PUBLIC HEALTH & COVID-19 RESPONSE

AMIRA ROESS

ISSUES

- Over the past several decades, the MENA region has made significant progress in improving health outcomes, expanding access to health care, strengthening service delivery, and enhancing public health programs. Substantial disparities between countries remain, however. Rates of noncommunicable diseases are increasing across the region and some countries also face the added burden of dealing with prevalent, if declining, rates of communicable diseases.

- In the short term the most pressing public health challenge facing the region, as elsewhere, is the COVID-19 pandemic. According to official numbers from the World Health Organization (WHO), as of the beginning of March, there were a total of nearly 10 million cases and 170,000 deaths across the MENA region. The impact of the pandemic and the resulting economic fallout hit countries hard, exacerbating existing public health issues, especially in states with active conflicts or humanitarian crises. Vaccination efforts remain in a relatively early stage with significant disparities in access and rollout between wealthy countries like Israel and the Gulf states and poorer or conflict-affected ones like Syria and Yemen.

- The region also faces a host of other long-term public health challenges, including increasing rates of numerous types of cancers, elevated antibiotic resistance, and a growing opioid crisis. The HIV/AIDS epidemic in the region is understudied, HIV surveillance systems are limited or ineffective, and access to antiretroviral treatment falls far short of demand. Many public health problems are being exacerbated by COVID-19, due to both capacity issues among health care providers and a reticence on the part of patients to seek treatment.

US INTERESTS

- Infectious diseases do not respect borders. As COVID-19 has made abundantly clear, in an increasingly interconnected and globalizing world, a virus can easily spread from one country or region to another. Similarly, the spread of antibiotic-resistant organisms is a problem for all countries. Improving health in the MENA region also improves health in the U.S.

- Public health problems overlap with a host of other political, social, and economic challenges in the MENA region, exacerbating conflicts and instability and hampering economic growth. Addressing these issues can help make the region safer, more stable, and more prosperous, furthering important U.S. foreign policy goals.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Make global public health a key item on the U.S. foreign policy agenda and allocate appropriate resources to support it.

- Help low-income MENA countries secure access to vaccines through programs like COVAX and facilitate their distribution. Existing disease monitoring programs in place in the region should also be adapted and used to track COVID-19.

- Efforts to fund, screen for, and develop infrastructure to address other public health issues in the region should be continued or expanded. Despite the understandable current focus on COVID-19, this should not come at the expense of addressing other long-standing issues.

- Restore funding for key programs cut by the Trump administration, like those carried out by the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees and the U.N. Relief and Works Agency.

- Following the decision to rejoin the WHO, continue to revive U.S. partnerships with public health organizations around the world and efforts to build relationships with epidemiologists and other public health specialists who will be vital for identifying the next pandemic and fostering the global cooperation needed to contain it.

- In a similar vein, continue to support and expand exchange programs for scientists and researchers run by organizations like the U.S. State Department, U.S. Department of Agriculture, the National Institutes of Health, the Department of Defense, and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, among others.

- Make it easier for students, scientists, and researchers to obtain visas to study and work in the U.S. and reduce the associated bureaucratic burden on colleges and universities. The country benefits from attracting the best and brightest.