COVID-19, GLOBALIZATION AND THE STRENGTHENING OF AUTHORITARIANISM IN THE MIDDLE EAST

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The present article seeks to examine the impact of Covid-19 on the process of globalization in the Middle East and its political consequences by posing the concept of 'ideological identity' to describe the socio-political conditions of the region. The authors seek to answer this question: How has the Covid-19 pandemic affected the process of globalization in the Middle East, and how has it helped the Middle East governments to strengthen their authoritarianism and ideological identity? In response to the above questions, in current research, the authors provide evidence of doubts about globalization in the Middle East using the reports published in the press and media, particularly after the Covid-19 pandemic in the region. The findings revealed that six attempts have been made by the Middle East governments to revive traditional authoritarianism and ideological identity, which resulted in taking diverse measures. These measures included the following issues: enacting new laws and increasing the authority of the governments, transforming the media from a supervisory institution to a policy tool, strengthening the position of the state media, reducing citizens' analytical skills and decision-making power, and returning to absolute sovereignty.

Keywords: *Covid-19, globalization, Middle East, authoritarianism, ideological identity.*

Introduction

Generally, globalization has always been recognized by several important indicators: the development of communication, the expansion of free trade, the culture of tolerance, and the dissemination of liberal values. During the Covid-19 pandemic, some of these indicators were reversed and stopped, leading to make sense that the liberal international order that had dominated international structures and countries for decades was collapsing. To combat the spread of the coronavirus, the Middle East states not only closed their borders to the citizens of other countries for several months but also cut off communication and transfer between cities within their own country. Trade between countries and between states reached its lowest point. Cultural tolerance was replaced by ethnic and religious discrimination and violence. Nationalism was revived and some governments moved back to intervene in markets and pursue the idea of self-reliance.

In addition to these events, the Middle East witnessed new and unprecedented events. While the Covid-19 outbreak was a constraint on citizens, it created opportunities for authoritarian regimes in the Middle East. In addition to the economic problems caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, it can be argued that the political consequences of this pandemic have not been as unpleasant as its economic effects, at least for the governments of the Middle East. The concentration of power and the dominance of the despotic atmosphere are the first consequence of a crisis situation, including the outbreak of a disease that has been well exploited by the Middle East regimes. In the present paper, we describe what the impact Covid-19 on globalization in the Middle East and how it has helped authoritarian governments to strengthen their ideological identities. In Figure 1, we present a conceptual model that explains the next sections of the paper.
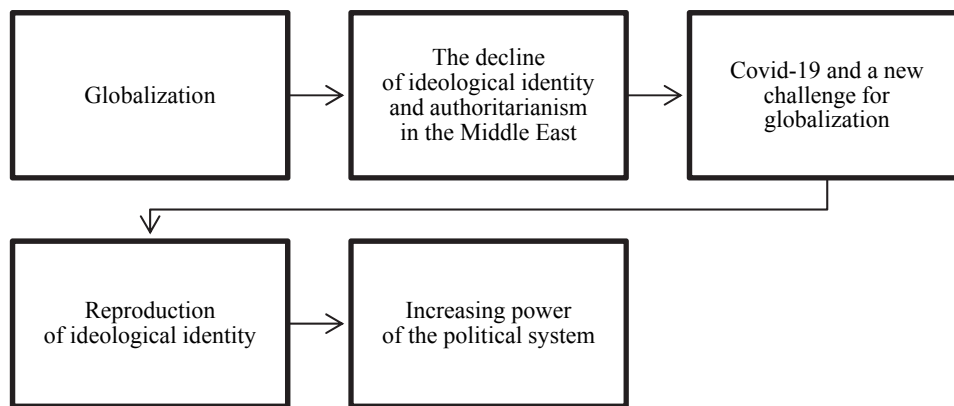

Fig. 1. Conceptual model

Covid-19 and Theoretical Challenges for Globalization and Democracy

There are different views on the effects of globalization on democracy, which can generally be divided into two groups:

1. The expansion of democracy within the globalization process: The proponents of this approach, who are in the majority compared to the second group, consider globalization as a factor to expand and strengthen democracy in the structure of political systems (Krastev 2011; Dobrolyubov 2019). They believe that this transfer of concepts and dimensions of democracy has improved the lives of citizens at various levels, especially in Asian countries (Shafeeq, Raza, and Ramzan 2019). Ronald Inglehart and Christian Welzel in their valuable work *Modernization, Cultural Change and Democracy: The Human Development Sequence* argue that people's basic values and beliefs are changing in ways that affect their political, sexual, economic, and religious behavior.

> Drawing on a massive body of evidence from societies containing 85 % of the world's population, the authors demonstrate that modernization is a process of human development, in which economic development triggers cultural changes that make individual autonomy, gender equality, and democracy increasingly likely (Inglehart and Welzel 2005).

Samuel Phillips Huntington, Yoshihiro Francis Fukuyama, David Held, Jürgen Habermas, and Alain Touraine are the most prominent promoters of this idea. Huntington (1991), for example, believes in spreading democracy to other countries. His theory, entitled 'The Waves of Democracy', is one of the most famous theories influenced by the process of globalization, in which he mentions three waves of democracy in the world. According to him, during each of these waves, many countries are in the circle of a democratic system (Huntington 1991).

Another popular view in politics is Francis Fukuyama's theory of the end of history, which describes the 'liberal democracy' model of government, as the most efficient political structure for all countries and 'the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government' (Fukuyama 2006).

The next famous theory belongs to the German philosopher, Jürgen Habermas, who believes that under the pressure of the globalization process, nation-states lose their monopoly tools for controlling societies and become unstable (Habermas 1989). According to Giddens (1992), late modernity is a world in which expert systems prevail Rather than rationality, democracy, and security. Similar to thinkers like Castells, he dreams of having rationality overcoming history and establishing rationality (Giddens 1992: 38–44). David Held, as one of the most important theorists of cosmopolitan democracy, believes that democracy in the world is globalizing. He regards democracy as inherently advantageous and believes that the expansion of democracy in the world is essential. In *Globalization and the Liberal Democratic State, Government and Opposition*, he argues that political society will eventually move towards cosmopolitan social democracy (Held and McGrew 1993). Alain Touraine also introduces globalization as a factor signaling the end of the social intervening power of governments and argues that in fact, all political and economic dimensions of government intervention power have become more or less disappeared (Touraine 2007).

