

# How neglect of health services left MENA countries ill-prepared for COVID-19 shock

Mon, 2021-11-08 23:32

DUBAI: A combination of chronic underfunding of public health services and long-term socio-economic trends resulted in a tenuous and uneven recovery for the Middle East and North Africa region as it emerged from the COVID-19 pandemic, according to a recent World Bank report.

Titled, "Overconfident: How economic and health fault lines left the Middle East and North Africa ill-prepared to face COVID-19," the report highlights the stress MENA health systems were under even before the pandemic hit.

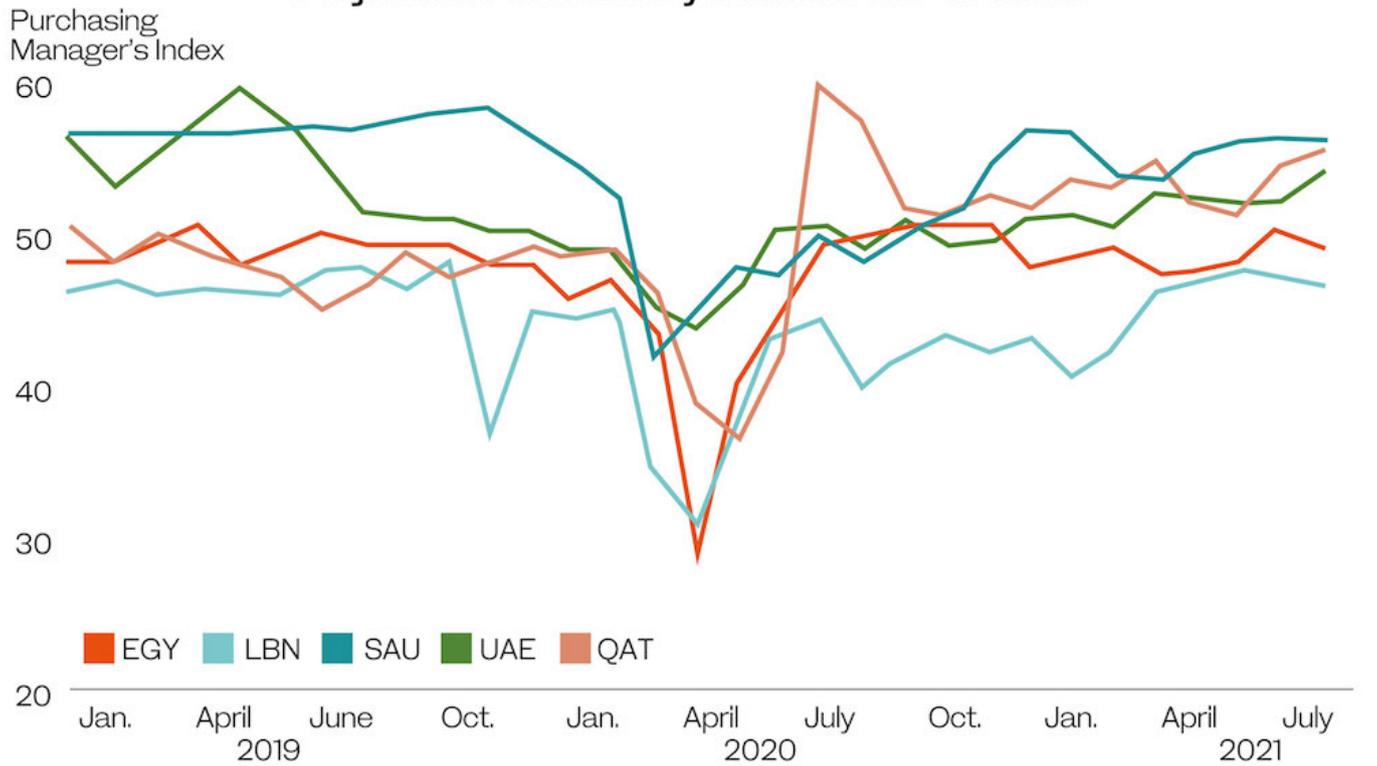
The study says that a bloated public sector and excessive national debt crowded out investment in MENA countries in social services such as health – a symptom it described as "fiscal myopia." In turn, that shifted some health costs to individuals.

Another symptom of stressed public health systems was the low share of government spending on preventive healthcare, a drawback that contributed to high rates of communicable and non-communicable diseases.

The report found that the region's public health systems were not only ill-prepared to absorb the shock of the pandemic but also that authorities were guilty of over-optimism in self-assessments of their health systems' preparedness. The survey referred to this as "overconfidence."

