

GLOBAL PERSPECTIVES SERIES

THE DECADE OF DEFIANCE & RESISTANCE

*Reflections on Arab Revolutionary Uprisings and Responses
from 2010 - 2020*

RAMI G. KHOURI
THE SOUFAN CENTER
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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ESCWA	United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
IMF	International Monetary Fund
LGBTQ	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer or Questioning
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
OPT	Occupied Palestinian Territories
UAE	United Arab Emirates

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INTRODUCTION

The dynamics fostered by the wars and revolutions plaguing many Arab states today represent the most consequential national transformations since World War I, culminating in a period of civilian defiance and resistance that was especially distinct between 2010 - 2020.¹ Despite being pauperized by predatory governments, citizens have challenged their heavily militarized states, emerging to fight battles that have been brewing for decades. Both the protesting citizens in the streets and the hardline governments that try to blunt their momentum are highly motivated. The outcome of these historic confrontations remains unclear. Yet, it is already possible to identify the causes, actors, motivations, and tactics on both sides that have fueled the waves of rebellion and repression over the past decade. Since the start of the 2010 - 2011 uprisings across the Arab world – the so-called “Arab Spring” – long-term transformations in the mindsets and actions of citizens have emerged that have the potential to catalyze political change across the region for decades to come, shaping political relationships between the governed and governors. In short, states and societies are battling to define themselves for the first time in a century on the basis of the consent of the governed.

This decade of Arab revolutionary uprisings is historic, because it condensed previously segmented critical protest dynamics from the past half century into a single sociopolitical force. Such amalgamated components include long-running street protests; cross-communal solidarities; defiance of political elites; and coordinated advocacy or even protest campaigns by single-issue groups. However, never before has this occurred in such a compressed timespan. These parallel movements aim to re-conceptualize governance, policies, and citizen rights across multiple countries simultaneously.

Today’s movements are noteworthy for being spontaneous, long-running, multi-confessional, and overwhelmingly nonviolent; they are also consistent in their objectives to replace entire existing military- and sectarian-based governments with more participatory, equitable, and accountable systems anchored in the rule of law. Never before had a majority of the 436 million Arab

¹ This paper draws extensively on Rami G. Khouri's experience over fifty years as a journalist and researcher in the Middle East and North Africa, and reflects his research, travels, and interviews with journalists, academics, and activists in the region. The TSC team is pleased to have been able to collaborate with him on this first publication in the Global Perspectives Series.

nationals simultaneously suffered the combination of economic, political, environmental, and security degradations that humiliate them today, in almost every dimension of their lives, motivating this revolutionary decade. Since early 2020 in particular, the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated and accelerated the underlying problems that drove millions of citizens into the street, crippled national economies, and sharply curtailed intra-regional trade and funds transfers. Moreover, the pandemic has bolstered the grip of autocratic ruling powers, and as such, its impacts will likely hasten the ultimate outcome of the standoff between citizens and ruling authorities.

Throughout the uprisings of the last decade, protesters throughout the Middle East have taken to the streets to redefine the popular ownership of urban space and the equitable use of political-economic power, mobilizing a more comprehensive set of demands and group of supporters to do so. In Jordan, Egypt, Morocco, Lebanon, and a dozen other Arab countries, citizen protests, strikes, sit-ins, boycotts, and demonstrations have taken place consistently since the late 1970s. They have always failed to compel change by or among the ruling elite because they focused on narrow single issues and never generated the nation-wide, trans-sectarian protests the region has experienced since December 2010. Today's protests have comprised many different participants, to include labor unions, tribal and sectarian leaders, leftist, nationalist and Islamist parties, professional associations, teachers, women's and retired officers' unions, student groups, artists, unemployed youth, and others. The new protests encompassed a wide range of issues from local to global, such as tribal rights, food prices, high taxes, corruption, unemployment and low wages, relations with Israel, and more. The 2010 - 2020 decade of protests should be seen not as a one-off "Arab Spring" by citizens who feel degraded, but rather as a new iteration in a century-long quest for dignity and political representation across the entire region.

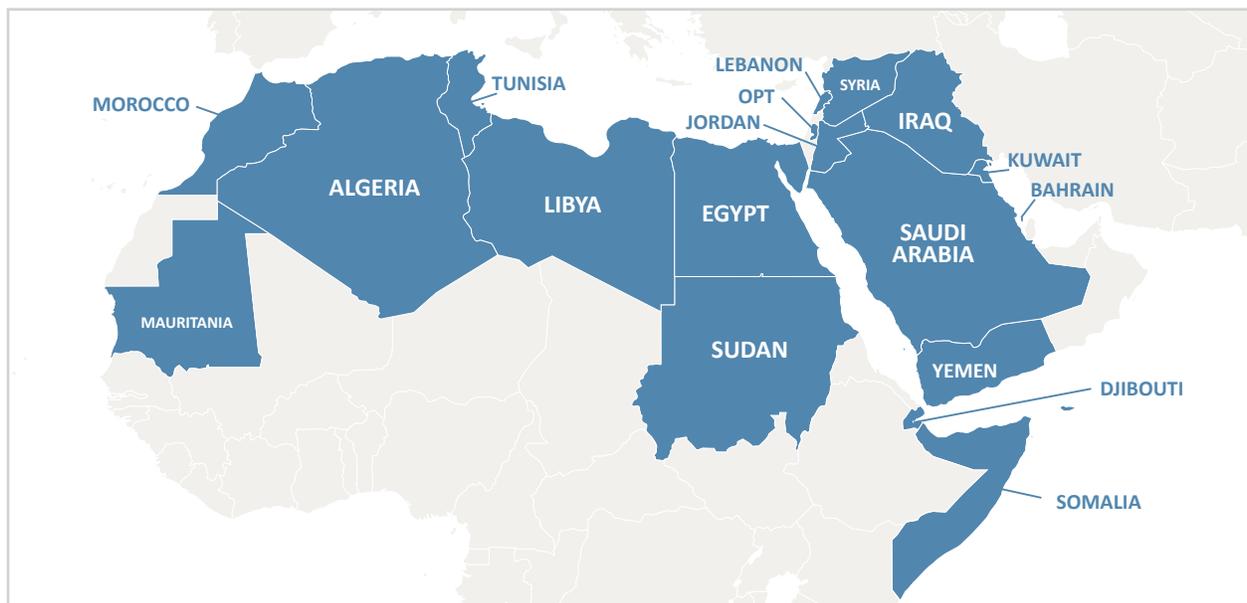
The protests have now entered their second decade, and nothing could be more illustrative of their potency than the countrywide demonstrations that erupted in Tunisia in mid-January 2021 – ten years after the nationwide movement that began in December 2010 and eventually helped depose the longtime dictator Zein el-Abideen Bin Ali. The current protests are similarly led by unemployed youth fed up with poverty, corruption, declining public services, and an uncaring wealthy elite in the capital, encapsulating grievances that have fueled many of the uprisings throughout this past decade.²