In the same vein, Korotayev believes 'the globalization context with a general recognition of the people's rights and condemnation of the violation of justice and law, with a demand for legitimacy (that is electivity) of government can by itself build a positive trend and in certain respects restrain authoritarian rulers' (Korotayev, Grinin 2015: 90). Some also believe that with decreasing illiteracy and with the growing population's self-consciousness necessarily accompanied with enlarging personal political experience, a transition to democracy may proceed much easier, smoother, and more effectively than the attempts to establish democracy through revolutionary ways (Kirchschlaeger 2014).

Researchers such as Aleshkovskii, Gasprishvili, and Smakotina also believe that 'Modern people really have the idea of the existence of a number of universal global values' (Aleshkovskii, Gasprishvili and Smakotina 2020: 84). They point out these values promote the culture and teachings of democracy in the international arena. Sergey Tsirel also believes that democratic governments that have achieved technological and organizational maturity have the potential to have a great impact on their neighbors (Tsirel 2015: 176).

Ridouane believes that liberal ideas and democracy exist in the mental background of human beings and have intensified in the process of globalization 'The Lockean "liberalist" and Kantian "globalist" ideals seem to have been – for the last three centuries – at the backdrop of continental politics and philosophical thoughts preoccupied with the "World Citizenship" project' (Ridouane 2019: 3). In the continuation of these ideas,

some researchers try to link even the protest movements that take place in different parts of the world, including the Middle East or South Africa, to democratization and globalization (Sadovskaya, Fakhrutdinova and Kochanova 2019).

According to Wallerstein, the modern world order appeared in Europe and was formed within European economy between 1450 and 1600 and during the seventeenth century spread and became a global economic system in a comprehensive sense. He asserts that when one speaks of the world system, it does not mean that it encompassed the whole world when it was first established but trends that take shape in this system that cover the whole world. In this sense, this system has had a global dimension from the beginning (Wallerstein 2000: 251–262).

2. The challenge of democracy in the globalization process: The proponents of this approach can be divided into the following three groups: a) some scholars like McGrew, point to the problem created by the globalization process for the fundamental principles of democracy (McGrew 1997). One of the world's leading economists of inequality, Branko Milanovic presents a bold new account of the dynamics that drive inequality on a global scale. Global Inequality takes us back hundreds of years, and as far around the world as data allow, to show that inequality moves in cycles, fueled by war and disease, technological disruption, access to education, and redistribution. The recent surge of inequality in the West has been driven by the revolution in technology, just as the Industrial Revolution drove inequality 150 years ago. But even as inequality has soared within nations, it has fallen dramatically among nations, as middle-class incomes in China and India have drawn closer to the stagnating incomes of the middle classes in the developed world. A more open migration policy would reduce global inequality even further (Milanovic 2016).

Ezeanya also believes in this regard: 'The postcolonial society has witnessed paradoxical authority patterns entrenched in "democratic and military dictatorships" which undermine civil rights and social justice, and clamp down on human rights struggles' (Ezeanya 2018: 140). b) Others, such as Rob Walker and Murray Low consider globalization as a major factor in the weakening of national governments (Scholte 2000). c) Some researchers like Farid Zakaria, have a different viewpoint. In *The Rise of Illiberal Democracy,* he argues that illiberal democracies have legitimacy and power in the twenty-first century because they are reasonably democratic. This form of government, in addition to the danger it poses to its people, has the greatest danger of discrediting illiberal democracy in the process of globalization (Zakaria 1997) and d) some have considered radical Islamism, in the current situation, as a disruptive of the world system (Eyesan 2020: 102). For example, Leonid Grinin believes Islamism cannot be eradicated at the present stage (Grinin 2019: 32); but Muslim societies can well grow beyond it (Bayat 2013; Hossain 2016; Amin 2017; Holdo 2017). Yet, this will take much time. One can agree that Islamism – regardless of how it is defined and which movements, parties, and groups are affiliated with it – will remain a political actor on the national, regional, and global stages for more than one generation (Malashenko 2015: 122). Bagheri Dolatabadi and Shafiee have also shown in their research how globalization paved the way for the rise of ISIS[1] by challenging the identities of the states instead of democracy (Bagheri Dolatabadi and Seifabadi 2017).

Baldwin explains that globalization is now driven by fast-paced technological change and the fragmentation of production, its impact is more sudden, more selective, more unpredictable, and more uncontrollable. He added, 'the new globalization presents

rich and developing nations alike with unprecedented policy challenges in their efforts to maintain reliable growth and social cohesion' (Baldwin 2016). Jerry Harris also is pessimistic about the process of democracy in the age of globalization. He refers to the 'necessity of a transnational capitalist class to develop a strategy for implementing democracy beyond its current impasse' (Harris 2016). Eric Sheppard also believes that inequalities in the world have worsened during the neoliberalizing era (since the 1980s) when globalizing capitalism has come better than ever to approximate its ideal type (Sheppard 2016).

What is happening in the Middle East, in addition to being distant from the above theories, is far more uncontrollable than being able to predict whether it ends in the institutionalization of rationality or merely to challenge the process of globalization. The Middle East is now moving towards rediscovering its ideological identity. In this region, we witness a kind of disruption of the established order, and what is happening is a great turmoil against the world order; a loose, fluid, and fragile order that is already prone to major changes and exposed to various anti-systemic environmental forces. Therefore, the main propositions of the above theories are losing their validity and acceptability, and the need to revise these theories is serious and necessary. The current research seeks to show how this is happening and how Covid-19 has helped restore ideological identity and authoritarianism in the Middle East.

Covid-19 and the Restoration of Ideological Identity

To provide a general description of the conditions governing the political systems of the Middle East, it can be said that these states have created a unique identity for themselves, which is called 'ideological identity' here. This identity is the same for many countries in the Middle East and differs from Islamism. The authors believe that the characteristics of this identity include the following issues:

1. It stems from critical conditions. In other words, with the heightening of the crisis, it tries to reproduce itself, and with the growth of people's awareness, its weaknesses and inability are revealed; 2. It is based on a set of historical, national, racial, ethnic, religious traditions, ideals and is used as means to justify power; 3. They usually rely on violence and repression to control the people and justify the actions of their violent supporters; 4. They are leader-centered or in other words person-centered. This means that a person, a party, or organization is considered the leader, and the process of authoritarianism will strengthen; 5. This identity is made by the ruling ideology and is strongly supported by the political system in these countries; 6. Ideological identity does not accept identity differences in any way and seeks to deny, reject and, if possible, eliminate different identities; 7. It is based on a form of false consciousness and tries to censor, distort facts and regulate its desired order of the political system; 8. The media and the public education system are the two main tools for promoting this identity. So, in countries with an ideological identity, there is no private education system and if there is, they are strictly controlled by the government; 9. Create a sponsorship in the light of an exclusive interpretation of religion and tradition is the main purpose of this identity; 10. Obedience, not active and dynamic political participation, is one of the main elements of ideological identity; 11. Ideological identity rejects individualism, freedom of thought, and independent thought; 12. Finally, the concept of freedom in the context of ideological identity does not mean liberal democracy at all but rather means liberation from colonial domination, regional and international enemies. Thus, with the seizure of media power by the rulers, the crisis of meaning within the framework of this type of identity is not allowed to emerge.

