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THE IMPACT OF THE GLOBAL PANDEMIC
ON MENA COUNTRIES' STABILITY

ABSTRACT: The article aims to analyse the situation in the MENA and neighbouring countries one decade after the so-called Arab Spring. The purpose of this study also is to analyze the importance of the COVID-19 pandemic, which hampered the development of protests in the region by providing governments with a wide range of tools for public restraint and control. These measures effectively and in a relatively short period of time have significantly reduced public and opposition activities, hampering the momentum that could lead to a 'second Arab Spring'. The study uses a qualitative method – a document analysis approach – to synthesize information from various sources to ensure the validity of the information obtained.

KEYWORDS: Arab Spring, Arab awakening, Second Arab Spring, Middle East uprisings, MENA, global pandemic, COVID-19

WPŁYW PANDEMII COVID-19 NA STABILNOŚĆ
PAŃSTW REGIONU MENA

ABSTRAKT: Celem artykułu jest analiza sytuacji w regionie MENA i krajach sąsiednich dekadę po tzw. arabskiej wiośnie oraz znaczenia pandemii COVID-19, która w opinii autora zahamowała rozwój protestów w regionie. Dostarczyła rządom szerokiego wachlarza narzędzi do ograniczania i kontroli społeczeństwa. Środki te skutecznie i w stosunkowo krótkim czasie ograniczyły aktywność społeczną i opozycyjną hamując impet, który mógł doprowadzić do „drugiej arabskiej wiosny". W procesie badawczym autor wykorzystał ogólnometodologiczne zasady poznania odnoszące się do sytuacji regionu MENA, m.in. metodę indukcyjną, dedukcyjną, filologiczną, metodę geograficzną, metodę analizy i syntezy, porównanie, uogólnienie, analogię, wnioskowanie i weryfikację. W celu realizacji zadań badawczych, autor przyjął metody badawcze wspólne dla nauk humanistycznych i nauk o bezpieczeństwie.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: Arabska wiosna, arabskie przebudzenie, druga arabska wiosna, MENA, pandemia, COVID-19

INTRODUCTION

When in late December 2010, with the authoritarian breakdown in Tunisia the Arab world was engulfed by the so-called Arab revival, the surprised world almost immediately compared it to the Spring of Nations – political upheavals throughout Europe in 1848 and for that reason, later referred to as the Arab Spring. The entire international community was convinced that the small Arab country became a trigger and a catalyst for mass uprisings throughout the region. Once the protests had reached a critical mass in Tunisia, they had inspired other countries in the region, foreshadowing profound changes in the MENA countries[1]. The reason for the outbreak of mass protests was dissatisfaction with living conditions, the high unemployment rate, inflation, spiraling food prices, and nepotism of the elites. Arabs sought to overthrow their political regimes and transform their countries, characterized by authoritarianism, poverty of the masses, and widespread corruption, into a place of respect for human dignity, democracy, and socioeconomic justice. The peaceful protests rapidly turned into clashes with the security services driving to the nationwide revolution and massive political changes in the existing regimes[2]. The Yemeni Uprising occurred simultaneously with the Egyptian Revolution, and people took to the streets in Libya, Syria, Algeria, Jordan, Bahrain, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Djibouti, Iraq, Kuwait, Morocco, Oman, Palestine, Somalia, and Sudan, affecting even neighbouring Iran. As a consequence, Tunisian president Zayn al-Abidin ibn Ali, who ruled the country for 24 years, was overthrown and Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak, who ruled for 27 years, was forced to resign. Jordan's King Abdullah II established a new government demanded by protesters, and Yemeni President Ali Abd Allah Salih made a promise not to run for re-election. Protests in Libya swiftly turned into a civil war, ending with the overthrow of the Muammar al-Gaddafi regime[3]. In Jordan, Mauritania, Oman, Palestine, Iraq, Kuwait, Bahrain, Sudan and Saudi Arabia, protests led to minor political and social reforms. A dozen or so months later, people have not been talking about the Arab spring, but rather an Arab winter[4], as the positive changes brought about by mass protests did not last. Moreover, it accelerated the resurgence of authoritarianism and Islamic extremism Commonly named Arab winter accelerated an al-Qaeda heartless hybrid called Daesh[5], which took an advantage of the unstable regional situation and seized territory of Iraq and Syria, claiming itself an independent country[6]. The power of the self-styled state allowed it to control large

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[1] *Vide* A. Bayat, *Life as Politics: How Ordinary People Change the Middle East*, Stanford 2013.

[2] M. Özekin, H. Hüseyin, *An Empirical Look to the Arab Spring: Causes and Consequences*, "Alternatives: Turkish Journal Of International Relations", No. 1-2/2014, Yalova 2014, p. 176-187.

[3] M. El Huni, *The revolution that turned into a civil war*, https://thearabweekly.com/revolution-turned-civil-war (03.03.2022).

[4] *Vide* S. King, *The Arab Winter: Democratic Consolidation, Civil War, and Radical Islamists*, Cambridge 2020.

[5] Also known as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), the State of the Islamic Caliphate (SIC) or Daesh (al-Dawla al-Islamiyya al-Iraq al-Sham). The last name was especially welcomed by the French President Francois Hollande and US President Barack Obama, as it refers also to the disparaging Arabic word meaning annihilation.

[6] *Vide* J-P. Filiu, *From Deep State to Islamic State: The Arab Counter-Revolution and its Jihadi Legacy*, Oxford 2015.

areas of the Middle East between 2014 and 2017 and to genocide tens of thousands of people (including other Muslims)[7]. Another remarkable consequence was re-awakening the separatist ambitions of Kurds[8], who reclaimed rights to the Iraq-Syria-Turkey borderlands. In fact, the wrongly named Arab Spring has encouraged the appearance of many regional wars, as well as religious and ethnic conflicts, the economic collapse of states, destabilization of the region, and the rise of mass political and economic refugees, also leading to the 2014 global migration crisis, the worst since World War II[9].