## MENA POST-PANDEMIC PICTURE

### Projections of recovery from COVID-19 crisis



Source: Bloomberg, L.P

ARAB NEWS

Experts say the World Bank report has revealed the extent of the region's social and economic inequalities, caused in large part by poor governance and skewed policy priorities. However, they caution against a generalizing that tends to gloss over differences at local levels.

Dr. Theodore Karasik, a senior adviser at Gulf State Analytics, told Arab News: "The lesson is about turning around priority within government budgets and other outside help besides having in place a much better healthcare system.

"However, the countries of the region all had different types of experiences and the lessons learned are going to be unique to those spaces."

MENA governments responded to the COVID-19 pandemic in their own ways, depending on the resources and infrastructure that were on hand. Many worked within the international system or cooperated with regional donors to secure vaccines and medical supplies.

Some countries, especially the Gulf Cooperation Council energy exporters, were able to organize a rapid response to the pandemic thanks to robust systems and better preparation. "The models set up in the Gulf are extremely useful to compare and contrast on how they worked," Karasik said.



Some countries, especially the Gulf Cooperation Council energy exporters such as Saudi Arabia, were able to organize a rapid response to the pandemic thanks to robust systems and better preparation. (AFP/File Photo)

“These models are working and there is evidence of them being used in other countries. So, leaders are applying what they see as the best methods.”

Some MENA governments that were slow to respond to the global virus outbreak, later adopted many of the same practices as their GCC counterparts, recognizing that disease control needed to be a far greater priority.

However, given the sharp differences in the region’s socio-economic circumstances, with some countries even categorized as fragile or failed states, emulation of GCC practices was no magic bullet. The UAE and Lebanon, for instance, were worlds apart in their respective vaccine rollouts.

“The differences between an urban versus a rural environment and how violence can mitigate treatment is a key issue that governments and health practitioners (must take into account),” Karasik told Arab News.

The estimated cumulative cost of the pandemic in terms of gross domestic product losses in the MENA region by the end of 2021 will amount to almost \$200 billion. According to the World Bank report, the region’s GDP contracted by 3.8 percent in 2020 and is forecast to grow by just 2.8 percent this year.



A picture taken on May 24, 2020 shows a man walking across a deserted street in Rabat, as the country went into lockdown to stop the spread of the

## COVID-19 disease. (AFP/File Photo)

Ferid Belhaj, the World Bank's vice president for the MENA region, said: "The pandemic's crippling impact on economic activity in the region is a painful reminder that economic development and public health are inextricably linked.

"It is also a sad reality check that MENA's health systems, which were considered relatively developed, cracked at the seams under the crisis."

Thirteen out of 16 countries in the region have lower standards of living in 2021 than their pre-COVID-19 levels, the report said. But for individual countries, the growth rate of GDP per capita in 2021 has been uneven, ranging from -9.8 percent in Lebanon, which is in a deep recession, to 4 percent in Morocco.

Roberta Gatti, the World Bank's chief economist for the MENA region, said: "The last two years have shown that pandemic control is essential not only to save lives but also to accelerate economic recovery, which is now tenuous and uneven across MENA."

### **INNUMBERS**

**\* 3.8% – MENA's GDP contraction in 2020.**

**\*2.8% – Region's projected growth in 2021.**

**(Source: World Bank)**

Dr. Albadr Al-Shateri, a former politics professor at the National Defense College in Abu Dhabi, says the events of the past two years have exposed serious weaknesses in the pandemic preparedness of not just the MENA region but in fact the entire world.

"Health security has not been prioritized as much as traditional security concerns. Governments invest heavily in all kinds of weapon systems, but less in health security," he told Arab News.

To prevent a repeat of the COVID-19 calamity, Al-Shateri said, the international community, and the MENA region in particular, must work harder to coordinate their efforts.

"The region has got to establish, in cooperation with the World Health Organization and other centers of excellence, a center for disease control for the region. The world and regional powers should contribute to such an endeavor," he said.

Such an approach to fighting infectious diseases will benefit the entire MENA region, according to Al-Shateri. Specifically, developed and affluent countries should extend aid to the less-fortunate nations, and a regional forum for countering diseases should help drive health security.



A Moroccan municipal worker disinfects outside a house in a closed street in the southern port city of Safi on June 9, 2020. (AFP/File Photo)

In conclusion, Al-Shateri said: “All epidemics are potential pandemics, and their consequences are catastrophic for the region and the world. The region must put in place collective efforts to stop any disease dead in its tracks.”