Ideological identity has been promoted in the Middle East for many years, and the rulers of these countries have legitimized themselves under its coverage. In this context, they have considered the multiplicity of identities as negative and have marginalized other identities. In the twenty-first century, the emergence of new information and communication technologies in the Middle East posed a serious challenge to this type of identity and, consequently, questioned the legitimacy of the rulers of these countries. Such behavior was first seen during the Arab Spring in the Middle East (2011), where for the first time the nations of the region spoke of their desire for freedom and democracy and called for tolerance of other identities and their recognition.

Before the outbreak of popular protests in 2011, the significance of the relationship between ideology and identity was clear to regional leaders. So, they used these concepts in the form of the ideological identity and the basis of politics in the Middle East. Before the events of 2011 in the Middle East, it must be pointed that ideologies uniquely produced and reproduced their own especial identities, delimiting and defining them in contrast to other different identities. The political systems of the Middle East, while fully defending their ideological identity, sought to impose their ideological identity and to marginalize and, if possible, eliminate other different identities. But this trend gradually slowed and weakened. With the intensification of globalization and the start of its new phase, identities in the Middle East region, as the only social realities, got out of their previous state and became individual and continued to live outside the will of political systems and provoked the reaction of governments (Bill and Springborg 1994: 55–80). Many political regimes in the Middle East tried to resist these changes. By trying to deny identity differences, they sought to make ideological justifications as their most important source of legitimacy. The political systems of Iraq, Syria, the Gulf Arab states, Turkey, Lebanon, Libya, Egypt, and Iran are prominent examples in this regard. The hallmark of all these communities can be taken as information censorship, a strong filtering system, and strict monitoring of non-governmental media, and on the other hand, in the relative distrust of citizens in the state media and their growing desire to obtain information from non-governmental organizations. While the process of globalization was challenging the ideological identity and authoritarian approaches in the Middle East (Robertson 1992: 8), the emergence of the Covid-19 crisis provided another opportunity for leaders to regain this totalitarian identity; an opportunity that has so far been well exploited politically by regional regimes.

The global Covid-19 pandemic not only strengthened the political approach and position of authoritarian states but also encouraged some quasi-democratic regimes to pursue authoritarian solutions. This happens at a time when there is no cohesive global leadership to fight against Covid-19 and the United States has left its leadership responsibilities (Bennhold 2020). As a result, countries have become more distant from each other, and by adopting independent approaches, they have unsecured the liberal international order. Thus, the Covid-19 pandemic can be viewed as a virus for democracy and an opportunity for ideological identities.

Even today, the prevailing but unequivocal view in public opinion is that the leaders of authoritarian regimes know better how to deal with Covid-19. A clear example of this claim can be found about China's ability to manage this crisis. Despite Beijing's insufficient measures to fight the Coronavirus, China has finally managed to control the spread of the disease, while many democracies in Europe and the United States have not yet shown the necessary efficiency. The death of Chinese ophthalmologist Li Wenliang,

who was arrested by the Chinese government after warning doctors when the virus out-break began, shows the malfunctioning of authoritarianism. The propaganda of state-run Chinese media that the country's success has been the product of Xi Jinping's lead-ership has not been ineffective in welcoming the authoritarian model. These claims can provide the best excuse for authoritarian countries in the Middle East to justify the ex-ercise of their authoritarian power in the days of the Covid-19 outbreak. The Middle East countries seem to have used six methods to strengthen their ideological identity and authoritarianism. These methods are: enacting new laws and increasing the authori-ty of governments, transforming the media from a supervisory institution to a policy tool, strengthening the position of the state media, declining citizens' analytical skills and decision-making power and authority, and returning to absolute sovereignty. In the following sections, all the factors will be discussed.

1. Enacting New Laws and Increasing the Authority of Governments

Politically, democratic governments seek to put the rule of law and the protection of citi-zens' rights at the top of their agenda. Therefore, paying attention to the law is one of the important characteristics of modern governments. All actions and programs are aimed at ensuring that citizens have the freedom and the right to choose and that leaders are ac-countable and have transparency in decision-making processes (Polanyi 1990: 87–95). However, during the coronavirus crisis, the Middle East leaders have used their execu-tive and legislative powers, passing and enforcing decrees and laws that they claim are necessary to prevent the spread of the coronavirus, but in fact, they give rulers freedom of action and authority that is beyond the scope of oversight and accountability. Mean-while, some citizens who were concerned about the outbreak of the Covid-19 virus have published their leaders' rhetoric – that an exceptional situation requires exceptional measures, – making them more arrogant in violating citizens' rights and moving towards authoritarianism. Evidence shows that these leaders are exploiting the crisis for political purposes and they are gaining new powers to expand their authoritarian rule and increase repressive policies, which are common in most of these countries. For example, it is enough to consider Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, and Bahrain, and the way the government has banned any political gatherings and protests due to the spread of the coronavirus.

Even in some Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, the government uses du-al-use advanced technologies to increase citizen oversight and control. The equipment can both track people infected with the virus to ensure that people comply with exit re-strictions, and can be used to control opponents of the regime. Bahrain and Kuwait, for example, use electronic bracelets to ensure that every citizen is well controlled by the government and to check compliance. Dubai Police in the UAE are using an artificial intelligence system to check car license plate numbers and compare them to databases to make sure that those who have left the house during quarantine time have a valid permit. The strong presence of the police in public places is another example of such efforts by the UAE government (Bulos 2020). These actions have developed govern-ment information in various fields and raised concerns among civil society activists about the abuse of this power to control the opposition.

At the same time, although similar actions took place in democratic countries, there are reasons for the civil society activists in the Middle East that make them concern including:

1. They ask themselves if the government's goal is to control the coronavirus, why does the government not vaccinate extensively and focus on dispersing communities? Many citizens in Iran, Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and Lebanon have not been vaccinated yet.