Sadly, ten years after the protests, the manifested will of the vast majority of Arabs turned out to be wishful thinking, and the only one country which seems to manage the reforms was Tunisia. Particularly disappointing results of the Arab Spring presented Libya, Yemen, and Syria, which descended into civil wars and a road to perdition. As a consequence of the rapid and profound changes, the majority of Arab countries have plunged into skirmish, chaos, and economic collapse[10]. In Syria, Bashar al-Assad did not yield to the pressure of the opposition and began political purges[11]. Against the rebels, al-Assad used the army, resulting in the death of thousands of people. Although President Ali Abd Allah Salih has relinquished power in Yemen, the country has fared poorly economically. The Iraqi rebellion briskly followed Syria's scenario, while Egypt, Libya and Yemen were accompanied by a permanent political and economic crisis, culminating in the overthrow of Muhammad Mursi in Egypt and the seizure of power by General Abd al-Fattah al-Sisi. In Libya, the consequence of these events was a civil war between the new government and Field Marshal Khalifa Belqasim Haftar, the commander of the Tobruk-based Libyan National Army (LNA).

NEW REGIONAL WAVE OF UPRISINGS – SITUATION IN THE MENA COUNTRIES ON THE EVE OF COVID-19 OUTBREAK

After Bashar al-Assad's regime retained its power, the Gulf States accepted that choice and started restoring diplomatic relations with the Syrian government. The scale of the refugee crisis, initiated de facto already in 2011 by the Arab Spring, has also decreased significantly. As a result of the stabilization of Syria, some refugees who found asylum in Jordan and Lebanon began to return to their homeland. Stabilization processes were also noticeable in Iraq. However, the slowly gained confidence in the stability of the MENA region was illusory and temporary. In a region where the interests of international powers are intertwined, regional powers such as Israel, Iran, and Turkey also wanted to maintain their influence.

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[7] *Global terrorism index 2019. Measuring the impact of terrorism*, http://visionofhumanity.org/app/uploads/2019/11/GTI-2019web.pdf (27.03.2022).

[8] *Vide* M. Rubin, *Kurdistan Rising?: Considerations for Kurds, Their Neighbors, and the Region*, Washington 2016.

[9] M. Esthimer, *World Confronts Largest Humanitarian Crisis since WWII*, https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/world-confronts-largest-humanitarian-crisis-wwii (12.03.2022).

[10] M. Stefanov, *The Arab Spring: A Decade Later*, "Institut za razvoj i međunarodne odnose Brief", No. 5/2021, Zagreb 2021, p. 1-8.

[11] *Syria's Assad Vows to 'Purge Extremists'*, https://www.voanews.com/a/assad-vows-to-purge-extremists-following-suicide-bombing/1626501.html (20.02.2022).

The emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic has further damaged the fragile sustainability and stability of the region. On the eve of the pandemic, protests flared up again in Iraq, Lebanon, Algeria, and Egypt. There were also relentlessly smouldering conflicts in the MENA neighbourhoods of Sudan, South Sudan, and Iran.

Before the outbreak of the global pandemic, ten years after the escalation of the events called the Arab Spring, the MENA countries returned to a precipitately growing social dissatisfaction with the shape and nature of the changes that took place in the past decade. Despite some differences, the scenario was remarkably similar. Small groups of dissatisfied citizens took to the streets, demanding the resignation of the authorities and the establishment of technocratic governments. In just a few days, two Arab prime ministers were forced to resign. Following the protests in Iraq and Lebanon, the social turmoil spread to Iran, Algeria, Egypt, and Ethiopia, while the situation in Libya and Sudan became significantly more complex than it used to be in the past[12].

In this article, the author will use the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) definition of MENA countries, which includes: Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Malta, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates, and Yemen[13]. Due to the size of the MENA region and the editorial limitations, only selected countries in which the pre-pandemic situation could lead to a recurrence of the 'Arab Spring scenario' will be analyzed.

LEBANON

Although until the end of 2017, internal policy allowed maintaining political stability in the country, avoiding conflicts between various religious groups, the authorities did not manage to implement long-promised political and social reforms, which significantly contributed significantly to the deterioration of the economic situation.

Since 2014, Lebanon has struggled with the returning waves of Syrian refugees breaking through the borders in a way that made it impossible to control their numbers. The constant influx caused that in 2017 the number of only legally residing refugees in Lebanon could exceed 1.5 million[14], which led to growing tensions between the Lebanese society and both Syrian and Palestinian refugees. Although the total number of registered refugees fell below 1 million at the turn of 2017 and 2018, at the beginning of 2018, the authorities demanded from international community resettlement of refugees to Syria, even committing some oppressive actions to discourage Syrians in Lebanon. A particular deterioration in internal politics as brought about by the assurances of Prime Minister Saad Hariri, who has publicly prom-

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[12] J. Spyer, *Arab Spring: The Second Coming?*, https://jiss.org.il/en/spyer-arab-spring-the-second-coming/ (07.05.2022).
[13] L. Van Waas, *The situation of stateless persons in the Middle East and North Africa*, https://www.unhcr.org/protection/statelessness/4ce63e079/situation-stateless-persons-middle-east-north-africa-laura-van-waas.html (4.02.2022).
[14] https://ec.europa.eu/echo/where/middle-east/lebanon_en (15.02.2022).