Few experts have been surprised by the World Bank’s findings, considering that many of the fundamental weaknesses highlighted by the report – low expenditure on public health, critical health infrastructure deficits, lack of human resources and equipment – are not unique to MENA countries.

“This is nothing new,” Dr. Richard Sullivan, director of the King’s College London conflict and health research group and principal investigator and chair of the R4HC-MENA program, told Arab News.

“(What is needed is) future resilience to epidemics and pandemics, intrinsic strengthening of basic public health systems, and a complex and heterogeneous picture across the region.”

Dr. Adam Coutts, a research fellow at Harvard University’s Weatherhead Center for International Affairs, says the key lesson to be drawn from the past 10 years is that public health and social welfare in countries such as Lebanon have been low political priorities.

“One can safely say that they do not care about the health and well-being of their populations,” Coutts said.



A prong extending from the CIRA-03 remote-controlled robot prototype approaches the mouth of a volunteer to extract a throat swab sample, as part of a self-funded project to assist physicians in running tests on suspected COVID-19 coronavirus patients in a bid to limit human exposure to disease-carriers, at a private hospital in Egypt's Nile delta city of Tanta. (AFP/File Photo)

"Also, donor governments and multilateral agencies have let countries like Lebanon, Iraq, and Syria get away with minimal investment in public services for decades. Meanwhile, millions cannot access healthcare due to out-of-pocket costs."

Apparently, people in countries such as Lebanon spend as much as Germany on healthcare as a proportion of GDP, but much of the money is poured into the private health system.

"Lip service is paid to policies such as universal healthcare in the region. We have yet to see any concrete steps taken in terms of actual political will, investment, and on-the-ground change," Coutts said.

He said the pandemic has exposed just how hollowed-out some of these MENA states' infrastructure really was to start with. Although these countries were badly hit by conflict and humanitarian crises, the "internal rot" had set in years before.

"Above all, the crisis shows that the political economy of health is a key area that needs to be addressed when examining the region and designing recovery policies."



Syrians suspected of being infected with COVID-19 receive treatment at Mouwasat Hospital in the capital Damascus, on March 31, 2021. (AFP/File Photo)

In Coutts's opinion, Jordan and the GCC countries have shown that the rule of law, stability and providing social protection are crucial if a nation is to withstand a shock such as COVID-19.

Most MENA countries, however, have not yet returned to pre-pandemic conditions and Coutts does not foresee Lebanon, for instance, recovering in the next few years as they are "too far gone and politically sick."

He says that under the circumstances, donors and multilaterals must make aid conditional upon major social and economic reforms, which provided good social protection policies.

"Politicians in laggard countries will maintain they are trying to change but they are in fact not," Coutts said.

"Only punitive measures work in these circumstances, I am afraid, otherwise nothing happens on the ground."

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UAE coronavirus cases below 100 for seventh day  
Israel reports subvariant of Delta coronavirus strain

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## [Israel spied on Palestinian human rights defenders, investigators claim](#)

Mon, 2021-11-08 23:32

AMMAN: Israel used controversial spying software to target Palestinian human rights defenders, international digital investigators have claimed.

In a press release, the Dublin-based Front-Line Defenders outlined how the timing of Israel's declaration to brand six human rights groups as "terrorist" organizations was issued two days after its use of a spying application was discovered.

The FLD said its digital forensic investigation “has uncovered the presence of Pegasus spyware on the phones belonging to at least six Palestinian human rights defenders.”

The search for Israeli spyware was launched when a staffer from the Palestinian human rights organization Al-Haq contacted the FLD regarding concerns about their phone on Oct. 16.

“A forensic analysis was immediately made and by the next day it was determined that Pegasus spyware was present,” the statement said.

The next day, Mohammed Al-Maskati, the FLD’s digital protection coordinator, requested additional information in a meeting with representatives from six Palestinian NGOs: Addameer, Al-Haq, Defense for Children – Palestine, the Union of Agricultural Work Committees, the Bisan Center for Research and Development, and the Union of Palestinian Women Committees.

After informing them of the breach, six iPhones, out of 75 checked devices, were found to be infected with the Pegasus spyware.

The FLD, the University of Toronto’s Citizen Lab, and its Amnesty International Security Lab – which independently peer-reviewed FLD’s work and confirmed the results – were unable to identify the client who deployed the spyware, but noted that “actions taken by the Israeli government raise many questions.”

On Oct. 18, Israel ordered the revocation of the residency of Salah Hammouri, a Jerusalem-based lawyer and human rights defender, on the basis of Israel’s “breach of allegiance” law.