2. In democracies, especially in Europe, the government succeeded in vaccinating the majority of population. Although they continue to prevent gathering of people and formation of communities, they do not limit a free presence in cyberspace. Citizens can form virtual groups in WhatsApp, Telegram, *etc*., to discuss different issues and criticize the performance of their officials.

3. In addition, the citizens of many Middle Eastern countries are pessimistic about the consequences of laws enacted by their governments. They generally interpret these laws one-sidedly and in favor of the government.

In general, the European countries consider the Covid-19 as a threat to life, welfare, health, education, and economic growth. The health policy regarding vaccination of population is that maximum people should be vaccinated in the shortest time. They restricted the export of vaccines and equipment needed for patients outside Europe. The EU has reached a crucial milestone with 70 per cent of the adult population now fully vaccinated against COVID-19. According to the president of the European Commission, Ursula Von Der Leyen,

> the European Commission has been negotiating intensely to build a diversified portfolio of vaccines for the EU citizens at fair prices. Contracts have been concluded with 7 promising vaccine developers, securing a portfolio of up to 4.6 billion doses. The Commission is working closely with the industry to step up vaccine manufacturing capacity in the EU. At the same time, the Commission has started work to anticipate and tackle new variants of the virus and to rapidly develop and produce on a large-scale vaccine effective against those variants (The European Commission 2021).

In contrast, the Middle Eastern countries are not making serious efforts to get vaccines. Within these countries, various negative propaganda and religious misinformation about the consequences of vaccination by religious groups are promoting. The government does not impose any restrictions on these people and groups. As Mahsa Alimardani and Mona Elswah state, 'Aggressive censorship regimes and a deficit of public trust in governments and authorities make the pursuit of credible sources for news and information difficult' in the Middle East (Alimardani and Elswah 2020: 1). Therefore, people avoid getting vaccinated and more and more people are getting sick or die every day. Also, there is no coherent plan to vaccinate or restrict travel between cities by governments. The disease affects the citizens of new cities every day and the number of patients is increasing.

While the Qatari government claims to have reduced restrictions on permission to leave the country, Amnesty International reports indicate that migrant workers were deported after being rounded up under the pretext of testing for the coronavirus. Another similar case can be found in Kuwait, where the authorities have announced plans that will lead to unemployment and the dismissal of 250,000 foreign workers after the end of the pandemic. Kuwait is also considering a broader program that could reduce Kuwait's immigrant population from 3.3 million to 1.5 million. The plan comes as anti-immigrant sentiment in the country rises. According to the plan, the government, with the help of the aviation administration, does not allow non-Kuwaiti people to enter the

country directly or even through transit trips. In particular, the entry of citizens of 31 countries into the territory of Kuwait is prevented (Arab News 2020a).

The right to freedom of religion and expression is another right that has been violated since the outbreak of the Covid-19 in the Middle East. Bahrain's Shiites, for example, who have been protesting against the country's political system since 2011, claim restrictions on attending and gathering in mosques for worship violate their civil rights. They claim that the government has taken advantage of the situation and prevented any gatherings or speeches about the government's performance. The Al-Khalifa regime in Bahrain issued a statement in October 2020 under the pretext of the Coronavirus, warning that anyone who left their home on the 40th day of the martyrdom of Imam Hussein (AS), the third Shiite Imam and grandson of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) – must wait for punishment. For Shiites, this day is a symbol of the struggle against oppression and injustice, and Witnesses believe the restriction stems from the regime's fear of protests. Bahrain and Saudi Arabia have also banned travel to the two Shiite countries of Iran and Iraq, which they see as the origins of their Shiite opposition. This is despite the fact that there is no ban on traveling to other countries where there is a risk of Covid-19. In a bolder move, the Jaffaria Waqf, a government organization with members appointed by the Bahraini ruler to deal with Shiite affairs, issued a statement banning any ceremonies and gatherings, and even watching live broadcasts on television, with gatherings of more than ten people (Alwaght 2020). The Saudi Ministry of Health also called on the people to refrain from gatherings of more than 50 people (Aljazeera 2020).

Even in countries with a semi-democratic political structure, it has been observed that the government used the Coronavirus pandemic as a tool to maintain the traditional structure of government. In Israel, for example, Benjamin Netanyahu used emergencies to delay the trial of his corruption case, prevent a parliamentary session, and grant extraordinary oversight powers to the internal intelligence organization. In this country, the Prime Minister's special measures to control the Coronavirus and temporarily suspend the activities of the courts and parliament have provoked protests. The suspension of the court's activities led to the postponement of Netanyahu's trial in March 2020. Israel's parliamentary activities were also suspended by the speaker of parliament, following a further suspension of court hearings in Israel. The move was announced as part of emergency measures to fight the coronavirus. In response, members of the opposition party (Blue and White party) led by former Army Chief Benny Gantz accused Netanyahu of abusing the public health crisis to consolidate his power. Eido Bam, an analyst at Marker, warns that Israel is moving closer to an authoritarian state, calling the process a 'coup' in every way. Some believe that an unprecedented political crisis in Israel has been caused by the Coronavirus and that Netanyahu is taking advantage of it (Avishai 2020).

In Lebanon, political parties have used the Covid-19 crisis as leverage to govern areas outside of government control, especially in southern Lebanon (Kirstine Rønn 2020). In this regard, Jamil Mouawad writes 'Political actors not only encourage reliance on discrimination and communication but also cultivate a sense of insecurity and instability to make the control of the areas they govern more cohesive' (Mouawad 2020). Critics have accused the Lebanese government of human rights abuses in connection with quarantine rules; there are some rumors by the government opposition about the torture of those detained for protesting against the commute restrictions. The Lebanese govern-

ment's move to quell protests in several cities under the pretext of preventing the spread of the Coronavirus has intensified criticisms. Layla Saleh and Larbi Sadiki, Middle East analysts at the Open Democracy website, cited the real purpose behind the operation as removing all signs of protest and regaining control of the streets. They believe,

> As they struggle to preempt or treat the corona menace, Arab states seem to take back all the 'space' wrested from them by mobilized publics during the 'Arab Spring': beaches and parks, public squares, even mosques. As if the coronavirus is conspiring against the state, lurking around every street corner (Saleh and Sadiki 2020).

2. Transforming the Media from a Supervisory Institution to a Policy Tool

Before the Covid-19 crisis, the media in the Middle East had more leeway. This globalization, against the will of the political systems of these societies, had led to the growth of a quasi-liberal personal culture and the reduction of the influence of political authority on individual and collective identities. In Iran, for example, despite the government's insistence on maintaining symbols of forced cover and opposition to harsh political expressions, young people used the media to promote their cultural and political thinking. Because it is a fact that with the increase in the amount and variety of thinking due to the growth of public use of these facilities, people's worldviews become more divergent, and different groups and identities reach different perceptions of the world (Waltz 1999: 77–89).