Since 2010, at least 16 of the 22 Arab states have experienced national protests or upheavals, signaling common citizen discontent across many countries. While revolutionary uprisings persist in several of these states, this essay will highlight four cases – Algeria, Sudan, Lebanon, and Iraq

² Yee, Vivian. "In Tunisia, Some Wonder if the Revolution was Worth It." *New York Times*, January 19, 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/19/world/middleeast/tunisia-protests-arab-spring-anniversary.html>.

– that offer snapshots of different dimensions of grievances and protests throughout the region. Other protests to reconfigure state power and strengthen citizen rights also continue intermittently in Jordan, Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT), Syria, Morocco, Yemen, Egypt, Bahrain, Mauritania, Tunisia, Somalia, Kuwait, Djibouti, Libya, and Saudi Arabia. These contexts offer profound insights into why and how citizens rebel and face resistance from existing power structures.

Figure 1: Map of Protest Movements Across Arab States



The fact that citizen rebellions and chronic protests have defined the entire Arab region for the last revolutionary decade, and many others before it, sets the region apart from most other parts of the Global South. Only the Arab region has witnessed such consistent and chronic citizen protests against almost all state authorities. This is in large part because only the Arab region has been ruled since the birth of its present-day nation-states by a combination of local elites, colonial powers, tyrants, or omnipotent monarchs; such elites and power brokers have given their citizens no viable path to participate in governance or policymaking. The modern Arab state system has been entirely and chronically non-democratic since its inception. It now suffers the strains of popular rebellions that reflect mass citizen indignation, pauperization, and humiliation.

The dynamics in the four selected contexts also highlight contested issues that define the entire region, evident in the citizen discontent and agitation in several Arab countries. Some nonviolent protest movements in these contexts, particularly in Syria, Libya, and Yemen, were corrupted or transformed into violent conflict, precluding the viability of sustainable protests. Syria and Egypt are not covered in this essay because they have transcended in different ways the ongoing mass

popular protest demonstrations in the four states that are discussed below. Syria's national uprising, which initially only called for reforms rather than total regime change, quickly plunged into a civil war when the state used lethal force against the nonviolent civilian protests. This was followed by two developments that have been replicated in other fractured lands, like Libya, Iraq, and Yemen: foreign and regional powers joined the battle. The consequent chaos allowed local, regional, and transnational Islamist militants, or violent jihadis as they are often called, to gather in Syria. In Egypt, the full force of the authoritarian military government hammered and killed protesters in the street, while simultaneously jailing anywhere from 20,000 to 60,000 civilians,³ including both Muslim Brothers as well as liberal secular democrats accused of being dangerous terrorists or security threats. Brutal warfare and mass incarceration thus joined the ugly legacy of modern Arab states' responses to their citizens' reasonable demands for more participatory and accountable governance under the rule of law.

On terminology, the 2010 - 2020 pan-Arab protests have been called uprisings, revolutions, citizen rebellions, demonstrations, or, among Western observers mostly, the "Arab Spring" and "Arab Spring 2.0". After much discussion with protesters themselves and scholars on the ground who analyze these movements, this essay refers to the protests as "revolutionary uprisings." This captures their two core dynamics: citizens seeking to replace their ruling system with an entirely new form of governance, and rising up to do so through protest.

Additionally, this report speaks of Arabs, Arab states, the Arab region, and Arab citizens. This refers to the nationals and the 22 countries of the League of Arab States, though not all their citizens are Arabs by ethnicity, primary language, or identity. Kurds, Amazigh (Berbers), Armenians, Circassians, Assyrians, Druze, and other minorities who are citizens of Arab League states do not always refer to themselves as Arabs. However, for the sake of discussing all communities within this analysis, the terminology used in this paper refers to all nationals and states in the Arab region. While this essay acknowledges the importance of state governments and their responses, it views the issues mainly through the lens of the protesters and focuses on the novel elements of a spontaneous and disjointed, yet intense and continuing, movement that has been half a century in the making.

Four Major Themes of the Uprisings

Four critical themes define these revolutionary uprisings and protesters – fearlessness; novel protest methods alongside renewed state repression; non-sectarianism/ecumenicalism; and continuity.

³ "2020 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Egypt." U.S. Department of State, 2020. <https://eg.usembassy.gov/2020-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices-egypt/>.

Fearlessness: The most prominent theme of the uprisings is how a steadily pauperized Arab citizenry has demonstrated deep and persistent fearlessness in challenging increasingly militarized states, with a view to replacing entrenched political leaders with a more participatory, accountable, and equitable system of governance. As courageous citizens from all walks of life gather in public spheres over months or years of protest to share their grievances and map out their desired future, they signal new forms of national identity and the citizen-state relations they wish to bring to life. The most significant of these is the growing trend of citizens expressing their identity in national terms, as Lebanese, Iraqis, Algerians, or Sudanese, rather than as members of specific tribes, ideological movements, or religions.

Novel Protest Methods Alongside Renewed State Repression: Another theme of the recent protests is the many novel methods deployed across the region, met with states' harsh, often deadly, counter-revolutionary measures. The protests reflect a common experience among participating citizens of intense humiliation and despair, often reaching existential levels; they also feature a common disdain and repression by which ruling elites have treated their citizens for over half a century. An important dimension of the continuing protests has been the use of communication technologies to coordinate among activists, inform and mobilize expatriate and diaspora communities, document the abusive responses of governments, and share the realities on the ground with the entire world – often in real time on live web-based streaming services.

