



# BOSTON CONSORTIUM *for* ARAB REGION STUDIES

## **COVID-19 and the Crisis of Citizenship in the Middle East: Prospects for Civil Society and Civic Renewal**

Denis Sullivan<sup>1</sup>, Professor of Political Science, Northeastern University  
Director, BCARS, the Boston Consortium for Arab Region Studies

---

*“The consequences of breakdowns in collective citizenship will likely be most dire for the region’s more marginalized populations who fall outside the state’s social safety net. Social capital among Arab countries’ citizens is likely to weaken as fear of ‘the other’ grows. Without government services to which to turn, marginalized populations are even more reliant on the charitable benevolence of fellow citizens.”*

- Catherine Herrold, Indiana University

Vulnerable populations across the Arab Region have become even more vulnerable due to COVID-19. Citizenship, and its promise of access to rights and services, is highly correlated with this vulnerability, to the point where the *lack* of citizenship and/or documentation creates concrete barriers to services and rights, particularly in already marginalized populations. Thus, when considering how to mitigate the negative consequences of COVID-19, it is not sufficient to simply treat the *symptoms* (e.g., lack of healthcare, education, infrastructure, civil and political rights); governments and civil society organizations must also focus on the *causes*, starting with the lack of citizenship – and/or statelessness – as well as *eroded citizenship* for those who possess it even if their states do little to honor it.

We argue that *citizenship* is the starting point for addressing these societal ills across the Arab Region, ills that were obvious throughout the Middle East prior to the pandemic of 2020 and have become exacerbated during and after COVID-19.

### **Methodology**

This project was conceived during April 2020 as the dire consequences of COVID-19 spread throughout the Middle East, and as Arab states in particular responded in disparate

---

<sup>1</sup> As discussed in the Methodology section, this document was developed with significant input from BCARS partners. My thanks in particular to: Rami Khouri, American University of Beirut; Catherine Herrold, Indiana University; Roel Meijer, Radboud University (Netherlands); Allison Hodgkins, American University in Cairo; Alice Verticelli, Northeastern University; Charles Simpson, Fletcher School of Law & Diplomacy (Tufts); and Allyson Hawkins, Northeastern University.

ways and with varying degrees of control and severity – to “flatten the curve” and to quash growing public protests, as well as to address the economic consequences of state efforts to control and reverse the rising number of infections, illnesses, and deaths.

Given global lockdowns, curfews, mandated distancing, and stay-at-home orders, we began by asking members of the BCARS Network – scholars, practitioners, and policy analysts in Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Sudan, Turkey, Boston and elsewhere in the US – to respond to a set of questions<sup>2</sup>:

*How is COVID-19 (the virus itself as well as the political and policy responses) affecting citizens and citizenship rights across the Arab Region?*

*What immediate and long-term consequences do you foresee for the most vulnerable people and marginalized citizens of the Region (stateless, refugees, IDPs, migrant laborers, impoverished and most destitute)?*

*Do you see COVID-19 resulting in a strengthening of solidarity within communities or challenging state structures? Will citizens play a greater role in pushing for reform (local or national) in the years ahead? Might civil society and grassroots organizations (even informal self-help groups) grow stronger through this crisis?*

The initial responses from our academic and policy network have generated some common themes, even if divergent conclusions. These themes are outlined below.

### **1. “Shifting balance of power and authority: who has power? Who has rights?”**

*There is a shifting division of power across Arab societies.* The “big four” sectors of society – government, civil society, the private sector, and non-state actors – are competing with and against each other due to COVID-19 upending the balance of power amongst these sectors.

Citizens had successfully mobilized around shared aspirations during the 2010-2011 Arab Uprisings; the early successes fizzled as governments cracked down, which led to social, political, and economic divisions among citizens. COVID-19 could exacerbate those divisions, with governments emboldened to quell any collective action. Alternatively, it is also quite possible that citizens will mobilize anew, this time with fewer restrictions and in more inclusive ways; this could be an opportunity for collective citizenship that challenges institutions and the status quo.

However these developments may occur, what is absolutely certain now is that governments are using COVID-19 as a rationale to crack down more than ever before on

---

<sup>2</sup> These initial questions continue to serve as foundational research for our ongoing focus on citizenship.

freedom of expression,<sup>3</sup> freedom of assembly, and freedom of association among various other civil, civic, and political rights.