With the Covid-19 crisis, this possibility was greatly challenged. Governments have increased the shadow of their authority over the media. Media information and government intervention have entered a new phase and the media has changed from a supervisory institution to a policy tool. Today, in all Middle East countries, especially Turkey and Iran, no information is published outside of official channels and government agencies, and press conferences are held with extreme restrictions. In these countries, the government publishes news exclusively daily, and journalists' attempts to cover non-governmental news, both online and in print, are subject to judicial and disciplinary action. In Iran, the cyberspace police have sent warning messages and filed cases against hundreds of citizen reporters and cyber activists. The government has also announced its intention to implement a national Internet plan in cooperation with the Chinese government and to take more control of cyberspace (Peters 2020). The filtering of the telegram, Twitter, Facebook, and other foreign messenger's apps whose servers are located outside Iran and over which the government cannot control is severely followed and government officials consider its continuation a necessity in the current situation. Many news sites have been blocked for allegedly spreading rumors about the Covid-19 crisis. Undoubtedly, as this trend continues, these measures will lead to the mediatization of politics and challenge personal culture.

This situation, which exists in almost the entire Middle East, causes politicians to use the media to measure the pulse of society and to manage and control public opinion. By consolidating their position, they are constantly expanding their sphere of power and using media resources for their unique interests. For example, the Saudi Attorney General has warned that those who send incorrect information could face criminal charges, including imprisonment or heavy fines (The National 2020). In Egypt, the government

has increased censorship through the Supreme Council for Media Regulatory (SCMR) and the State Intelligence Services (SIS), declaring that they close news websites, web pages, and social media accounts for 'spreading fake news' and 'raising public concern' about Coronavirus. Two foreign reporters, the Guardian correspondent Ruth Michaelson and Declan Walsh, head of the New York Times Cairo office, were summoned for being questioned by the SIS. The sentence for Michaelson revoked his journalistic license and he was forced to leave Egypt. His crime was that he questioned the official statistics of Egypt at that time – about 100 cases of Coronavirus – and according to the researchers' statistics and an epidemiological study, he claimed that by early March of 2020, there would be more than 19,000 cases of Coronavirus. Also, based on statistics and information from the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, several doctors have confirmed receiving instructions from state officials to remain silent about the Covid-19 statistics (Reporters Sans Frontières 2020).

Also, Middle East governments have restricted the media for unsubstantiated reasons, while access to epidemic information is essential. In Jordan, for example, printing has been suspended for some time because the publication of newspapers could contribute to the spread of the infection. It seems that this set of measures, while transforming the media from a supervisory body to a political tool, has significantly reduced the level of personal thinking power throughout the region and made them more and more uniform under the ideological thinking of the government.

3. Strengthening the Position of the State Media

Before the access of citizens to the non-governmental media and the spread of these media in the Middle East, the only reliable source of information for the people was the news provided by the state media. Such an attitude resulted in the action legitimization of these societies' political systems in the demarcation of identities and ideological hostilities. Thus, in the context of ideological identity, personal interests easily overlap with national interests; and the behavioral independence of citizens was linked to the unquestioning loyalty of the authorities. But the process of globalization has significantly reduced the government's ability to monitor, control, and censor. Reconstruction of time and place and the spatialization of social life have permeated any socio-cultural frontier and, in many cases, have made censorship, control, and monopoly very difficult and even impossible; in such a way that symbols, cultural signs, and other types of information crossed any boundaries easily and in the fastest possible time and did not tolerate any censorship and control (Bromley 1994: 44–45). But during the Covid-19 pandemic and the governments' confrontation with it, the position of the media, especially the non-governmental media, has been greatly weakened, and the government institutions have been able to powerfully turn the media into a tool under their control. In other words, the process of media empowering against politics is reversed. In the Middle East today, with the sharp decline in interpersonal communication during the Covid-19 outbreak, the only channel of communication between the political system and the people is the state media, and media tools, either written or virtual, have played a crucial role in managing the behavior of society. These conditions have led to the questioning of some basic rights of citizens, such as the 'free flow of information' under the pretext of 'realization of the right to public health.' In Iraq, for example, the Reuters license was temporarily revoked. The move came after the news agency reported on the number of

Coronavirus victims. Also in May 2020, at least four journalists were arrested in the Kurdish Autonomous Region of Iraq. The government has also suspended nine TV channels and restricted Internet access (Peters 2020). In Syria, the opposition has accused government officials of abusing the current crisis to suppress the opposition, including the arrest of an opposition politician and a journalist (Reporters Sans Frontières 2020). All these decisions have been made at a time when in the context of the Coronavirus pandemic, society is increasingly in need of free information.

Middle East leaders, by monopolizing the media, especially the visual media, have induced the society that it is the only reliable source of information for the government and its affiliated networks. Politics that has learned media logic well and has adapted to it over the years, now turn the media into a tool for this opportunity, and in the meantime, the absolute need of the society for reliable information has weakened the non-governmental media leverage. In this new balance, the media no longer provides legitimacy for politics and has become a tool for establishing legitimacy and inducing ideological identity.

Thus, it can be argued that the Covid-19 crisis in most Middle East countries, either quasi-democratic or authoritarian, has led political power to increase its media monitoring, contrary to the previous routine. In these countries, leaders, based on old practices and following the media logic, have been able to turn the risk of an outbreak into a process of state media empowerment against the non-governmental media. In addition to enforcing new rules for the media to follow the government, statesmen have turned themselves into the only channel of access to information, and the media has relied on information that is solely available to the government, and people are provided with such information. This situation has deprived the media of its regulatory position and has strengthened the position of politics vis-a-vis the media.