Non-sectarianism/Ecumenicalism: Less visible but important among the long-term dimensions of the uprisings are the many transformations in the areas of gender, youth, the private sector, sectarianism, and inter-class dynamics, among others. Citizens from all walks of life, identities, ages, and regions, who spent months protesting and strategizing for their envisioned new world, discovered that they could only change the system if they changed their own mindsets and removed many of the ideas that had fragmented the movements in earlier decades. The calls for accountability and progress in governance furthered solidarity; this reinforced a unified national identity over the religious, ethnic, regional, or political identities that had earlier defined, and largely separated, them from one another.

Continuity: The uprisings also are striking for their longevity despite the repression they triggered. The 2010 - 2020 decade of revolutionary uprisings also maintained momentum while covering a wide range of grievances. With limited, if any, opportunities or optimism regarding living conditions, political rights, or future prospects, many citizens in the four countries discussed deemed they had little left to lose.

THE EVOLUTION OF ARAB UPRISINGS AND PERSISTENT DEMANDS

The genesis of the current revolutionary uprisings dates back to the pivotal decade of 1975 - 1985, when ambitious and brutal young military officers seized control of many Arab countries, with destructive repercussions. Examples include Saddam Hussein in Iraq; Hafez Assad in Syria; Moammar Gaddafi in Libya; Zein el-Abideen Ben Ali in Tunisia; Hosni Mubarak in Egypt; Ali Abdulla Saleh in Yemen; Omar Hassan al-Bashir in Sudan, and others. By the late 1980s, most governments could not meet the basic needs of their citizens, in terms of security, services, identity, and opportunity. As governments withdrew services and support from many areas and the elite turned inward, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) – civilian, religious, or secular – emerged to serve citizens where the state had left a vacuum. This ultimately opened the door for non-state armed groups and foreign and regional powers to more easily penetrate and manipulate governments in many Arab states, whose effective sovereignty consequently suffered. The revolutionary uprisings are as much about dysfunctional autocratic governments and fragmenting states as they are about demeaned and frightened citizens.

Prior to this decade of uprisings, most earlier protests failed to secure their objectives due to their focus on a single issue, their shorter duration, piecemeal demands for change of officials, and fragmented public support. Governments easily neutralized, ignored, or suppressed most protests, and often bought citizen allegiance or at least acquiescence with symbolic salary increases or temporary price freezes. Ruling elites also reinforced their own power through patronage networks and enriched themselves, often through corrupt practices. This legacy compounded preexisting deterioration in essential public services provided by governments and contributed to the reality of underemployment and joblessness for tens of millions of youth since the 1990s.

This trajectory finally reached a tipping point in the 2010 - 2020 decade, which galvanized a more comprehensive, collaborative approach. These revolutionary uprisings persisted for months or years, tackled the environment which gave rise to many grievances, and aimed to achieve equal rights for citizens from all political and ethnic identities, regions, and income groups. The parallel civil wars, intra-regional conflicts, invading armies, and fragmenting states revealed the bigger picture of Arab regional experiences. These include a historical dynamic in which indigenous citizens, oligarchic and military elites, aggressive regional states, and interventionist

global powers have spent the past century battling for the right to define the borders, identities, and policies of ostensibly independent states. In 2010 - 2020, Arab nationals themselves collectively stepped forward to demand the power to define their own states, identities, values, and policies – working toward national self-determination based on the consent of the governed, denied to them since the advent of modern Arab statehood a century ago.

The various Arab uprisings have not followed a single trajectory. Moreover, they have resulted in a wide range of outcomes, despite common grievances and protest methods underlying them. Only Tunisia transitioned into a constitutional democracy, and Sudan is in the midst of a novel three-year transition to pluralistic democracy by 2022, co-managed by civilians appointed by the protesters and elements of the old military regime. Egypt returned to harsh military rule, as Field Marshall-turned-President Abdel-Fattah Sisi harnessed local and regional Arab support to overthrow the democratically elected Islamist government of President Mohammad Morsi. Bahrain essentially accepted Saudi Arabian tutelage and protection. In destructive turns, Yemen, Syria, and Libya suffered civil wars that quickly attracted many regional and foreign interventions. Some country protests were more localized and intermittent over many years, and triggered replacements of presidents and prime ministers without altering the basic power structure or socio-economic policies in any tangible manner (i.e., Jordan, Morocco, Algeria, Mauritania). A few governments fought back fiercely to suppress the uprisings, usually with Arab or foreign military support (i.e., Syria, Bahrain). The four case studies elaborated upon in this report have reached stalemates between demonstrators and a defiant power structure that offers to bend but not yet submit to protesters' demands.

Grievances

Across the region, despite countries' different histories and governance systems, protesters' common demands reflect degradations and unmet needs that have ravaged their lives for decades. These demands, as expressed by protesters since early 2019, cover the whole range of issues that define citizens' lives, their ineffective governance systems, and the ties that bind the two. The general demand for a state that guarantees its people equality, dignity, peace, and security includes a series of specific demands that start with removing the entire ruling power elite and ending oligarchic-sectarian-military rule. This contrasts with previous protests in the 1960 - 2010 period that typically sought a single change, such as the resignation of a president or prime minister, increasing salaries, or lowering commodity prices.

As daily life conditions deteriorated, civilians felt demeaned by the uncaring attitude of their government, and yet they had zero capacity to pursue accountability and change through existing channels such as elections, the courts, or parliament. Taking to the streets was the only option for

most citizens, though some emigrated and others, in a quid pro quo, joined the corrupt state system to provide for their basic needs. The protests of the past decade demand a new governmental system anchored in the rule of law, democratic pluralism, public accountability, and constitutional guarantees of equal rights for citizens. Common goals today across the entire region include electing new parliaments through a more nationally equitable electoral law, installing civilians at the head of the government (instead of military leaders), and appointing qualified technocrats to run ministries and public agencies so that all citizens are equitably treated.

The protests of the past decade demand a new governmental system anchored in the rule of law, democratic pluralism, public accountability, and constitutional guarantees of equal rights for citizens.