## 2. “Resilient Communities”

*Communal self-help is on the rise.* This has always been a feature of Arab society within Muslim, Christian, Jewish, and other communities across the Arab Region, and now it is growing further with people’s expanding needs coupled with the inability of governments, civil society organizations, the private sector, and non-state actors to meet them.

Informal grassroots organizations and community-based philanthropies – groups operating outside of the formal, professional NGO sector – are restoring cultures of voluntarism and solidarity within Arab civil societies. Before COVID-19, they were organizing through social media with face-to-face activities at their core. While those in-person activities are currently on hold, the groups’ savviness in the online environment has made them some of the most vibrant types of civil society organizations during the COVID-19 crisis. Their importance will only grow in the crisis’s aftermath.

Some protections have been extended toward non-citizens (refugees, migrant laborers, stateless persons) in an ad hoc way, but the fact that they are being extended at all is notable. If formalized or institutionalized, these protections could lead to an improved sense of belonging and social cohesion for these non-citizens. Similarly, grassroots efforts (such as in Jordan with tribal and urban community grocery deliveries, street cleaning initiatives, and other civic projects) could result in sustained senses of belonging, social inclusion, and collective efficacy that may outlast the crisis.

## 3. “Silent No More”

*People are speaking out.* While governments are increasingly authoritarian and/or incompetent in their responses to tackling COVID-19, people across the region are increasingly emboldened to speak more openly, and notably, more critically about those governments. Governments are under greater scrutiny from activists and protesters as well as people who simply have had enough. Rami Khouri sees this as a possible window of opportunity amidst the crisis for a more engaged citizenry.<sup>4</sup>

COVID-19 is exacerbating existing problems: access to healthcare, economic issues, public infrastructure, transportation, and environmental concerns (pollution and access to water). Alice Verticelli, a member of the BCARS Scholar Advisory Board, notes that

---

<sup>3</sup> Yerkes, [“Coronavirus Threatens Freedom in North Africa,”](#) *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*.

<sup>4</sup> To read more of Rami Khouri’s analysis on citizenship issues in the Arab Region, visit his page on *Agence Global*: <https://agenceglobal.com/author/rami-g-khouri/>.

people who have been protesting for decades have no patience left and are at the end of their proverbial rope. Citizens have witnessed their already inadequate institutions and infrastructure crumble away even more during the pandemic.

Most governments have been taking advantage of public fears over COVID-19 to enact harsher than usual policing techniques, restrictive laws, and discriminatory policies. However, there are also examples where COVID-19 has resulted in government addressing the needs of its population with *less* discrimination. For example, in rare cases, a government may respond to the crisis in part with initiatives to support both refugees and communities across the country that host those refugees at great costs.

#### 4. COVID-19, Citizenship, and Gender

*The pandemic is gendered.* As we've seen increasingly since the Arab Uprisings in 2010-2011, women have been playing a more dynamic role in social movements, thus helping lead the challenges to corrupt systems; women's roles in organizing and mobilizing may well expand even further after COVID-19. However, in the midst of the pandemic, women's ability to participate in public activities has been restricted due to gendered economic and social dynamics that have uniquely combined with COVID-19 restrictions. Lockdowns and curfews impact everyone, but women's mobility in particular has been even further restricted, as it can be viewed as less essential in times of crisis. Additionally, women everywhere face increased risks of intimate partner violence due to home confinement, and limited access to life-saving support such as psycho-social, health, and security services.<sup>5</sup>

Gendered economies across the globe, perhaps even more so in the Middle East, are struggling further due to COVID-19. Different sectors such as agriculture, service work, construction, childcare, teaching, and domestic work are highly gendered across the region, and all genders are uniquely impacted with varying levels of risk across these sectors as a result of the pandemic. The medium- and long-term repercussions of these risks, as well as the potential loss of livelihoods or restructuring of these sectors to limit opportunities for different genders within them could be dire. On a household level, the pandemic also has the potential to reverse changes that have led to more different and more equitable divisions of labor within homes and economies across the Arab Region.