4. Reducing of Citizens' Analytical Skill

Among the components of the modern world that have brought about a change in authoritarian patterns in the Middle East and, consequently, challenged the approach of these societies, within the framework of ideological identity is a change in the analytical power of citizens. On this basis, we can consider moving away from blind obedience to the ruling political system and moving towards questionable obedience, and moving away from the traditional criteria of legitimacy and acceptance of the efficiency criterion are the most important components of change in the political structure of these societies, which brings great results. For example, before entering such a process, apart from the traditional and divine criteria of legitimacy in the Middle East such as Saudi Arabia, Iran, Iraq, Turkey, and Lebanon, security was the only concept by which the rulers of these countries sought to maintain their dominance and legitimacy. However, as the process of globalization accelerated, the leaders of these countries, considering such a policy ineffective, moved towards accountability as a legitimizing factor in this new world and provided the grounds for political reform. Another consequence of such a transformation was a change in the concepts of citizenship and civil society. Until now, the prevailing policy in the Middle East countries has been based on disregard for the legitimate demands of citizens, political repression, and the marginalization of any different identity. But as we enter into the twenty-first century, it has become increas-

ingly difficult to adopt such a policy. Such a dramatic change before the Covid-19 crisis can be seen as a transition from security to accountability in the Middle East; but with the outbreak of the Covid-19 crisis, the situation changed dramatically. Not only has the past gradual reform process stalled, but the political situation is reversing. Governments are moving towards authoritarianism at a time when there are serious concerns about the spread of the Coronavirus and the main important need of the people is transparency, proper information, accountability, and protection of public health. They have made themselves the sole source for announcing the statistics of Covid-19 victims and prevent any kind of information from other authorities. For example, after Reuters report that Iraq was hiding the outbreak of the Coronavirus in Iraq, Iraqi officials suspended the agency's license and imposed a fine of 25 million Iraqi dinars ($ 21,000). The Iraqi government called the report 'deliberate misinformation.' In Saudi Arabia, anyone who publishes what the government calls 'fake news or rumors' about Covid-19 will face a fine or imprisonment (The National 2020). Iran, Yemen, Oman, and Jordan have stopped printing and distributing newspapers, citing the need to prevent the spread of the Coronavirus.

Also, for the political reason governments in the Middle East, sometimes force people to stay at home by exaggerating the death toll, and sometimes to increase political participation during elections, they reduce the number of Covid-19 cases. For example, a study of the global impact of Covid-19 on elections on the International idea website and its subsequent analysis shows that from February 21, 2020, to October 18, 2020, at least 73 countries around the world decided to postpone national elections due to Covid-19. In practice, however, at least 58 national elections or referendums have been held, despite concerns about the spread of the Coronavirus in many of these countries (International idea 2020).

The Iranian parliamentary election on February 21, 2020, is a good example of this claim. In the weeks leading up to the election, there were reports of cases of Coronavirus disease being identified in the country, and two days before the election, the Ministry of Health announced the death of two people due to the disease, but the government nevertheless refused to stop the election and tried to make it a minor issue. Following the outbreak of the disease, a letter attributed to Iran's minister of interior, Abdolreza Rahmani Fazli, addressed to the health minister, Saeed Namaki, was published, in which he was asked to refrain from publishing any news about the number of the patients and news related to this issue until the end of elections (Iranintl 2020).

In addition, measures such as closing all state offices and public organizations for at least one month and encouraging teleworking to stay away from social information, urban quarantine and banning people from leaving the house except for urgent work, shutting down public transportation, banning gatherings of more than two people out of residence, imposing fines on violators, and severe censorship of information, while reducing citizens' analytical skills, have shifted Middle East governments from an accountable approach to authoritarianism. This is while all citizens should have an equal right to comment and protest against decisions and actions.

5. Decreased Decision-Making Power and Authority of Citizens

Other consequences of globalization include changes in the decision-making power and citizens' authority in the Middle East. In the past, leaders had the right to expect automatic obedience from their followers; but when globalization reached its peak in the

Middle East, the region's political and religious leaders feared that the cultural and social currents that flowed into the country through the information revolution would have a negative impact on the thoughts and decisions of the people of these societies and question their sense of legitimacy and authority. Gradually, in countries such as Syria and Iraq, the belief spread among the people that they could free themselves from identity crises by joining the protesters against the political system, instead of joining the ruling political systems. But with the coronavirus outbreak, the situation changed. Identity subgroups were weakened, and as a result, citizens' rights were challenged. This is due to the fact that during the Coronavirus crisis, the limited number of democratic institutions has been significantly weakened and governments have manipulated democratic and electoral institutions justifying that they are struggling with them.

The significant point here is that countries involved in domestic political crises, such as Syria and Iraq, are using the Covid-19 state of emergency to justify their opposition and militias to cooperate on the country's borders. Cooperation between them reduces the decision-making power and authority of people's forces for their civil liberties. In Iraq, for example, President Barham Ahmed Salih first launched an anti-epidemic plan called 'for the defense of Homeland'; the army then took to the streets to control the people, while some social strata were allowed to take long leave to control the society (Akour and Karimi 2020). In the next step, Ayatollah Ali Sistani, the spiritual leader of the Iraqi Shiites, issued a fatwa declaring the fight against Covid-19 with self-quarantine as a collective commitment. This practically made the absence of his followers in the communities a must. Following Barham Salih's plan, the Kurds, who always criticize the central government themselves, and the Iraqi Hashad al-Shaabi, which is itself a sub-discourse, took on the responsibility of assisting the medical staff and providing field hospitals. The military also enforced a curfew across the country (Badawi 2020).

In Syria, Kurds in the northeast of the country, known as opponents of the central government, have closed schools, public events, and border crossings. This caused social forces to be practically restrained by the opposition and the fighters against the central government. Therefore, they were deprived of decision-making power. In Lebanon, the central government has set up emergency programs implemented by the Internal Security Forces, the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF), and Hezbollah, respectively. They systematically thwart any movement or society that violates Covid-19 National Pandemic Confrontation Plan (Marks 2020: 76–80).

Modern authoritarian regimes, relying on rules and emergencies situations, suppressed critical political forces and opposition groups that we are increasing the level of access to information and the citizen's rights for the people. They gave special powers to intelligence and military organizations. Governments, using their control and disciplinary policies, suppressed the demand for transparency and accountability and launched a massive campaign against the free flow of news and information. Therefore, the decision-making power of citizens should be added to the list of victims of the Coronavirus. Because the Coronavirus pandemic has masked the repressive policies of governments, it can be predicted that, as in previous years, 2020 will be in favor of authoritarianism and to the detriment of rival sub-discourses. Meanwhile, the people of the Middle East experienced worse consequences of the Coronavirus in the socio-political dimension than in other parts of the world, given the strong contexts of authoritarianism

and tyranny. According to the police chief of Iran, Hossein Ashtari, during the peak of Coronavirus in Iran, the police warned the managers of 1300 sites and groups on social networks about the consequences of their actions, and 320 people were arrested on charges of spreading lies and spreading rumors (Arab News 2020b). In Oman, the Sultan's Armed Forces (SAF), along with the police, are stationed at checkpoints across the country, manipulating citizens' authority to introduce themselves as public health guards. One of the primary consequences of the above conditions and the imposition of curfews and quarantine has been the severe militarization of public space, as the state of emergency greatly blurs the line between the internal security forces and the military (Hoffman 2020).