Citizens throughout the Arab states consistently identify the most common problems they face as low income, poor job prospects, government corruption, declining state services, inequitable sharing of national income, and elite abuse of power.⁴ Over the past three decades, regular polling has confirmed these common sentiments. Among citizen complaints is the poor governance since the 1970s that has generated corruption-riddled rentier political economies with limited productive growth that has not kept pace with population growth. In turn, poverty steadily increased, the middle class shrank, and inequalities widened. These trends have continued to accelerate ever since, due to relentless damage from local and regional wars, including the Arab-Israeli conflict that has now entered its eighth decade.

That old and young alike protest together is significant. Older Arabs remember past decades of state-building when their governments provided them with basic services relatively equitably and efficiently, like collecting garbage, operating decent schools, and delivering jobs, clean water, and

⁴ Author's analysis based on reviewing five waves of regional surveys by the Arab Barometer and the Arab Values Survey (see the two most recent below) and also analyzing the demands of the protesters in the four countries highlighted in this essay:

"What Arab Publics Think: Findings from the Fifth Wave of Arab Barometer." *Arab Barometer*, January 28, 2020. <https://www.arabbarometer.org/publication/what-arab-publics-think-findings-from-the-fifth-wave-of-arab-barometer/>;

"About Arab Opinion Index (AOI) 2019-2020." *Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies*. <https://arabindex.dohainstitute.org/EN/pages/arab-opinion-index-2019-2020.aspx>;

Cammett, Melani and Nisreen Salti. "Popular grievances in the Arab region: evaluating explanations for discontent in the lead-up to the uprisings." *Middle East Development Journal*, Vol. 10, Issue 1 (March 2018): 64-96. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/17938120.2018.1443606?journalCode=rmdj20>.

electricity. Younger Arabs under the age of forty have only experienced deteriorating social services, draconian security controls, widespread political exclusion, and violent oppression. Additionally, the vast polling evidence since 1990 reveals that political discontent among youth and adults is virtually identical.⁵ The only major difference is that young men and women say they are more likely to emigrate to seek a better life, while adults with families and obligations tend to be less likely to do so. Common differences in citizen attitudes throughout the region tend to reflect income and class differentiations (wealth, poverty, and opportunity), rather than age, ethnicity, or gender.⁶

In Lebanon, for example, research on the October 2019 protests by Dr. Rima Majed and Dr. Lea Bou Khater showed that economic impoverishment was the main driver of the protests.⁷ The largest share of people in the streets comprised students, wage earners, and informal workers; most of them had low incomes, could not meet their monthly basic expenses, and did not have social security or insurance protection.⁸ Beyond these, other studies confirm perhaps the single most important underlying driver of the protests: a growing majority of Arabs are poor, vulnerable, and politically and economically marginalized.⁹ The cumulative social fragmentation has led to civil, class, and sectarian wars, and even state collapse – as happened since the 1980s in Somalia, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Occupied Palestinian Territories, Sudan, and pockets in Morocco and Egypt, most notably.

Studies by the United Nations and others indicate that at least two-thirds of the 436 million Arabs are poor or vulnerable, and the extent of poverty is as much as four times higher than previously assumed.¹⁰ The United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ “The 2019-2020 Arab Opinion Index: Main Results in Brief.” Arab Center Washington DC, November 16, 2020. <http://arabcenterdc.org/survey/the-2019-2020-arab-opinion-index-main-results-in-brief/>.

⁷ Khater, Lea Bou and Rima Majed. “Lebanon’s 2019 October Revolution: Who Mobilized and Why?” *The Asfari Institute for Civil Society and Citizenship at the American University of Beirut*, May 19, 2020. http://www.activearabvoices.org/uploads/8/0/8/4/80849840/leb-oct-rev_-_v.1.3-digital.pdf.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Abu-Ismaïl, Khalid and Sherine Farouk Ghoneim. “Rethinking inequality in Arab countries: the latest research evidence.” *Economic Research Forum: The Forum*, December 24, 2019. <https://theforum.erf.org/2019/12/24/rethinking-inequality-arab-countries-latest-research-evidence/>
Khouri, Rami. “How Poverty and Inequality Are Devastating the Middle East.” Carnegie Corporation of New York, September 12, 2019. <https://www.carnegie.org/topics/topic-articles/arab-region-transitions/why-mass-poverty-so-dangerous-middle-east/>.

¹⁰ “Rethinking Inequality in Arab Countries.” *United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia*, 2019. <https://www.unescwa.org/publications/rethinking-inequality-arab-countries>;
“The 2019 Global Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI).” United Nations Development Programme. <http://hdr.undp.org/en/2018-MPI>.

(ESCWA) economist Khalid Abu-Ismaïl – who heads a Beirut-based team of researchers that has been exploring every dimension of this issue for several years now – pointed out in a recent interview that, according to UN data, 116 million people across 10 Arab countries were classified as poor; this constituted 41 percent of the total population, while another 25 percent were vulnerable to poverty.¹¹ Many vulnerable, low-income families officially dropped into poverty in 2020 - 2021, due to COVID-19 economic slowdowns.

The middle class that defined Arab societies for half a century declined from 44 to around 33 percent of the population by 2017, and has become even smaller now due to the economic recessions from ongoing wars, COVID-19, and lower worker remittances, tourism, trade, and oil revenues.¹² This was the only region in the world where extreme poverty increased in the 2010 - 2020 decade.¹³ Moreover, the Middle East has become the most unequal region in the world,¹⁴ and this trend has been repeatedly confirmed by global studies.¹⁵ The growing gap in wealth, as well as the related suffering and helplessness of the majority of ordinary citizens, are key reasons

¹¹ Khouri, Rami G. “How Poverty and Inequality Are Devastating the Middle East.” *Carnegie Corporation of New York*, September 12, 2019. <https://www.carnegie.org/topics/topic-articles/arab-region-transitions/why-mass-poverty-so-dangerous-middle-east/>.