Hammouri’s phone was one of the six infected.

He is also a French citizen. Without residency, he would be subject to deportation from his homeland.

Israel’s Defense Minister Benny Gantz issued an executive order on Oct. 18 setting forth the determination that the six Palestinian NGOs – the same six NGOs that held the meeting on Oct. 17 with the FLD – were “terrorist” entities.

Ubai Aboudi, director of the Bisan Center for Research and Development, which was one of the six Palestinian organizations accused of being a “terrorist” outfit by Israel, told Arab News that the discovery of the spyware on his phone made him feel insecure and exposed.

“I feel violated. My privacy has been infringed upon. My family and my work as a human rights defender are also exposed to risks. I feel insecure,” said Aboudi, who also holds US citizenship.

In publishing the report, FLD Executive Director Andrew Anderson said: “The exposure of illegal spying on peaceful Palestinian human rights defenders, coming on top of baseless claims about terrorism against internationally respected human rights organizations, emphasizes how important is the

continued support of the international community for their legitimate work.”

He added: “Surely, this episode will serve as a stark warning against any deployment of the term ‘terrorist’ against any human rights defender anywhere in the world, and renew efforts to reign in the use of spyware against human rights defenders, journalists, and other civil society activists.”



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[benny gantz](#)

Criticism over Israeli ‘terror’ label for Palestinian groupsUN says Israel move designating Palestinian groups as ‘terrorist organizations’ unjustified

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## [Palestinians, Israel spar over US mission in Jerusalem](#)

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Mon, 2021-11-08 00:25

TEL AVIV: The Palestinians on Sunday slammed Israel for rejecting the promised reopening of the US Consulate in Jerusalem, a move that would restore Washington's main diplomatic mission for the Palestinians in the contested city.

Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett said late Saturday there was no room in Jerusalem for another American mission.

The Trump administration shuttered the US Jerusalem Consulate, an office that for years served as the de facto embassy to the Palestinians. Secretary of State Antony Blinken has pledged to reopen it, a move that Israel says would challenge its sovereignty over the city. The reopening could help mend US ties with the Palestinians ruptured under Trump.

In a statement, the Palestinian Foreign Ministry said it views the reopening of the consulate as part of the international community's commitments to ending Israel's decades-long occupation of territories the Palestinians seek for their future state.

"East Jerusalem is an inseparable part of the occupied Palestinian territory and is the capital of the state of Palestine. Israel, as the occupying power, does not have the right to veto the US administration's decision," the statement said.

Asked about the consulate at a press conference, Bennett repeated Israel's position on Jerusalem.

"There's no room for another American consulate in Jerusalem," he said.

"Jerusalem is the capital of one state and that's the state of Israel."

Israeli Foreign Minister Yair Lapid suggested the consulate could instead be opened in the Palestinian administrative center in Ramallah, West Bank. The Palestinians reject the idea because it would undermine their claims to Jerusalem.

Israel views Jerusalem as its eternal, undivided capital. The Palestinians seek the eastern part of the city, which Israel occupied in 1967 and later annexed, as capital of their hoped-for state.

The consulate is emerging as another test between Bennett's government and the Biden administration, which has moved to restore traditional US foreign policy toward Israel and the Palestinians after the Trump White House largely sided with Israel on issues related to the conflict.

Trump had downgraded the consulate's operations and placed them under his ambassador to Israel when he moved the US Embassy from Tel Aviv to the holy city in 2018. The embassy move infuriated the Palestinians and led them to sever most ties with the Trump administration.

Blinken has not provided a firm date for the reopening and US officials have implied that Israeli resistance to the move could act as a hindrance.



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US embassy in Jerusalem opens amid Palestinian protests  
US Embassy road signs go up in Jerusalem

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## [Sudan security forces fire tear gas against anti-coup protests](#)

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Mon, 2021-11-08 00:18

KHARTOUM: Sudanese security forces on Sunday fired tear gas at multiple anti-coup rallies, with protesters in several cities joining a call for two-days of civil disobedience against last month's military takeover. Hundreds of anti-coup protesters rallied on Sunday in Khartoum, as well as in its twin city of Omdurman, Wad Madni to the south, and the northern city of Atbara.

"The authority belongs to the people," protesters chanted, calling "no, no to military rule," and demanding a "civilian government."

Nationwide anti-coup protests have occurred since the Oct. 25 power grab by the army, but have been met by a deadly crackdown.

At least 14 demonstrators have been killed and about 300 wounded, according to the independent Central Committee of Sudan's Doctors.