ised that the resettlement of refugees will take place only after complete stabilization of the situation in Syria. This was welcomed by the international community, but much less sympathetic from the Lebanese society. Apart from some reshuffles, the parliamentary elections held on 6 May 2018 did not bring about any major changes in the political scene or the possibility of rapid emergence of the authorities, causing public discontent and calls for the creation of a technocratic government capable of solving Lebanon's pressing problems. In the opinion of society, the structure based on the Taif agreement no longer works in the era of dynamic global and regional changes. The citizens had enough votes in the 'theoretically free elections', which gave voice to the same group, not the candidate. According to the agreement, Taif's party structures remain unchanged, as well as potential changes in the government, depending on religious parities. Consequently, in each subsequent election, the so-called changes were in fact cosmetic, allowing the groups found on the Lebanese political scene to maintain their influence. The protracted crisis associated with the inability to identify the Heads of Cabinet, accelerated by the poor economic situation of the country, led to another escalation of dissatisfaction in October 2019, and consequently to the outbreak of protests in Beirut, from where it spilled over the cities of Sur, Said, Tripoli and the rest of the country. Citizens blocked the streets with barricades, cut off access to critical transport hubs, seaports, and airports, demanding an immediate elimination of corruption and the dismissal of power. On 21 October 2019, a group of several hundred members of Hezbollah and AMAL came to Beirut to maintain the existing power distribution system with the intention of pacifying the protesters. Despite stopping the pacifiers by the Lebanese army, citizens very quickly split into two groups supporting extremely different positions. As the government did not allow the cabinet to dissolve and the public demanded the establishment of a technocratic government, by the end of October 2019, public protests had increased significantly. The only mobile operators in Lebanon – Alfa and Touch – declared that they would join the protests, which resulted in interruptions in access to the mobile network and the Internet, and the escalation itself led to the deepening of the country's economic crisis. In November 2019, prices of goods and services increased drastically, and domestic reserves of goods, e.g. fuels, began to shrink. Moreover, schools, universities, and banks were closed, and there was a shortage of convertible currencies throughout the country, which resulted in the emergence of the gray economy and speculators. It has been said, the demonstrations could culminate in as much as a quarter of the Lebanese population.

A decisive public outcry was caused by a government decree on the taxation of voice calls made via WhatsApp communicator. Although the government withdrew from the idea due to the escalation of social discontent, this did not weaken the protests. Civic movements were regularly reminding of the worsening economic and social conditions. Ultimately, the government yielded to pressure from citizens, and Prime Minister Saad Al-Hariri announced his readiness to step down, but the crowds demanded a complete replacement of the existing

political elite. The public's demands were met with great disapproval by an informal force in the country – Iranian-backed Hezbollah, which publicly rejected the resignation of Prime Minister Al-Hariri. Moreover, Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah accused protesters of collecting funds from foreign states in exchange for destabilizing their own state. The society split into two camps, protesters and supporters of Hezbollah, and skirmishes took place between them. On 22 January 2020, a new Hassan Diab government was elected, announcing its readiness to form a technocratic government. Unfortunately, the changes that took place on the Lebanese political scene after the resignation of Saad Hariri and his cabinet turned out to be cosmetic, and the current political elite tried to delay the transformation of the system towards a technocratic government as much as possible. The events that followed the changes quickly showed it was not possible to deviate from the sectarian denominational model of the division of competences, and that behind each 'technocrat' stands de facto political party that supported this candidacy in many ways. The forceful steps taken by the authorities were prompted by the need to form a government, which was an ultimatum to restore foreign subsidies to Lebanon. On the other hand, they had a very negative effect on the security situation in the entire region, which former Lebanese donors observed with great concern.

ALGERIA

Algeria, destabilized by the Arab winter, similarly to Lebanon, has been hit extremely hard by successive waves of social discontent. An authoritarian country with a hybrid system of central control and capitalism relying mainly on oil revenues began to feel the effects of falling oil prices as early as 2014. Yet, by 2017, with the help of a clerical and secret service apparatus, the authorities managed to maintain relative stability[15]. As of 2018, Algeria was experiencing its deepest economic crisis since Abdelaziz Bouteflika came to power and began to move dangerously close to the threshold of bankruptcy accelerated by money printing.

A permanent crisis of power based on clan connections and a system of obligations, combined with a lack of prospects for Algerian youth, inflation, embarrassing drug scandals, numerous embezzlements, pervasive corruption, political repression, and rising food prices triggered successive waves of protest, and could quite quickly provoke an unprecedented wave of economic migration to Europe. The country experienced regular protests by various groups of society: teachers, doctors, postal workers, bakers, and pensioners. In late 2019 and early 2020, the country could only be saved by technocratic governance, the implementation of deep reforms and recovery programs, as well as an increase in the price of the barrel of oil (on which the Algerian economy depended). However, none of these factors have been achieved. The date of the presidential election announced in early 2019 was accompanied by a promise to introduce deep economic reforms that would represent a compromise between

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[15] K. Mezran, M. Khan, *No Arab Spring for Algeria*, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/issue-brief/no-arab-spring-for-algeria/ (12.12.2021).

the government, the public, and the opposition. From a social perspective, the declarations of authorities have only caused frustration, and the preparatory actions, in reality, provided a veil for carrying out political purges in rival clans. In opposition to the government's current censorship policies, the street protests in March brought together hundreds of thousands of young people, including students and journalists. The protests demanded a radical transformation of the system and the dismissal of discredited elites from power.