¹² Based on findings from author’s September 2020 interviews with ESCWA economists, as well as: Abu-Ismaïl, Khalid and Sherine Farouk Ghoneim. “Rethinking inequality in Arab countries: the latest research evidence.” *Economic Research Forum: The Forum*; Alvaredo, Facundo, Lydia Assouad, and Thomas Piketty. “Measuring Inequality in the Middle East 1990-2016: The World’s Most Unequal Region?” *World Inequality Database*, April 2018. <https://wid.world/document/alvaredoassouadpiketty-middleeast-widworldwp201715/>; “Arab Middle Class: Measurement and role in driving change.” *United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia*, 2014. file:///Users/zachwhite/Downloads/arab-middle-class-measurement-role-change-english.pdf.

¹³ Abu-Ismaïl, Khalid and Sherine Farouk Ghoneim. “Rethinking inequality in Arab countries: the latest research evidence.” *Economic Research Forum: The Forum*; “Multidimensional poverty in the Arab region: regional and national reduction efforts.” United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia: Executive Committee Sixth Meeting (Marrakech, Morocco, 15-16 June 2019), April 24, 2019. https://www.unescwa.org/sites/www.unescwa.org/files/events/files/multidimensional_poverty_int_he_arab_region_-_regional_and_national_reduction_efforts.pdf; Heydemann, Steven. “In the Middle East, poverty is down but economic grievance is up. Why?” *Brookings Institution*, March 2, 2021. <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2021/03/02/in-the-middle-east-poverty-is-down-but-economic-grievance-is-up-why/>.

¹⁴ “Arab Multidimensional Poverty Report.” *United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia*, 2017. <https://www.unescwa.org/publications/multidimensional-arab-poverty-report>; “Poverty and food insecurity in the Arab region.” *United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia*, April 1, 2020. [https://www.unescwa.org/news/new-escwa-brief-83-million-people-will-fall-poverty-arab-region-due-covid-19#:~:text=%EF%BB%BF%EF%BB%BF%EF%BB%BFBeirut%2C%201,COVID%2D19%20\(attached\)](https://www.unescwa.org/news/new-escwa-brief-83-million-people-will-fall-poverty-arab-region-due-covid-19#:~:text=%EF%BB%BF%EF%BB%BF%EF%BB%BFBeirut%2C%201,COVID%2D19%20(attached);); Assouad, Lydia. “Inequality and Its Discontents in the Middle East.” *Carnegie Middle East Center*, March 12, 2020. <https://carnegie-mec.org/2020/03/12/inequality-and-its-discontents-in-middle-east-pub-81266>.

¹⁵ “Wealth Inequality and Closing the Poverty Gap in Arab Countries: The Case for a Solidarity Wealth Tax.” *United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia*, 2020. <https://www.unescwa.org/publications/wealth-inequality-closing-poverty-gap-arab-countries>.

why politically powerless citizens declared through their protests that they will not acquiesce to their permanent destitution, which they blame on the mismanagement of their inept leaders.

Football, wildly popular in the region, is a mirror that poignantly reflects popular identities, sentiments, and protest dynamics. The combination of citizen discontent and defiance – due to massive citizen poverty alongside the disdain of their rulers – has been captured in dramatic anti-regime chants by football (a.k.a. soccer) club fans in Algeria and Morocco. Tangiers' local Ittihad team fans chant an anti-corruption protest song entitled, "This is a Land of Humiliation."¹⁶ Such chants speak of their bitter life, where corrupt and uncaring officials make empty promises and build expensive houses, and citizens ask to be rescued from this fate on an emigrant's boat to a new life abroad. Football fans in Morocco chant, *Fbladi Dalmouni*, or "In my country, I suffered from injustice." These sentiments express the humiliation of most citizens across the region who demand the eviction of entire regimes and seek solidarity with their fellow citizens.¹⁷ They echo the responses of young men and women aged sixteen to eighteen in Lebanon and Iraq who regularly say to journalists or researchers who ask why they risk death by protesting against strong regimes in the pandemic age: "We are dead, we have nothing to live for." Further pushing such communications of discontent to irregular channels, governments have clamped down on traditional and social media, criminalizing expressions of citizen discontent or criticisms of the state. The football chants in Morocco that capture this feeling also mirror anger among journalists and artists who fear the state's intimidation, arrest, torture, or worse.¹⁸

It is therefore unsurprising that at least one in every four citizens across the region, and nearly half of young Arabs, are considering leaving to live abroad.¹⁹ This is a dramatic increase since 2016 and reveals how the emigration option continues to be perceived as attractive among citizens. The percentage of Jordanians who wish to emigrate was 23 points higher in 2019 than it

¹⁶ Middle East Eye. Twitter Post. October 1, 2019. <https://twitter.com/MiddleEastEye/status/1179072320817844224>.

¹⁷ Balla, Nassim. "Shouting for a New Algeria: Slogans as Foundations of a Political Project?" *Arab Reform Initiative*, December 11, 2019. <https://www.arab-reform.net/publication/shouting-for-a-new-algeria-slogans-as-foundations-of-a-political-project/>.

¹⁸ Benasria, Youssef. "Moroccan Activists: Despite Expecting the Worst in 2021, Hope is Eternal." *Raseef22*, January 9, 2021. <https://raseef22.net/article/1081089-moroccan-activists-despite-expecting-the-worst-in-2021-hope-is-eternal>.

¹⁹ "Who Desires to Migrate from MENA?" *Arab Barometer*, December 17, 2019. <https://www.arabbarometer.org/2019/12/who-desires-to-migrate-from-mena/>;
"Top 10 Findings: What Do 200 Million Arab Youth Have to Say About Their Future?" Arab Youth Survey. <https://www.arabyouthsurvey.com/findings.html>.

was just two years earlier, and in Morocco it was 17 points higher.²⁰ In five of eleven countries surveyed by the respected nonpartisan research network Arab Barometer, more than half of 18-to-29-year-olds think about migrating.²¹ The Arab Barometer identified economic conditions and corruption, which citizens tend to see as a conjoined issue, as ranked highest among the main problems in society. In Algeria, Sudan, and Lebanon, 54%, 73%, and 75% of respondents respectively listed them as the main factors pushing them toward migration.²²

Most citizens identify official corruption as a key problem, because it demeans them and their families' future in so many ways. Corruption and kleptocracy siphon off billions of dollars of public money into the private bank accounts of officials and their crony associates, instead of funding public services that have deteriorated steadily throughout the region.²³ This practice also deprives the economy of new investments and jobs for the hundreds of thousands of young graduates who end up emigrating or remain behind, impoverished and vulnerable in the informal economy. About 60% of labor in Arab economies is in the informal sector, which reportedly rises to over 85% among youth.²⁴ The establishment of anti-corruption mechanisms and restoration of stolen public funds also are high on the list of protester demands; this is because corruption reminds citizens of their inability to hold the state accountable, and of their own marginal place in society.

