

COVID-19 in the MENA Region: Addressing the Impacts of the Pandemic and the Road to Recovery

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Written Statement

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Chairman Meeks, Ranking Member McCaul, Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to speak before you today on this important topic.

COVID has killed nearly 200,000 people in the Middle East according to official figures, and likely far more due to lack of testing and poor data transparency in many countries. As elsewhere in the world, the pandemic has been an unprecedented public health crisis which has taken a tremendous human and economic toll. Yet the wholesale collapse of societies has not (yet) taken place, contrary to many predictions. I remember in particular discussing the prospects for Iraq in early 2020 with colleagues at USAID, when it appeared that the country would face the converging disasters of escalating proxy conflict between the U.S. and Iran, a COVID outbreak worse than Iran's, and an economic wipeout from plummeting oil prices.

These dire short-term predictions did not play out, and today I'd like to look past the immediate crisis of COVID and refocus our attention on the long-term causes of instability in the Middle East. These stressors preceded COVID, were exacerbated by it, and will now re-emerge worse than ever. You've already heard about the grave economic situation in the Middle East, which drives so much instability. But I would like to focus on what I believe is an even more fundamental challenge than stagnant economies: Dysfunctional, ineffective governance and weak institutions.

Ultimately, tax codes, regulation, and the business environment are set by government; education policy is set by government. It was poor governance, as well as the lack of opportunity it perpetuated, that drove the Arab Spring uprisings of 2011. But a decade later the governments that emerged from, or survived, the Arab Spring have failed to meet the original demands of protestors.

As far back as 2019, which seems a very long time ago, we were already seeing the second wave of the Arab Spring arriving: that year protests forced the resignation of presidents and prime ministers in Algeria, Sudan, Iraq and Lebanon. In each case protests were met by a panicked mix of concessions and violence, but little serious systemic change, showing that

regional governments today are no better equipped to address popular demands than they were a decade ago.

Then 2020 happened, and the demonstrations quieted under the smothering blanket of COVID-19 and repressive emergency health ordinances. Press freedoms were severely curtailed and public gatherings all but prohibited by governments across the region, including those that we had previously considered relatively open. Jordan joined Egypt, Lebanon and others in coercing journalists and civil society through draconian restrictions and outright violence.

Despite these restrictions, protests never entirely disappeared, and now with COVID receding citizens will emerge from quarantine to find economies even more sluggish, corruption more pervasive, education more broken, than they were at the start of protests in 2019. According to the Arab Barometer, in 2019 only 29 percent of Moroccans and Tunisians were satisfied with their education systems – *before* the pandemic caused the better part of a year's learning loss among children. In 2019 only thirty-eight percent of Jordanians said they had trust in their government, *before* the pandemic caused unemployment to surge to 24%. Elsewhere in the region, dissatisfaction is similar.

So what can we do? What is required is very hard: to preserve stability, governments in the Middle East need to demonstrate tangible improvements in citizens' lives - this year. They need to be transparent, responsive, and effective - right now. Within 18 months it will likely be too late and popular discontent will become overwhelming. It was *already* overwhelming before COVID.

Given this urgent timeline, I would make several recommendations:

First, focus our resources - both financial and diplomatic - on those countries in the region where we have the influence to help governments undertake urgent reforms and weather the short-term fallout. With our help, regional allies need to demonstrate quick wins for their populations, and then communicate those wins widely and loudly. Close regional allies such as Jordan, Tunisia and to a lesser extent Morocco are vulnerable and will require support.

COVID vaccines make up an important part of this short-term assistance, as there is no better vehicle for concretely helping people and economies recover. The new President and CEO of the Wilson Center Ambassador Mark Green recently hosted former Prime Minister Tony Blair for his institute's report on the global vaccination effort. The report's recommendations included a rigorous prioritization of dense urban and essential worker populations. I would take this a step further in the Middle East context and propose a greater focus on our allies most vulnerable to instability. Forty percent of Jordan's population lives in Amman, and Jordan will face acute stability challenges this year. By comparison Yemen's population is dispersed and difficult to reach, and has no stability to lose. Global coordination of vaccine distribution is essential, but an over reliance on multilateral instruments such as COVAX will reduce our ability to strategically focus vaccines and mute the positive public diplomacy effect of this lifesaving aid.

People in the Middle East need to know that the United States is standing with them during this time, and they need to see our flag. Too many of them only see China's.

Finally, in those countries where we don't have the scale or the resources to help governments through this immediate turbulence - stay focused on the long term. Presidents and prime ministers come and go, but *systems* remain as we've seen in Tunisia, Egypt, Sudan, Algeria and elsewhere. It's those systems that our development professionals are helping improve, inch by inch and year by year. Stagnant state-centered economies are not transformed into vibrant private sector job creators in a year. We must not lose sight of our long-term vision for a prosperous and stable region, even if today seems consumed by chaos.

Thank you again for the opportunity to present this testimony, and I look forward to the discussion.