In response, police, military police and special units brutally pacified the protesters using an extensive spectrum of weapons – from a water cannon and gas to the Long-Range Acoustic Devices. The government was talking about the "foreign elements inspiring the youth" in order to destabilize the country. However, none of the measures taken by the authorities, from image changes in the leadership of political parties to the intimidation of protesters and arrests of oligarchs supporting the opposition, has brought the desired results. On 2 April 2019, Buteflika had resigned from the office[16], but according to analysts, his clan still remained in de facto power. Therefore, the protests, even after the presidential resignation, did not fade. Not even Ramadan could stop protesting youth boycotting the presidential elections announced for July 4, 2019. Despite continued repression, the government finally agreed to a partial compromise. Bowing to the demands of the public, it cancelled the previously announced elections, but extended the presidential mandate held by Abd al-Kadir Bensalah. The constitutional crisis resulting from the decision-making chaos created a dangerous opportunity for the military to take over the country, thus replicating the recent Egyptian and Libyan scenario. Although the authorities tried to arrange meetings with various social and interest groups and launched a series of media trials for corruption, they were not willing to implement the protesters' demands to release political prisoners, withdraw the army from politics, and elect a technocratic cabinet. As a consequence of the unrest prevailing in the country for more than 42 weeks, in November 2019 the European Parliament adopted a resolution on the situation of freedom in Algeria. In December, elections were held, boycotted by opposition parties and the public, who even bricked up the entrances to polling stations as an act of protest. The voter turnout was 39.9%, of which approximately 13% of votes were declared null and void[17]. The unrest persisted in the country until a state of pandemic caused by the coronavirus was declared.

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[16] *Algeria's interim president Bensalah proposes talks without 'state' involvement*, https://www.france24.com/en/20190703-algeria-interim-president-bensalah-talks-state-involvement (12.03.2022).
[17] *Le Conseil Constitutionnel annonce les résultats définitifs de la présidentielle,* https://www.aps.dz/algerie/99035-le-conseil-constitutionnel-annonce-les-resultats-definitifs-de-la-presidentielle (26.03.2022).

IRAQ

In ranked as the 23rd most corruption-ridden[18] country in the world and separatism-torn Iraq, years after the Arab Spring, young Iraqis became increasingly frustrated[19]. Despite Iraq's vast oil reserves, the population remained impoverished, unemployment and corruption were on the rise[20]. The frustration and discontent that had been building for years was the sum of the neglect and ineptitude of successive administrations to enforce the rule of law, a sprawling bureaucracy, and nepotism. The authorities also maintained a centrally planned economy that stifled state development. The country, which is based on almost 90% of its oil exports, was also vulnerable to price changes on the petroleum market. Internal tensions on the political scene have been exacerbated by the strong influence of Iran, the United States, Russia, China, and some actions taken by Israel, perceived as the eternal foe. Geopolitical problems led to political gridlock and ineffectiveness in implementing changes and responding adequately to society's social needs. The influence of Daesh, hiding from the Global Coalition, was also not insignificant. As a result of the deteriorating economic situation and widespread protests against central mismanagement, the first massive protests erupted in Iraq's industrial region of Basra in 2018. In 2019, the oil-rich province made a renewed attempt to gain wider autonomy, and residents of the region called for public demonstrations and rallies in support of the concept of independence. Such compromises were not accepted by the Iraqi government, which was trying to maintain its territorial integrity and financial liquidity based on the sale of oil from that particular region. The authorities' reluctance to such solutions was also enhanced by the experience of the Kurds' attempts to gain independence in 2018. The efforts to improve the internal situation were not made any easier by the Iranian-backed Popular Mobilization Forces[21], which were established to fight Daesh, but after coming to grips with the problem, refused to de-form and integrate into the civilian and military structures of the state. As a consequence, 2019 has seen the largest and most brutally suppressed anti-government protests in the modern history of Iraq[22]. In late September and early October 2019, a wave of violent protests triggered by rising unemployment, corruption, and lack of access to basic public services has flooded Mosul, Baghdad, Nadjaf, Amara, Karbala, Nasriya, and Basra, leading to a significant deterioration of the security situation and a serious destabilization of the state. The national government found itself in a very difficult position as it was infeasible to stabilize the country

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[18] *Corruption Perceptions Index 2021*, https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2021/index/irq (05.05.2022).

[19] S. Jiyad, *Struggling Iraq Faces Another Crisis in COVID-19*, "Instituto Affari Internazionali Comments", No. 20/73 2020, p. 1-7.

[20] Iraq has the world's fourth largest oil reserves, yet a quarter of the population lives at the edge of poverty. Read more: Assessment of COVID-19 Impact on Poverty and Vulnerability in Iraq, 2020, https://www.unicef.org/iraq/reports/assessment-covid-19-impact-poverty-and-vulnerability-iraq (12.02.2022).

[21] The forces were composed of approx. 50 different Shia militias numbering 150,000 armed fighters, operating inside Iraq since 2014.

[22] *Biggest protests since fall of Saddam*, https://edition.cnn.com/2019/11/09/middleeast/iraq-protest-death-toll-intl/index.html (12.02.2022).

socio-economically in a relatively short period while struggling with terrorism and pursuing a multi-vector policy with regional and international powers simultaneously. Thus, a decree was issued to suppress protests, bring Iraqi Security Forces into the streets, impose a curfew, close schools, offices, and cut off access to internet services within the country. The authorities also pressured independent journalists to prevent them from reporting on developments and forced foreign journalists to leave the country. The implosion of discontent, visible especially among youth, has focused on the fragmentation of political factions, unable to find consensus and implement the necessary reforms. In response, authorities quickly moved from acknowledging and trying to understand the protesters' rationale to accusing them of being a tool of manipulation by the external actors. Islamic clerics with political aspirations have also joined the public's conflict with the government, supporting and exhorting the crowds to continue their protests. The protesters demanded the resignation of Prime Minister Adel Abdul-Mahdi and the prosecution of the persons responsible for the violent suppression of peaceful protests. In December 2019, President Barham Salih agreed to dismiss the Prime Minister, but the crowds refused to end the protests and continued protesting until mid-March 2020 - the announcement of the Covid-19 outbreak. Unlike the peaceful protests in Lebanon and the moderate protests in Algeria, there have been clashes in Iraq in which at least 300 people have been killed and about 12,000 demonstrators injured[23].