"Protesters barricaded the streets, set car tires ablaze, called out against the military rule, and chanted that civilian government is the people's choice," said Hoda Othman, who witnessed protests in Omdurman on Sunday.

Almost two weeks ago Gen. Abdel Fattah Al-Burhan dissolved the government, as well as the ruling joint military-civilian Sovereign Council – that was supposed to lead the country toward full civilian rule.

Burhan also declared a state of emergency and detained Sudan's civilian leadership.

Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok was briefly detained, but later placed under effective house arrest.

Al-Burhan met with a delegation of the Arab League on Sunday, state television reported.

The Arab League, which has called for Sudanese parties to stick to the democratic transition after the army took over power last month, had said on Saturday that it would send a high-level delegation to Sudan.

Sunday's rallies followed calls for two-days of civil disobedience made by the Sudanese Professionals Association (SPA), an umbrella of unions which were also instrumental in the 2018-2019 protests which led to the ouster of longtime strongman Omar Bashir in April 2019.

"The Sudanese people have rejected the military coup," the SPA said, vowing "no negotiation, no partnership, no legitimacy."

In Khartoum eastern Burri district, protesters built burning barricades of tires.

"Security forces later dispersed the protest by firing tear gas and began removing the barricades," said protester Mosab Abdalla.

Earlier on Sunday, dozens of teachers rallied against the army outside the education ministry in Khartoum.

"We organized a silent stand against the decisions by Burhan," said geography teacher Mohamed Al-Amin, who took part in the protest.

"Police came and fired tear gas at us, though we were simply standing on the streets and carrying banners."

There were no confirmed reports of casualties but about 87 teachers have been detained, according to the SPA.

The teachers' rally came after the military leadership replaced heads of department at the Education Ministry, as part of sweeping changes it made in multiple sectors.

"The protest rejects the return of remnants of the old regime" linked to now jailed ex-resident Bashir, the teachers' union said.

The SPA's appeals for the civil disobedience were circulated via text messages to bypass internet outages since the putsch.

On Sunday, there appeared to be mixed compliance with the call among retailers.

Some shops were still open but others were shuttered in Khartoum, as well as in the neighboring cities of Omdurman and Khartoum-North, according to witnesses.

The military takeover sparked international condemnation, including punitive aid cuts and demands for a swift return to civilian rule.

Al-Burhan insists it “was not a coup” but a move to “rectify the course of the transition.”

On Thursday, the military released four civilian members of the government. But other key officials are still under guard and, on that same day, security forces arrested other civilian leaders near a UN building in Khartoum, following their meeting with UN Special Representative for Sudan Volker Perthes.

“We call upon the military leadership to cease arresting politicians and activists and to stop committing human rights violations,” Perthes said afterwards.



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Sudan protest leaders snub army talks, call two-day strike  
Sudan's Burhan meets Arab League delegation: State TV

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## [UN Yemen envoy in Aden for talks with government](#)

Sun, 2021-11-07 22:55

AL-MUKALLA: The UN Yemen envoy Hans Grundberg began a visit on Sunday to the interim capital of Yemen, the southern port city of Aden, to discuss the UN-brokered peace plan to end the war in in the country with the government.

The UN envoy is meeting Prime Minister Maeen Abdul Malik Saeed and other government officials.

Grundberg is pushing both the government and the Houthis to accept the UN peace plan that calls for achieving an immediate nationwide truce, including stopping the Houthi offensive on the central city of Marib, opening Sanaa airport and lifting restrictions on Hodeidah seaport.

On Saturday, Yemen's President Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi told US envoy to Yemen Tim Lenderking in Riyadh that his government would comply with any peace plan or ideas to end the war in Yemen, stressing that the Yemenis would resist Iran's attempt to force its ideologies onto the country through the Houthis.

"We are always open to all calls for peace and the cessation of war to spare the blood of the Yemeni people, establish security and stability, normalize life and rebuild what the Houthi militias have destroyed," the Yemeni president told the US envoy, according to the official news agency SABA.

Hadi said that the continuing military escalation by the Houthis and their shelling of civilians in Marib, Shabwa and Taiz show they are not serious about peace and ending the war.

On the ground, Yemen's Defense Ministry said on Sunday that government troops, backed by air cover from the Arab coalition, pushed back many Houthi incursions in areas south of Marib city.

The coalition's warplanes targeted Houthi forces heading to the battlefields in Marib province.

Hundreds of combatants have been killed in fierce clashes outside the city of Marib since earlier September when the Houthis intensified attacks on government troops defending the strategic city.



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Houthi court sentences abducted Yemeni model to five years in prison  
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