other countries, notably [Turkey and Russia](#), are using frustration and lack of managing the novel coronavirus to leverage their positions within Syria's ongoing conflict.

TUNISIA

Tunisia was one of the [best performers during the initial wave of the COVID-19 pandemic](#). Success was largely attributed to the relative strength of the country's healthcare system. However, previous protests in Tunisia highlighted disparities in services between the coast and central regions; this [ongoing disparity in healthcare](#) may motivate future grievances with government services. New stringent [lock downs](#) were imposed before the Eid holiday to stem the curb of the virus. Set against the backdrop of COVID 19, leaders in Tunisia express concern that President Kaid Saied is working to limit parliament's authority to [expand political powers](#) during frustration with COVID 19 restrictions.

Women are playing a visible role as [both caregivers and medical professionals](#) during the pandemic, signaling a growing role for women in the scientific community. However, women still face multiple challenges during COVID-19 with a [five-fold increase in reported incidents of GBV](#) in three months.

WEST BANK/GAZA

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacted a heavy toll in the Palestinian West Bank. Stories highlighted that responses to the virus were not equal between [Israel and occupied East Jerusalem](#). In some cases, prisoners and refugees [faced deliberate neglect](#). Given the population density, [enforcing lockdowns is particularly challenging](#) in Gaza. The strict lockdown measures have likely halted the spread of the virus, but also impeded the delivery of important services to marginalized groups including [electricity](#) for hospitals and [legal assistance to women](#).

With the coronavirus spreading fast through the Gaza Strip, the Palestinian militant group Hamas agreed to a [de-escalation of hostilities](#) in September 2020 with Israel in exchange for a cash infusion from Qatar and for Israel's agreement to let fuel flow back to Gaza's power station. With limited coordination between the Palestinian Authority and Israel, civil society is a critical [remaining channel for cross border contact](#) between Israelis and Palestinians. Joint cooperation in the medical field has included Israeli aid to the Palestinian Authority and Hamas, as well as Gazan medical staff coming into Israel to [receive coronavirus response training](#).

[China demonstrated support for the West Bank during COVID-19](#). In response to Israeli endeavors to annex large swathes of the West Bank, Chinese Ambassador to Palestine Guo Wei emphasized that the humanitarian and economic challenges facing the Palestinian territories should not be ignored.

YEMEN

In Yemen, the COVID-19 virus has spread rapidly, with a [known fatality rate near 25 percent](#)—“nearly four times higher than the global average” due to the overall poor health of the population and a severe lack of medical infrastructure after years of war. Prior to COVID-19, Yemen experienced [other notable disease outbreaks](#) including cholera, diphtheria, measles and dengue fever. In more stable governorates like Hadramawt and al-Mahra, local authorities have fared better. In Houthi-held areas, the rebels’ concealment of COVID-19 figures has only allowed the pandemic to spread. This trend may add to overall fatigue with pushes for democracy. In addition to the pandemic, Yemen [faced flash floods](#) in April, ongoing [fears of hunger](#), [inability to finance imports](#) of commodities, and [lack of access to water](#), which deeply impacted women and children. Across the nation, the impact of both conflict and COVID-19 disproportionately impact women and migrants.

Despite the spread of the COVID-19 epidemic in Yemen and calls for a ceasefire from the international community, [Houthi forces have escalated military operations](#) in various regions, particularly along the Saudi border and in Saudi cities, further complicating pandemic responses and impact. Overall, the Houthis are taking the same approach as other armed non-state actors in the region and exploiting the pandemic as an opportunity to escalate military operations. The [ongoing violence and unresolved underlying grievances](#) entrenched Yemen as the [most failed state](#) in the world. Support for basic services is critical to mitigate impacts on undernutrition and [likelihood of famine](#).

China provides support to Yemen, [agreeing to provide a grant](#) of 100 million Chinese yuan (\$15.5 million) to support the implementation of development projects and humanitarian aid.