EGYPT

Egypt's successful 2011 revolution, paid for by hundreds of casualties and years of political crisis has slowly begun to pay off. Initially, a very dynamic tenure focused on normalizing neighbour relations, sustaining good relations with the EU, the US, China, and Russia, fighting terrorism in the Sinai Peninsula, and implementing socio-economic reforms in the country, began to focus on maintaining the power as of 2018. The army, which had a strong influence on national politics, became de facto guarantor of the state's existence. The changes introduced allowed President Abdel-Fatta Al-Sisi to remain in power until 2030, which for observers marked Egypt's renewed transformation toward a 'presidential-parliamentary dictatorship' system and dangerously evoked echoes of Hosni Mubarak's regime. Additionally, terrorist attacks carried out by Daesh and al-Qaeda supporters continued to plague the country. The adoption of the constitutional amendments gave cause to the first spontaneous and uncoordinated anti-government expressions of dissent. In June 2019, Mohammed Mursi died during a defence statement in trial, triggering an immediate reaction from sympathizers of the former president and supporters of the outlawed Muslim Brotherhood. Crowds have also accused authorities of inhumane treatment of Mursi in prison. In turn, in July 2019, the Parliament legislated a new NGO law which, despite some cosmetic

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[23] M. Tawfeeq, *Iraq protests death toll rises to 319 with nearly 15,000 injured*, https://edition.cnn.com/2019/11/09/middleeast/iraq-protest-death-toll-intl/index.html (01.02.2022).

changes, maintained the government's extensive authority to disband independent human rights groups and NGOs. In late September 2019, hundreds of people took to the streets of major cities to protest government corruption and economic changes hitting existing sources of subsidies, chanting catchwords reminiscent of the Arab Spring demonstrations. Despite the draconian penalties (in place since 2013) for organizing and participating in so-called unauthorized protests, the population was willing to take the risk of detention. The ruling camp of the military junta was also fragmented, and retaliatory detentions and staff changes in the army, secret services, and government offices significantly escalated popular dissatisfaction. To nip the protests in the bud, the authorities, following the example of the previous president, shut down the Internet access and prohibited foreign news stations. A strategy was adopted to completely eliminate 'protest' sources, consisting of arrests of opposition activists and people who did not support Egyptian authorities. The government did not bow to pressure from the international arena, explaining the measures taken as necessary to ensure the stability of the state. Despite the relatively quick suppression of the protests, the situation clearly indicated that the stability achieved in the country after years of chaos should not be taken for granted. Despite a booming economy[24], the average Egyptian has not only failed to benefit from the country's development, but more importantly has lost out through government-imposed cuts in subsidies and the devaluation of the currency[25].

SYRIA

As a result of the anti-government uprising, the civil war between the forces loyal to President Bashar al-Assad and the armed opposition that has been ongoing since 2011 has led to the economic devastation of the country and the mass migration of Syrians to the European mainland[26]. Initially, on the wave of the so-called Arab Spring, the demands of the protesters demanding the exchange of elites and state democratization quickly extended to the religious dimension. Dominated by Alawite-Shia groups, the Sunni majority has risen to power. These actions quickly divided society, while also providing an ideal breeding ground for the growth of religious extremist groups. De facto, since 2013, the war in Syria has become an internal conflict of multilateral character, involving many international actors taking sides on both sides of the conflict. The conflict has engaged the United States, Turkey, Russia, Britain, France, Egypt, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon's Hezbollah and even Yemeni, Iraqi, and Afghan fighters. The 2018/2019 U.S. decision to withdraw troops from Syria not only struck a blow to the Kurdish forces affiliated with the People's Protection Units (YPG), but also rebalanced the fragile stability that had been achieved over the years. The turmoil has been used by the Islamist militias affiliated with Al-Qaeda (*Hay'et Tahrir al-Sham* – HTS),

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[24] World Bank, https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/egypt/overview#1 (20.03.2022).
[25] Ibidem.
[26] M. Yacoubian, *Syria Timeline: Since the Uprising Against Assad,* https://www.usip.org/syria-timeline-uprising-against-assad (20.03.2022).

which have launched the offensive in northwest Syria. In the area bordering Turkey, the decision has been made to establish a safety zone to ensure Kurdish independence fighters a relative stability after the US withdrawal. However, the handover of Kurdish-populated territories to de facto Turkish control by the Syrian authorities has endangered the livelihood of the Kurdish ethnic community. The constant armed clashes in Idlib between the opposition and supported by Russia Bashar al-Assad's regime did not help the situation of civilians. Syrian oil fields have quickly become, in the footsteps of Daesh, a key source of funds for separatist Kurds. Some of the fighters battling the Al-Assad regime, after the failures of the opposition, decided to fight for money in war-ridden Libya. Some recruits, especially Salafists from the Sham Legions, had hoped to make an easier crossing to Europe.

LIBYA

Since the 2011 overthrow of Muammar Gaddafi, Libya has been permanently divided between the Government of National Accord (GNA), represented by the Tripoli Government, and a competing self-declared administration in the East, supported by Marshal Haftar's Libyan National Army (LNA). This means that it has de facto rival governments and two parliaments in the west and east of the country. Following the Syrian scenario, the Libyan conflict was quickly internationalized to incorporate such actors as Russia, France, Italy, the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, and the G7 states. Since the outbreak of the internal conflict, the peace agreements both between the parties and those proposed with the involvement of the external actors have been violated in a very short period. The international effort of the African Union, France, and Italy to stabilize and organize general elections was nullified. The ceasefire reached in October 2018 lasted only two months; and the Daesh threat has not decreased. The territories bordering Algeria, Niger, Chad, and Sudan have become havens for all manner of militants, armed groups, and rebels, relying heavily on the financial factor, resulting in frequent changes of parties, which further destabilizes the scene and introduces chaos. Between January and February 2019, Marshal Haftar's Libyan National Army forces took control of oil fields in the southern part of the country and drinking water intakes. At the time, the LNA forces were committing acts of arson and looting the residences of the clans that supported the GNA forces, moving perilously in the direction of ethnic cleansing. The Libyan NGO Aman Organization Against Discrimination has even called on the UN to intervene to protect the civilian population. The unexpected increase in hate speech, racism, and revenge rhetoric has jeopardized the stability and efforts undertaken to establish a peaceful environment in the country. The UN envoy for Libya, Ghassan Salame, has promised the commitment of the UN mission to protect civilians and provide essential medical and food supplies. In a fairly short time, Libya became a transit hub for hundreds of thousands of migrants crossing the Sahara to get to Europe via the Mediterranean Sea.