#### 5. "Citizens" vs. "Residents"

*The differences between "the haves" and "the have-nots" are starker than ever before.* COVID-19 has shone the brightest possible light on "those who have" and "those who lack" citizenship by exposing the inequalities that result from lacking citizenship status. People are being stranded due to this distinction; basic human rights are either honored or

---

<sup>5</sup> UNHCR, "[Displaced and stateless women and girls at heightened risk for gender-based violence in the coronavirus pandemic.](#)" April 20, 2020.

ignored due to the difference between “citizen” and other, and people are dying due to this difference.

There are at least three separate strata of the “haves” and “have-nots”:

- (a) Citizens are those who “have” – i.e., they have protections due to a modicum of personal, legal, economic, and social rights;
- (b) Legal residents and migrant workers are the “have-nots”, in that they lack protections accorded citizens;
- (c) Refugees, stateless persons, and other non-citizens who lack even more protections than their fellow “have-nots” (legal residents and migrant workers) whose vulnerabilities are even more exposed during the pandemic (see #6, below for a more detailed discussion).

People who are *figuratively* “stuck in the middle” – those who have no official status as residents of the states they live in – are becoming *literally* stuck in the middle, stranded, deprived of rights due to “resident” vs. “citizenship” status.

**“Weaponization of citizenship.”** Even before the world experienced COVID-19, we were in an era of increasing ***citizenship stripping***, where the state has the ability to remove citizenship and all its accompanying rights from citizens with little justification or recourse. The state can revoke passports and other forms of identification, prevent travel, and otherwise deny citizens of their political, civil, and economic rights. In the Arab Region, this phenomenon has impacted people who may have run afoul of a particular leader by daring to speak freely, assemble or mobilize others. This growing phenomenon shows that we are in an era of increasing ***weaponization of citizenship***, and highlights a disturbing trend that can potentially increase as focus has shifted to the pandemic and away from this subtle threat to citizen rights.

Beyond “active weaponization,” citizenship can be “inadvertently weaponized” also. Through no active ill will of the state or its leaders, citizenship has been more passively weaponized in a way that politicizes and jeopardizes the rights of citizens as they go about their lives. When a Syrian refugee is born in Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey, Iraq, Germany, Canada (i.e., anywhere except at home in Syria) and is therefore unable to access citizenship rights back home or fully in the country where he or she is born, this exemplifies a passive weaponization of citizenship that results in a lack of rights.

The Norwegian Refugee Council estimates that well over 200,000 children have been born to Syrian refugees in Lebanon alone, and that nearly 80% of them have not completed the complex registration process required to make their birth certificate legally valid. Whenever they might return to Syria, these children may have problems accessing government services such as education, healthcare, or humanitarian assistance.<sup>6</sup> The consequences of being unable to access these services in a pandemic are even more dire,

---

<sup>6</sup> Malli, [“A second chance for unregistered children.”](#) Norwegian Refugee Council.

and this example highlights the critical role citizenship and access to rights plays in a pandemic.

## 6. COVID-19 & Refugees

COVID-19 cast existing vulnerabilities amongst mobile populations (e.g., refugees, IDPs, migrant workers) into sharp relief; the most vulnerable are now even further at risk. This is especially true for refugees, but also for those in refugee-receiving countries for whom the standard corona virus protections, such as social distancing, wearing face coverings, and regular hand washing, are challenging to maintain.

Additionally, many refugees are employed informally, and the curfews, lockdowns, and restrictions on employment have disproportionately impacted their livelihoods and access to necessary capital. With access to funds restricted, remittances within refugee and migrant worker communities are also stalled, cutting off important sources of income that many rely upon during an already difficult time.

Mobility of refugees has also been heavily restricted. Seeking much-needed shelter or asylum was already a difficult task for people on the move, and now it is near impossible due to border closures and increasing securitization of movement in efforts to halt the spread of the virus. Some governments have enacted harsh border security crackdowns on irregular migrants for this exact reason, demonstrating the need to balance public health concerns with the safety and rights of migrants and refugees.

Ultimately, the categorization of people in different states with different statuses (refugee, migrant, citizen, non-citizen etc.) has created *hierarchies of care*<sup>7</sup> that put some of the most vulnerable even further at risk. What is needed is universal humane treatment and access to rights and services for all, regardless of status, a mandate that will surely also help reduce the spread of disease and its secondary symptoms of economic distress and mental health challenges amongst refugees and migrants.