²⁰ "Arab Barometer V: Jordan Country Report." *Arab Barometer*, 2019. https://www.arabbarometer.org/wp-content/uploads/ABV_Jordan_Report_Public-Opinion_2019.pdf?ct=t%28What+Jordanians+Think_COPY_08%29&mc_cid=b997daec47&mc_eid=%5BUNIQID%5D;
"Arab Barometer V: Morocco Country Report." *Arab Barometer*, 2019. https://www.arabbarometer.org/wp-content/uploads/ABV_Morocco_Report_Public-Opinion_Arab-Barometer_2019.pdf.

²¹ "Arab Barometer V: Migration Report." *Arab Barometer*, 2019. https://www.arabbarometer.org/wp-content/uploads/ArabBarometer_Migration_Report.pdf.

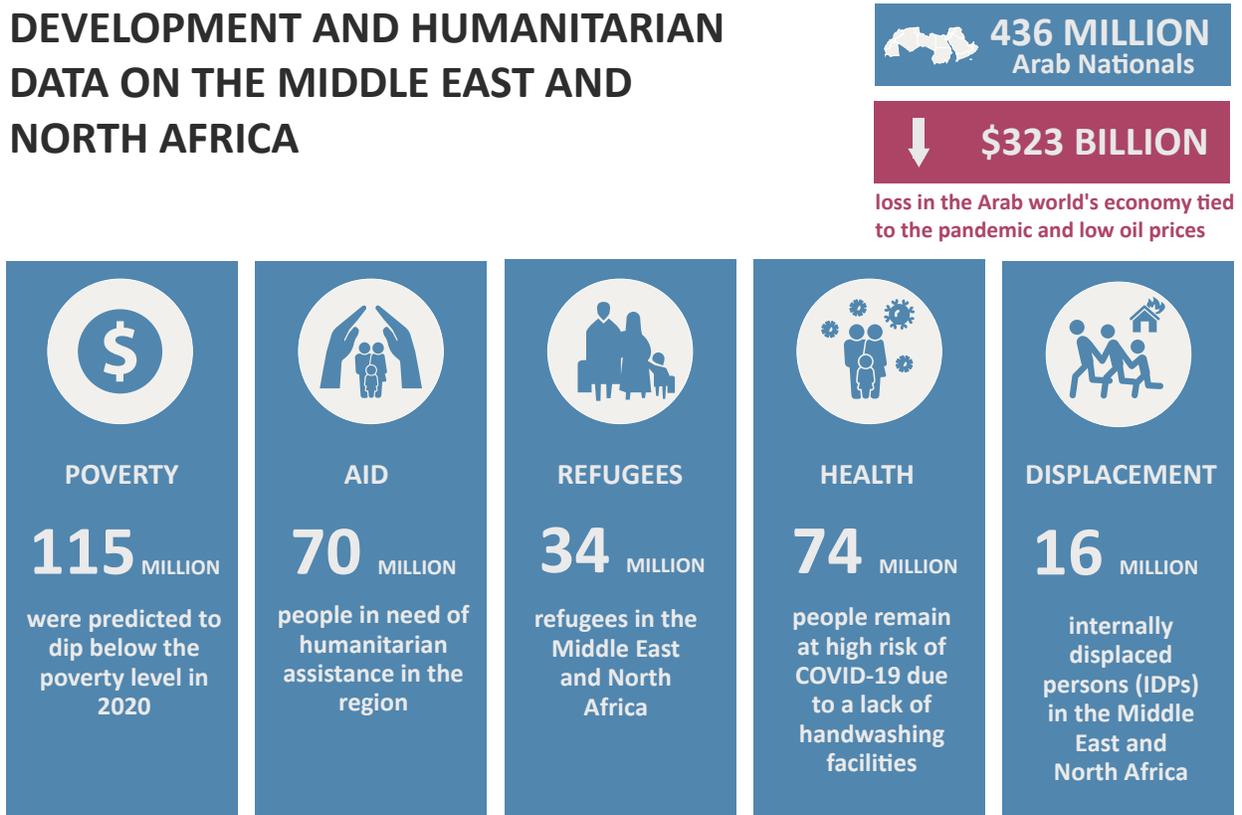
²² Ibid.

²³ Aboulenein, Ahmed and Reade Levinson. "The medical crisis that's aggravating Iraq's unrest." *Reuters*, March 2, 2020. <https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/iraq-health/>.

²⁴ *Women and Men in the Informal Economy: A Statistical Picture (Third Edition)*. International Labour Office – Geneva: ILO, 2018. https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/documents/publication/wcms_626831.pdf.

Figure 2: Development and Humanitarian Data

DEVELOPMENT AND HUMANITARIAN DATA ON THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA



SOURCES: IMF, UNDP, UNESCWA, UNICEF

One crucial concern voiced frequently in public protests is a lack of confidence in the independence of the judiciary and the rule of law in order to protect all citizen freedoms and rights, especially freedom of expression. An independent judiciary is vital for the demand to apply stringent anti-corruption laws and mechanisms and retrieve the billions of dollars of public money stolen by corrupt politicians. Protests also demand new public policies that put the dignity and wellbeing of citizens at the center of public life, rather than the enrichment of the elite. Demands include pursuing social and economic policies that equitably address the needs of all citizens, especially the poor and vulnerable, including delivering basic services, fair taxation policies, and creating job opportunities for the youth.