MENA NEIGHBOURHOOD

Similarly to the Arab Spring period, the MENA countries' neighbourhood has also shown limited resilience to the regional upheavals. In the conflict-torn state of **Sudan**, the political and economic situation on the eve of Covid remained very tense. The escalating protests in the second half of 2019[27] were driven by the lack of transparency in the political system and the judicial sector. Despite the successful overthrow of the dictator in April 2019 after which people danced in the streets, it became clear, that the army, which supposed to be the enforcer of the democratic transition, craved to hold the power to itself. The decision was followed by a massive campaign of civil disobedience. The 2020 skirmishes in Darfur, Abey, and especially Khartoum have shown that the country's progress towards stability and democratization can be eroded in a very short time. The threat was also intensified by the difficult economic situation, the devaluation of the Sudanese pound, and inflation. **South Sudan** was experiencing a lack of much needed transition from elite politics to socio-economic development[28]. Therefore, in May 2019, a resistance group called The Red Card Movement, inspired by street protests and the successful overthrow of the dictatorship in neighboring Sudan, called South Sudanese for protests. As a consequence, the security deployment and unexpected inspections of households took place in the following days. Under the excuse of maintaining the democratic system, President Salva Kiir declared to use all means, including force 'to maintain democracy'. In **Iran**, the 2017-2018 anti-government protests were sparked by increasing inflation, high unemployment, and corruption. Since spring of 2017, youth and university students have been protesting against President Hasan Rouhani and his unfulfilled promises to improve the situation of citizens. In 2018, the government announced the necessity of implementing an austerity budget, raising prices, and cutting benefits. At the same time, military funding has been declared. In a very short time, manifestations motivated exclusively by economic factors evolved into aggressive political demonstrations. The rallies condemned foreign interventions in the region, such as in Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq, and the allocation of funds for these purposes that could be used to improve the social situation of Iranians. There was criticism of the omnipresent corruption and the clerical privileges, and calls for the abolition of the Islamic republic and monarchy re-establishment. The government's decision was greeted with an outrage from the citizens, whose frustration was fuelled by the economic impact of U.S. sanctions. In the year preceding the renewal of protests, the economic collapse had deepened markedly, with an observable slowing of oil exports and a decline in the value of Iran's national currency. The turning point came with the government's announcement of food rationing plans. The heated protests

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[27] W. Berridge, *Briefing: The Uprising in Sudan*, "African Affairs" 119/1, p. 164-176.
[28] J. Pospil, Ch. Origina, S. Dawkins, D. Deng, *Don't take this away from us again. Citizen perceptions of peace in South Sudan*, Policy Brief No. 1/2020, p. 4, https://www.aspr.ac.at/fileadmin/Downloads/Publikationen/ Policy_Briefs/ASPR_Policy_Brief_1_2020.pdf (20.04.2022).

engulfed about 100 cities, resulting, similar to protests in MENA countries, in fatalities[29]. After the emergence of the covid-19 pandemic, Iranian politicians claimed that the spread of the virus was deliberately aimed at Iran, subsequently using that fact to achieve their political goals.

CHANGES ANNOUNCED WITH THE OUTBREAK OF THE PANDEMIC

When the coronavirus started to spread in MENA countries, many states faced a significant number of challenges. Egypt and Tunisia, where tourism constitutes a significant share of budget income, have been looking with concern at the internationally introduced restrictions and travel prohibitions. Iraq, along with its domestic (internal and external, political, economic, and epidemiological problems), was still struggling to fight against the Daesh. The situation in protest-ridden Lebanon and Algeria was further complicated by the nature of the protests and the potential virus transmission in the crowds, while in civil war-ravaged Libya and Syria, it was nearly impossible to control the movement of civilians or clashing local militias.

For years, Middle Eastern regimes have used the threat from the jihadist group as a warning against anarchy. This was to deter potential protests and consolidate their power. By scaring the public with religious fanatics, they simultaneously tightened surveillance, control, and strengthened the police state. With the significant reduction in Daesh activity and economic problems, the level of control of societies began to become ineffective. Thus, the Covid-19 pandemic became a turning point, as the restrictions and pervasive control it triggered allowed the MENA governments to reassert their control and consolidate their power. The authorities of selected MENA countries soon realized not only the risks of the global virus for society and economy, but also the benefits it may bring for the political elite. Most of the COVID-19 measurements quickly became weaponized in the fight against political opponents. Moreover, the spread of the virus also provided a wide range of tools to introduce restrictions and public control.

In protesting **Lebanon**, at the beginning of March 2020, the authorities banned the organization of mass events under the pain of immediate enforceability. Schools and colleges, which played a significant role in organizing protests led mainly by young generations demanding a technocratic government, were also closed. To keep public order, mixed patrols of the army and internal security services were set up, entitled to ID citizens, to use coercive measures or detention. Limiting the possibility of conducting protests allowed the government to work to save the country from collapse and implement the reforms required by the international community, which is a condition for launching international aid. Despite the atmosphere of persistent epidemic threat, intensifying social protests in more urbanized regions resumed in July. In the opinion of the authorities, apart from a threat to public safety, the protests were also an area for the spread of the virus. The Lebanese authorities have used

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[29] During the 2009, 2017, and 2018 protests, Iran has proven that it is ready to use force in order to stabilise public order. Iran's Ministry of Interior even threatened publicly that it was able to identify all the leaders of the riots.

the coronavirus as a substitute topic for the deepening political and economic crisis in the country, masking the lack of willingness of the main political blocs to build consensus and form a new government.