## 7. COVID-19 & Conflict

It goes without saying that everything discussed thus far, and an array of issues not even mentioned yet, are particularly acute in conflict zones. And while “conflict” translates readily into “intensification of COVID-19”, similarly, COVID-19 is almost certain to “intensify conflict” in these and other places.

---

<sup>7</sup> Actors that provide critical services in humanitarian settings (legal aid, medical care, etc.) can create hierarchical systems wherein some recipients are prioritized based on their perceived vulnerability. For further reading, look to Ticktin, “Casualties of Care: Immigration and the Politics of Humanitarianism in France,” (2011) and Hyndman, “Managing Displacement: Refugees and the Politics of Humanitarianism,” (2000).

Of particular concern are conflict zones in Syria, Yemen, and Libya. In these conflict countries, instead of the pandemic uniting local, regional, and international actors around a common purpose, divisions due to the conflicts persist and have hampered an effective COVID-19 response. Cooperation amongst and support from external actors related to these conflicts is also strained, and state services will continue to erode, resulting in further destabilizing these already unstable areas.<sup>8</sup> The conflicts in Syria, Yemen, and Libya already impact the individuals living in those countries on a daily basis with physical insecurity, poverty, famine, loss of livelihoods, interrupted education, and traumatic stress. The pandemic exponentially increases the negative impacts of these existing phenomena, and simultaneously reduces the capacity of states, international actors, and humanitarian organizations to aid those most affected.

Furthermore, as these conflicts persist and their impacts are heightened within country, there is the potential for regional instability to increase as a secondary result. As the entire region grapples with containing the virus, it must also consider how the virus itself can intensify conflict not just within current conflict zones, but beyond as conditions continue to deteriorate.

## Conclusion

As stated at the beginning, marginalized populations are becoming increasingly reliant on the goodwill and benevolence of their fellow citizens across the Middle East. This speaks to the incredible resilience and determination of people across the Arab Region to survive and thrive within and beyond the pandemic and its after-effects. However, this crisis clearly demonstrates that the lack of citizenship rights guaranteed by states creates a vacuum wherein populations across the region have become stratified and increasingly vulnerable. Addressing this gap and securing access to rights and services for citizens across the region is a critical need revealed by the pandemic; securing rights and services for non-citizen residents of Arab and other states in the region is equally critical. Addressing the gap is essential if countries hope to move beyond the virus' aftermath in a comprehensive way. The politics that have delayed this action, nationally and regionally, need to be re-examined in a post-COVID-19 era for meaningful rebuilding and change to occur for all the region's citizens, wherever they may be.

---

**Dr. Denis Sullivan** is professor of political science and international affairs, with a specialization in the Middle East. Dr. Sullivan is the author of dozens of journal articles, book chapters, policy briefs, blogs and encyclopedia entries plus a number of books, with special focus on Egypt, civil society, Islamism, and Egyptian-American security and economic relations. He is the founding Director of the Boston Consortium for Arab Region Studies and the founder of Northeastern's Dialogue of Civilizations Program. His current work focuses on the Syrian and Yemen civil wars and refugee crises, and on citizenship in the Middle East.

---

<sup>8</sup> Asseburg and Azizi, [“The Covid-19 Pandemic and Conflict Dynamics in Syria.”](#) *German Institute for International and Security Affairs*.

Sharing is encouraged, but please let us know!

[www.bcars-global.org](http://www.bcars-global.org)



### Sources Cited:

Asseburg, Muriel and Hamidreza Azizi. “The Covid-19 Pandemic and Conflict Dynamics in Syria: Neither a Turning Point Nor an Overall Deterrent.” *German Institute for International and Security Affairs*. SWP Comment. May 2020. <https://www.swp-berlin.org/10.18449/2020C21/>.

Malli, Nadine. “A second chance for unregistered children.” *The Norwegian Refugee Council*. July 8, 2019. <https://www.nrc.no/perspectives/2019/a-second-chance-for-unregistered-children/>.

UNHCR. “Displaced and stateless women and girls at heightened risk of gender-based violence in the coronavirus pandemic.” April 20, 2020. <https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/news/press/2020/4/5e998aca4/displaced-stateless-women-girls-heightened-risk-gender-based-violence-coronavirus.html#>.

Yerkes, Sarah. “Coronavirus Threatens Freedom in North Africa.” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*. April 24, 2020. <https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/04/24/coronavirus-threatens-freedom-in-north-africa-pub-81625>.