The COVID-19 pandemic has heightened grievances and risks. The combined impact of ongoing wars, lagging energy prices, and COVID-19's economic slowdown regionally and globally devastated Arab economies, causing the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in 2020 to issue its lowest forecast of regional economic trends in half a century, with a loss of some \$323

billion.²⁵ Of the 436 million Arab nationals, 115 million were predicted to dip below the poverty level in 2020, with women, refugees, the elderly, and the unemployed particularly at risk.²⁶ A frightening 74 million people remain at high risk of virus infection because they lack handwashing facilities.²⁷ Some 70 million people in the region already need humanitarian aid, and many others will suffer from the inadequacies in public health, food, water, and education systems.²⁸ The rising number of poor and vulnerable citizens, and the 34 million refugees and 16 million internally displaced people,²⁹ will suffer their fate for years to come. Two main issues propel this: most governments do not have the resources or political will to assist them through social safety nets or insurance, and the economic slowdown has reduced all key sources of revenue for most Arab economies (e.g. taxes, tariffs, exports, foreign direct investment, tourism, worker remittances, and bilateral aid, to mention only the most important ones). This kind of massive new stress on Arab economies translates immediately to life-or-death situations for tens of millions of individual families – many of whom had already reached desperation levels that drove them to protest in the streets to overthrow their derelict governments.

²⁵ “Coronavirus: IMF says Middle East economy to see biggest shock in 40 years.” *Middle East Eye*, April 15, 2020. <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/coronavirus-middle-east-economy-imf-arab-world>.

²⁶ “Compounding Crises: Will COVID-19 and Lower Oil Prices Lead to a New Development Paradigm in the Arab Region?” United Nations Development Programme, 2020. https://www.arabdevelopmentportal.com/sites/default/files/publication/compounding_crisis_undp_feb07-2021_combined_v3_2.pdf;
“Policy Brief: The Impact of COVID-19 on the Arab Region. An Opportunity to Build Back Better.” *United Nations Sustainable Development Group*, July 2019. https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/sg_policy_brief_covid-19_and_arab_states_english_version_july_2020.pdf;
²⁷ “Coronavirus: IMF says Middle East economy to see biggest shock in 40 years.” *Middle East Eye*, April 15, 2020. <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/coronavirus-middle-east-economy-imf-arab-world>.

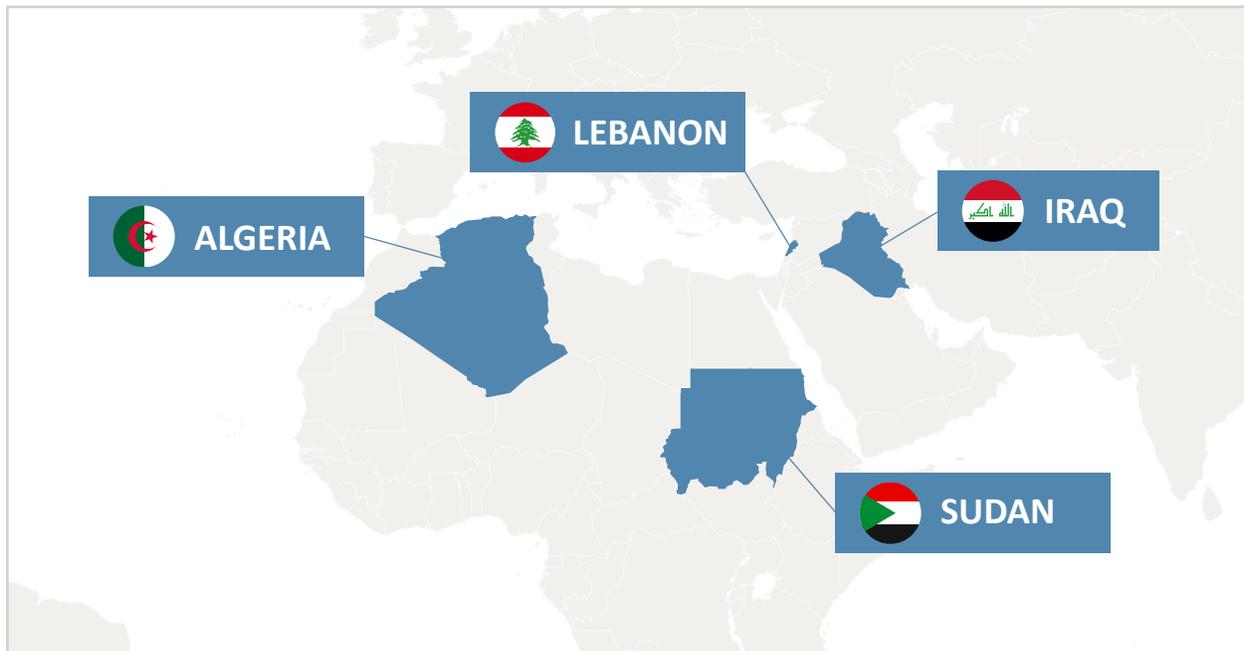
²⁷ “ESCWA: 74 million in the Arab region at risk of COVID-19 due to lack of access to a handwashing facility.” United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia, April 15, 2020. <https://www.unescwa.org/news/escwa-74-million-arab-region-risk-covid-19-due-lack-access-handwashing-facility>.

²⁸ “Middle East and North Africa: Humanitarian Response.” UNICEF. <https://www.unicef.org/mena/humanitarian-response>.

²⁹ “Migration to, from and in the Middle East and North Africa: Data snapshot.” IOM Regional Office for the Middle East and North Africa, August 2016. https://www.iom.int/sites/default/files/country/mena/Migration-in-the-Middle-East-and-North-Africa_Data%20Sheet_August2016.pdf.

SNAPSHOTS FROM SUDAN, LEBANON, IRAQ, AND ALGERIA

Figure 3: Map of Snapshot Countries



As the uprisings enter their second year in Sudan, Lebanon, Algeria, and Iraq, they have forced some limited concessions from their governments and ruling militaries. Though Sudan has launched a three-year transition that remains fragile, none has yet generated a constitutional and democratic transition as Tunisia did in 2011. Indeed, reflecting on the 2010 - 2011 protests, a key lesson learned is the importance of an extended transition period between the fall of the old political order and the creation of a new one, so that citizens have time to create a system that is fair to all and realistic in its implementation. This aims to avoid the mistake made in Egypt that allowed the armed forces to regain absolute power because the system transitioned too quickly from the overthrow of the old president to holding elections for parliament, without giving adequate time for citizens to form credible political parties.