The COVID-19 pandemic, one of the greatest challenges for **Algeria**, paradoxically constituted a salvation for the authorities and, in retrospect, significantly helped the government to restore the country's internal stability. Stigmatized by protesters for failing to fulfil their election promises, the new authorities received a set of tools enabling them to take control of the 'Hirak' street movement[30], which since February 2019 has been demanding the resignation of politicians associated with the former president's regime. By introducing restrictive steps, a ban on gatherings, quarantine and self-isolation, it solved a theoretically unsolvable problem at no cost, both in terms of image and the economy. The Algerian authorities used pandemic restrictions to assign the blame for the development of the pandemic to the relentless Hirak social movement, which they believe contributed greatly to the contamination of the virus. They also called for an end to excessive use of public space, linking the movement with alleged support from third countries. Soon the authorities adopted a repressive attitude towards the protesters. On the viaducts over the highways to Algiers, the number of national gendarmerie observation posts increased to respond to crowds heading to join Hirak protests. The virus expansion was very quickly used by President Abdelmadjid Tebboune to temporarily restrict civil liberties. Contrary to previous assurances of readiness to respect the exceptional importance of Hirak, Tebboune strictly banned organizing and participating in rallies and marches, resulting in total freezing of Hirak activity.

With the confirmation of the first COVID-19 cases in **Iraq**, the authorities in line with recommendations from the World Health Organization, announced a curfew, suspended flights, banned entry into Iraq of passengers from France, Turkey, Spain, Nigeria, China, Iran, Japan, South Korea, Thailand, Singapore, Italy, Kuwait and Bahrain. Soon after that, the authorities also limited dispersal among Iraqi provinces. Schools, universities, and colleges were closed, cutting off youth from places of gathering and protest arrangements. Subsequently, the authorities urged all citizens to abide by curfew regulations and practice social distancing, including avoiding participation in all types of gatherings. As a consequence, due to the pandemic, it was successful to force the political elite to accept Mustafa al-Qadhimi for the post of prime minister. The deteriorating situation created by the political stagnation and Covid-19 was used as an excuse to justify that choice. In February/March 2020, the **Egyptian** government, like other states, decided to close shopping malls, restaurants, cafes, schools, and universities; Flights were also prohibited. At the same time, the government denied the actual scale of the virus in the country and, using its special authority, threatened to arrest people who spread information about the real figures. The subject of opposition control resurfaced

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[30] *Algeria: 3 Years On, Repression on Protest Tightens*, https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/02/21/algeria-3-years-repression-protest-tightens (22.02.2022).

with great urgency. Individuals expressing views different from the government's, as well as human rights activists, have been detained and charged for promoting anti-government propaganda. This focus of Egyptian authorities on consolidating power and enforcing imposed restrictions has impacted the entire region's security. Despite the ongoing conflict in **Syria**, the government has imposed some restrictions have been imposed by the government. Among other measures, the crossings with Lebanon and Jordan have been closed and a curfew has been introduced. In February 2020, the neighboring **South Sudan** entered a transition period, which should last 36 months and culminate in general elections[31]. Although, before the COVID-19 pandemic, the mentioned process was substantially delayed, the hit of COVID became an excellent excuse. Similarly to other countries struggling with the pandemic, a lockdown was announced in South Sudan. People were forbidden to meet and gather, while most of the international community had left the country. Using the excuse of fighting a pandemic, the already strong authoritarian political system became even more centralized. The state established a so-called Covid Task Force, responsible for the coordination and control of travel visas, thus constituting another weapon in government's hands. The Cabinet used the pandemic to pursue a 'delay policy', delaying the transition of power and postponing all necessary changes. Another tool for political tactics become a substantial increase in subnational violence. Political rallies were prohibited, significantly hampering opposition.

CONSEQUENCES

Aside from the obvious stabilization of the domestic political situation for many MENA countries, the Covid-19 pandemic also resulted in many detrimental impacts. The critical economic situation of many countries in the region makes the Middle East particularly vulnerable to upheavals. This makes any potential long-term effects caused by the international restrictions accompanying the pandemic even more alarming. The negative consequences of the epidemic in Africa and the Middle East are much more severe and noticeable than those in Europe, America, or even Asia. It has strongly influenced countries' foreign policies, including widespread isolationism, restrictions on the flow of people and goods. A negative consequence of the pandemic has also resulted in the prudent disposition of the budgetary resources by Western and wealthy Middle Eastern countries. In fear of economic recession and the complications caused by a rapid decline in trade and production, some of the economic programs supporting MENA countries have been temporarily frozen, which may lead to acceleration of the collapse of such destabilized states as Syria, Iraq, Libya, Lebanon, or Yemen and their close neighborhoods: Ethiopia, Somalia, or Iran. The involvement of MENA countries' security forces in the domestic stability has relaxed their control over the inflamed regions, and hence accelerated local disputes. Daesh-supporting cells have been renewed in Northern

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[31] *South Sudan Not Ready for Free, Fair Elections Given Failure to Implement Peace Agreement, Human Rights Activist Tells Security Council*, https://www.un.org/press/en/2022/sc14821.doc.htm (06.05.2022).