In addition, protest movements in countries such as Bahrain, Lebanon, and Iraq, under the name of 'security and health,' faced a severely repressive and undemocratic response from their governments. Thus, the Coronavirus made the nightmare a reality that quasi-democratic systems could very easily and overnight return to the era of tyranny since the constraints that are justified in an emergency can become commonplace and continue after the crisis. Thus, the Coronavirus has shaken the foundations of the political dimensions of globalization, such as political freedoms, elections, pluralism in power, and parliamentarism, and pave the way for authoritarian governments to inject ideological identities.
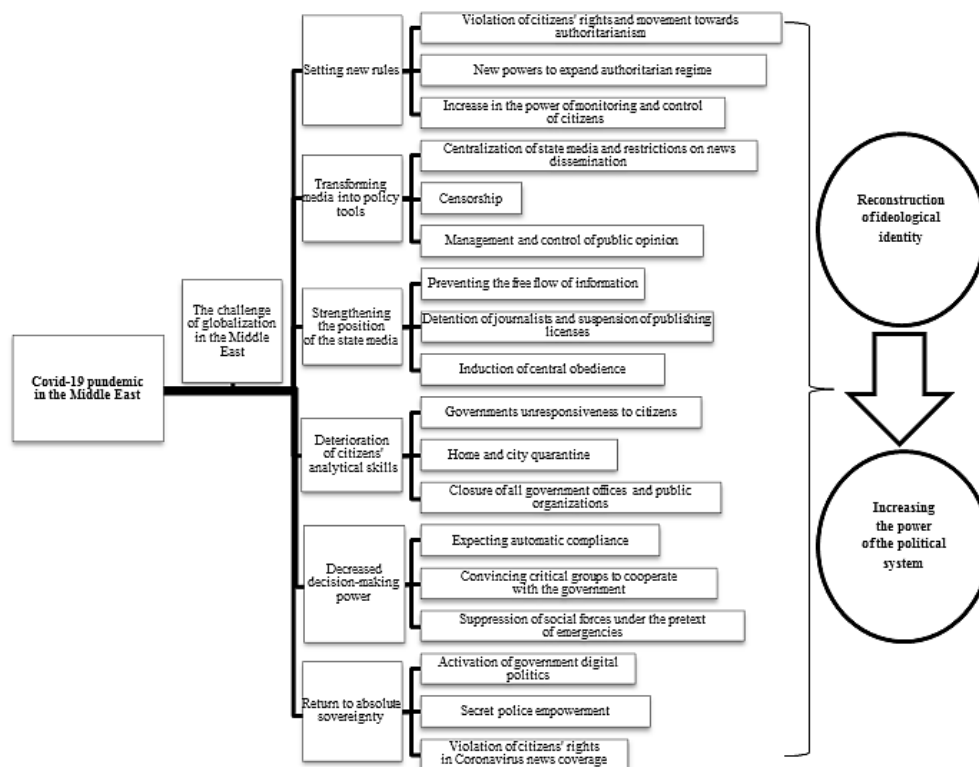
6. Return to the Era of Absolute Sovereignty

As the process of globalization intensified in the Middle East, the sovereignty of governments and their domination over their citizens became more and more challenged. So the concept of sovereignty turned into new components by moving away from its Westphalian concept. Accordingly, as a result of the globalization processes, the national sovereignty of the states was practically eroded, so that the governments could no longer have the necessary authority and power as in the past (Robertson 1992: 8). This process limited the ability of governments to take independent action and reduced their control over new information and communication technologies.

Before such a trend emerged in the Middle East, protest against leaders was somewhat suppressed, and critics and opponents could not seriously damage the credibility and authority of ideological identity. Governments used various tools and tactics to break the protesters' resistance. Whenever nation-states faced resistance by opposition to their policy of unification, they did not hesitate to resort to stubbornly violent measures, from forced unification to repression, discrimination, or even forced displacement and genocide. As globalization accelerated, government actions to suppress and curb identity challenges became visible to the world and reduced their authority. Any eyewitness can easily use his smartphone and internet access to inform the world about any repressive action of the government, even in the most remote parts of the country. Thus, globalization, by making political secrecy more difficult, has increased the cost of suppressing the opposition and the government's political critics in rebuilding a unified identity; but the outbreak of the coronavirus upset all these equations. The experience of the Arab revolutions in 2011 and thereafter has shown what role social media play in crises and the collapse of autonomous governments (Coretti 2013). But this experience was reversed during the Coronavirus outbreak, and the government regained its lost sovereignty by taking over social media and controlling the media. Under such circumstanc-

es, social networks became the infantry of authoritarian governments and a tool to prevent the formation of political protests. Thus, it can be argued that transformation in the Middle East provoked by the Coronavirus could lead to a more active digital politics and a redoubled attempt by the ideological regime in its internal relations to exert political and ideological influence on people. While the international community and even regional public opinion are caught up in the news of the deaths and economic consequences of the Coronavirus crisis, the likelihood of repressive and inhumane policies of some authoritarian Middle East governments has greatly increased. Media coverage and exaggeration of Coronavirus news can also allow them to justify their actions and gradually turn violations of the law into practice. The news about the arrest of prominent and powerful people in the Al-Saud dynasty by Muhammad bin Salman under the pretext of financial corruption – at a time when all eyes are on Coronavirus – is an example of these events that could pave the way for the young crown prince to reach the kingdom (Grossman 2020).

Thus, the rise of the secret police and the tight control of the public sphere, leading to a profound lack of civil and political freedoms, have scattered the foundations of authoritarianism and overt repressive mechanisms throughout the Middle East. The use of new information and communication technologies has also increased the range of repressive tools available in the Middle East, especially in the GCC countries. The United Arab Emirates, for example, by using apps such as WhatsApp, Skype, and Google Hangouts has provided itself with the ability to continuously locate the citizens. Citizens' passage permits also require personally identifiable information (PII) that is 'linked through centralized biometric identification, and to the individual's phone and car number plate' (Government of Dubai 2020). Today, across Dubai, surveillance networks are being set up by cameras that identify owners based on license plates and fine and stop their vehicles. Compared to Dubai, Bahrain, whose government is particularly threatened by Shiites, has chosen a more precise type of control. In this country, everyone in quarantine is 'forced to wear an electronic tag linked to its user's phone' (The National 2020). The Lebanese government also declared a general state of emergency on March 15, 2020. The order closed universities, sports clubs, cafes, and other public places. About eleven days later, Lebanon enacted a curfew, requiring citizens to stay home between 7:00 and 5:00 (Middle East Monitor 2020). The Lebanese government also increased street checkpoints and army patrols on the streets and imposed fines on violators. The political action of the Lebanese government, which is in the worst economic conditions, has reduced the level of their demands in addition to controlling the popular movements and has reduced the presence of independent and supranational leaders in the cabinet. This indicates the return of Middle East governments to the stage of absolute sovereignty.