Iraq, and a similar scenario was observed near the Syrian city of Deir-e-Zor. The coronavirus measures have had a serious economic impact on conflict-torn Syria. The cost of living there has increased by more than 100% in a year and the gap between social classes has deepened to the disadvantage of the most impoverished[32]. Due to pandemic restrictions and ongoing clashes, some humanitarian organizations have been forced to stop their activities in Syria, creating a particularly difficult humanitarian situation in refugee camps in the Northeast of the country. The progressive depreciation of the Syrian pound quickly translated into increased inflation and deepening poverty. This, in turn, led to riots and public demonstrations in June 2020[33]. In the long run, it may also provide a fertile ground for supporting all kinds of extremist movement and, particularly, economic emigration. The routes of cross-border migration to Europe from the African hinterland – particularly those areas that were out of epidemiologists' control during the pandemic – run through Libyan territory, which could be of further concern. The hostilities and the battle to take over Tripoli have resulted in thousands of casualties, including foreign mercenaries, while humanitarian aid agencies have warned of a drastic increase in casualties caused by a pandemic accompanied by a lack of health care. It was very soon that the humanitarian situation reached a level that had never been witnessed before in the country. Only between 1 April 2019 and 31 March 2020 did UNSMIL document at least 685 civilian casualties, hundreds of thousands forced to leave their homes, and nearly one million people in dire need of humanitarian assistance. In **Lebanon**, despite the drastic restrictions, residents were repeatedly disobeying travel prohibitions and limitations. The shutdown of the international aviation movement has also imprinted an economic footprint. Lack of tourism income and expenditures on pandemic response have caused that the economic reforms, which the authorities launched under public pressure in late 2019, to be postponed or even abandoned. In May 2020, after 15 months of the pandemic situation in **South Sudan**, the Political Settlements Research Programme (PSRP) conducted an expert perception survey on the impact of COVID-19 on peace processes in South Sudan. It proved that the COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated and catalyzed the elite politics of delaying the peace process and aggravating violent competition for power. In June 2020 David Shearer, Special Representative and Head of the United Nations Mission in South Sudan admitted that "South Sudan is facing the twin threat of COVID-19 and escalating violence (…) A truly unified national leadership would have acted promptly and stepped in to curb this conflict," he said. "Instead, the violence has been allowed to play out and is being used to sort out power arrangements at the national and subnational levels". Both the political impasse and the COVID-19 lockdown have prompted an upsurge in violence. Hundreds of people were killed,

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[32] S. Heydemann, Yazigi Jihad, *Syrian uprising 10-year anniversary: A political economy perspective*, https://www.brookings.edu/on-the-record/syrian-uprising-10-year-anniversary-a-political-economy-perspective/ (12.03.2022).
[33] *Syria hit by rare anti-regime protests sparked by economic crisis*, https://www.france24.com/en/20200609-syria-hit-by-rare-anti-regime-protests-sparked-by-economic-crisis (12.12.2021).

women and children were abducted, property destroyed or stolen, and more than 60,000 people were displaced. Furthermore, organized forces might joined the conflict, putting the fragile situation even more at risk, as the covid-19 pandemic had only accelerated and accentuated South Sudan's crucial challenges.

CLOSING REMARKS

In the article, the author aimed to respond to the question of if and how the COVID-19 pandemic affected the situation in MENA countries, and whether it could have slowed the pace of developments and protests occurring in the region, indirectly slowing down the next wave of migration of Africans and Middle Eastern residents to Europe.

Analysis of international events during the period of the rapid spread of COVID-19 allows for the thesis that the global pandemic helped the power apparatuses in MENA countries maintain power through imposed restrictions and pervasive control (including of the opposition). The internationally accepted package of restrictions constituted one of the main factors in the dissolution of protests, preventing another wave of uncontrollable riots, which could have turned into an 'Arab Spring bis'. It should be clearly emphasized that many similarities are discernible between the 2019/2020 speeches and the Arab Spring of late 2010/early 2011. The crowds chanted the same messages that had previously appeared during the uprisings in 2010 and 2011. Following the example of the Arab Spring, the youth demanded the absolute replacement of the political class and/or military elites and stabilization of society's steadily deteriorating living conditions. The continuous protests, which had lasted for months, as well as the determination of the protesters, were put to the test by the government apparatus, which tried to put them down swiftly, using mainly brute force. In both cases, the deteriorating livelihood situation overcame the fear factor and led to the organization of massive and unabated protests in a relatively short period of time. The accelerator for the growing anxiety caused by the pauperization of society and the enrichment of the military-political elite has also been a significant erosion of Daesh, hitherto one of the elements of terror, legitimizing the surveillance and control of the state apparatus over its citizens. In light of the facts presented, it seems very likely that the global pandemic and the accompanying restrictions imposed by the authorities of unstable MENA countries had temporarily frozen civil unrest. At the time of writing the article, Poland, an EU member state, has successfully prevented Belarus-controlled illegal migration. However, the brief stability of the old continent restored in February/March 2022 was terminated by the Russian invasion over Ukraine. The so-called Russian 'spec-operation' in a remarkably short period of time has turned into a full-scale war, greatly affecting Eurasian relations, including transport routes of migrants to Europe. With a high degree of probability, it can be assumed that Russian aggression over Ukraine resulting in hostilities in Central and Eastern Europe and the accompanying refugee scale from Ukraine were another factor, effectively delaying the mass exodus of citizens of the identified MENA

states to Europe via Turkey[34]. Although the tools created to control the transmission of the virus have been used by the governments to maintain their power and stabilize the domestic scene, their preservation cannot be endlessly justified. Bearing in mind the protracted conflicts in Syria and Libya and the delicate situations in Tunisia[35], Sudan, South Sudan, or Iraq, it is in the great interest of the EU to be adequately prepared for the next waves of potential emigration from MENA countries after the pandemic restrictions are lifted and the situation in Ukraine stabilizes.

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[34] *In war-torn Syria, the coronavirus pandemic has brought its people to the brink of starvation*, https://thecaonversation.com/in-war-torn-syria-the-coronavirus-pandemic-has-brought-its-people-to-the-brink-of-starvation-144794 (12.04.2022).

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