In general, how Coronavirus influences the process of globalization and the emergence of ideological identity and finally the gradual movement of Middle East governments to absolute sovereignty can be seen in the form of a diagram as follows

Fig. 2. COVID-19, globalization and the emergence of ideological identity
Covid-19 and Democracy in Europe and the Middle East

In Europe, some states abused the situation and took inappropriate measures under the pretext of emergencies, which is an indication of authoritarianism in some Asian and African countries. In Hungary, for example, a new law was passed that allowed Prime Minister Viktor Orbán to rule indefinitely by issuing decrees that are not under the supervision of parliament (Dunai and Than 2020). In the United States and Greece, officials used the Coronavirus to bolster long-held border controls (Dennison and Geddes 2020). Some other countries also tried to gain more control over the media. The Turkish government was one of those countries that issued harsh warnings, threatening that anyone who questioned official statistics on patients with Covid-19 would be punished for spreading false information. Ankara also banned families from visiting journalists imprisoned on political or security charges, limiting their telephone calls to ten minutes a week (San, Fatih Bastug, and Basli 2021). There are also concerns that many European countries, including the United Kingdom, Germany, and France, are using surveillance systems to enforce quarantine laws that violate individuals' privacy. In addition, there are many concerns about the fate of democracy in some countries, including Poland. Poland's ruling party has been accused of insisting on holding presidential elections in May 2020 despite the outbreak of the coronavirus. 1 – It has carelessly endangered human lives (right to life), 2 – It has been satisfied with low participation in elections.

The next example is Portugal, which held the presidential election on Sunday, January 24, 2021, despite the poor health of the country and the high number of patients with Covid-19 (BBC News Agency 2020). However, compared to the Middle East, European states have been somewhat more serious about protecting their civil rights in the coronavirus crisis, as shown in the table below.

Table 1

Democracy trends in Europe and the Middle East during the Corona

Democratic rights	Middle East	Example	Europe	Example
Social justice	Declining trend, lack of adequate financial assistance to citizens, lack of accountability of officials	Afghanistan, Syria, Iraq	Proper distribution of financial and support grants, relative responsibility of governments	Most European countries
Media	Restrictions, lack of free flow of information, punishment of violators	Iran, Syria, Iraq, Saudi Arabia	Cross-sectional control, relative information flow	Germany, Austria, England
Freedom of expression	Restrictions, repression of journalists and reporters	Syria, Iraq, Kuwait, Jordan, Afghanistan	Cross-sectional restriction of liberty	Hungary, Poland, England
right to life	Holding elections in the context of the Covid-19 outbreak	Iran, Israel, Syria	Holding elections in the context of the Covid-19 outbreak	Poland, Portugal
Political participation	Declining political participation in elections	Iran, Israel	Changes in the conduct of elections, in some cases holding elections with less risky methods such as sending votes by mail	Serbia, Netherlands, Bulgaria, Russia, Germany
Right to assembly and to hold meetings freely	Prevent people from attending meetings	all countries	Prevent people from attending meetings	all countries
Minority and immigrant rights	Relative weakening of rights	Bahrain, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, UAE, Qatar	Protection of minority rights, strict control of immigrants	The majority of European countries

Table 1 (continued)

Democratic rights	Middle East	Example	Europe	Example
Security of citizens	Maintaining security with strict supervision and control over social and personal affairs	Qatar, Bahrain, UAE, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Oman	Maintaining security by cross-monitoring and controlling social affairs and emphasizing the participation and cooperation of the people	Germany, England, France, Switzerland, Sweden, Belgium, Denmark

Therefore, the approach of European countries towards Middle Eastern countries regarding citizenship and democracy during the Coronavirus crisis seems to be more acceptable for the following reasons:

1. Due to the deep historical and political roots of democracy in most European countries, although this type of political system had problems and shortcomings, it suffered less damage than the Middle East.

2. Compared to Middle Eastern states, more states in Europe seem to believe that transparency, freedom of expression, accountability, free access to information, and the preservation of human life and dignity are among the principles that will facilitate the overcoming of the current crisis.

3. From the point of view of many European people, officials and elites, however, the nature of the Coronavirus crisis is such that it requires achieving the most effective solutions in the shortest possible time, but sacrificing democratic processes is by no means necessary. Therefore, they acted more cautiously towards the governments of the Middle East region.

4. Governments in the Middle East, because of the crisis of legitimacy, made the Covid-19 crisis a tool for internal cohesion and consolidation of their power, while in European countries, due to the existence of civil society, political participation, and political awareness, states appeared less capable to use this tool.

5. Coronavirus crisis management has severely restricted the freedoms of people of the world, but public confidence in government in Europe has prevented them from raising serious concerns. Middle Eastern citizens, meanwhile, have serious concerns about the continuation of restrictions and the closure of society's political space, even in the post-Corona period.

Conclusion

Based on the evidence presented above, we can conclude that the countries of the Middle East, under their ideological identity, seek to transmit the idea to their citizens that the fight against the Covid-19 requires extraordinary measures and regulations which are only possible with the use of an internal superior power. Many leaders in the Middle East feel they should show the dangers of this epidemic less than it is, to both prevent harm to the economy and protect their interests. This action has led to the security of the socio-political space. In a way, these governments have gradually turned into authoritarian regimes. Therefore, even with the end of the Covid-19 pandemic, one cannot expect the Middle East countries to be willing to relinquish their intended powers during that period. The persistence of the current situation raises uncertainties about the future of

globalization and its relationship with the Middle East. It is not clear exactly when and how would be realized what Francis Fukuyama and David Held stated about the pervasiveness of democracy in the world, or what Alain Thorne calls a reduction in government interference in affairs. Will our dreams of the establishment of rationality over history, as Giddens pointed out, come true? It seems that the future of the Middle East in this regard is dark and its path is uneven and long.

NOTES

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[1] These organizations are banned in the Russian Federation.

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