Across the region, protesters persevere because of the impression of progressively conceding governments and mass support across the country and region. Yet, they also recognize that they

must develop more effective ways to engage with and compel their ruling elites to accept full transitions to new governance systems. The following sections offer insights into the dynamics in four different contexts, highlighting helpful comparisons and commonalities.

Sudan: Stalled Reform in the Transitional Authority



The revolutionary uprising in Sudan may be the most complex and fruitful of the four cases spotlighted in this essay. Sudan's persistent and peaceful protests led by a unified national opposition forced the country's military rulers to negotiate a military-civilian authority that would govern during a three-year transition to democracy. This movement is Sudan's third civilian uprising against military rule in its modern history, likely informing its gradual and negotiated path to democracy; the others, in 1964 and 1985, ended when the military seized power again.³⁰ Yet, Sudan mirrors many of the same dynamics in Algeria, Lebanon, and Iraq, echoing central themes of similar movements across the Arab world.

The current revolutionary uprising started in 2018, after two years of recurring but limited protests across the country against shortages in food, fuel, and foreign exchange, high inflation, unemployment, foreign sanctions, corruption, and poor access to health and education. This deteriorating social and economic situation resulted from four decades of autocracy, mismanagement, and civil war under inept and corrupt leaderships that were variously influenced by military, Islamist, tribal, and nationalist groups. After nine months of continuous protests and the deaths of well over 100 protesters, President Omar Hassan al-Bashir and his ministers resigned and were arrested in mid-2019. Bashir was sentenced to two years in jail for financial crimes, and in mid-2020, he was again indicted, with 15 former officers, all of whom will be tried for their role in the 1989 coup that brought him to power. In early 2020, the government announced that it had retrieved approximately \$4.6 billion of assets that Bashir and his family and colleagues had stolen.³¹

³⁰ Dwamena, Anakwa. "The Historical Precedents of the Current Uprising in Sudan." *New Yorker*, February 8, 2019. <https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/the-historical-precedents-of-the-current-uprising-in-sudan>.

³¹ Alamin, Mohammed. "Sudan Recovers \$4 Billion of Assets From Ex-President Bashir." *Bloomberg*, May 23, 2020. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-05-23/sudan-recovers-4-billion-of-assets-from-ex-president-bashir>.

The protesters chanted slogans like “silmiya, huriyya, thawra, dud el-haramiyyeh, madaniyyeh” (peaceful, freedom, revolution, against the thieves, [we seek a] civil [state]). The persistent, nonviolent activism of the protests in Sudan, managed by the coalition of opposition groups called the Forces for Freedom and Change, ultimately convinced the military rulers — who comprised several different factions — that they did not have the capacity to suppress a nationwide rebellion, as the Egyptian or Syrian militaries had done.

After continued protests upon the removal of Bashir, negotiations began between the protesters and the military council that had assumed power. They agreed to establish a transitional Sovereign Council comprising both military and civilian members, which would rule for three years and pave the way for a democratic system. The sovereign council’s eleven civilian and military members are headed by a mutually agreed upon civilian, offering a model of an autocratic-to-democratic negotiated transition that has heretofore never been attempted in the Arab world. It may be the most significant achievement of the current uprisings, if it succeeds and fully tempers the once absolute powers of the security agencies and their supporters.

Among the new government’s achievements was the appointment of an independent prime minister, who named a heavily technocratic cabinet. The new government also repealed many antiquated laws, including ones that allowed for detention of civilians by the security services; put Bashir and other former officials on trial; retrieved billions of dollars of stolen public funds; ended some long-running internal conflicts in the east, west, and south of the country; and disbanded the former ruling party.³²

After slow progress by the new government in its first year in office, tens of thousands returned to the streets in July 2020 demanding “freedom, peace, and justice” from the transitional authority. The renewed demonstrations called for the authorities to “correct the path of the revolution,” because they felt that the government was not progressing rapidly enough to assert civilian authority. In late July 2020, the protest movement also rejected the government’s proposed economic austerity measures, which would have added unbearable new pressures on low-income families. The protests paused upon the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Economic conditions deteriorated steadily in the past decade due to the state’s corruption and mismanagement. Nonetheless, several additional factors recently contributed to this trajectory, such as a cruel convergence of the pandemic, severe floods, tens of thousands of refugees from neighboring Ethiopia, millions of internally displaced from several ethnic civil wars, the loss of

³² Sheridan, Katy. “Sudan: One Year After Omar Al Bashir.” *International Republican Institute*, October 1, 2020. <https://www.iri.org/blog/sudan-one-year-after-omar-al-bashir>; “Sudan: Events of 2020.” *Human Rights Watch*. <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2021/country-chapters/sudan>.

oil income after the secession of South Sudan, reduced economic activity due to lower energy prices and the pandemic's lockdowns, and slow delivery of promised aid from the World Bank and other donors. These and other factors resulted in a steady collapse of the value of the national currency, 170 percent annual inflation, continued fuel and food shortages, and debt that reached 200 percent of GDP.³³



A woman leads the protesters in a chant in Khartoum [Twitter, Lana H. Haroun]

Progress towards a stable democracy and economy still proved elusive after the uprising toppled the Bashir regime and installed the transitional council, as the former political and ethnic tensions that had fueled civil strife for decades continued to haunt the delicate civilian-military partnership. During the pandemic lockdown, some former regime officers attempted to organize a march to bring down the transitional council, which the

government prevented. Some internal peace agreements with rebel groups reduced most but not all ethnic and ideological tensions in the country, many of which were widely seen to be linked with branches of the military. Prime Minister Abdulla Hamdor was the target of an assassination attempt in March 2020 that was mostly blamed on disgruntled military officers.

By December 2020, some demonstrators took to the street yet again to demand a faster pace of reform, fearing that the former military leaders in the political elite still held disproportionate power in appointing regional governments or securing control of state- and security-owned enterprises.³⁴ The prime minister reshuffled his cabinet and acknowledged that the transitional authority must “correct the path of the revolution.” Demonstrations continued sporadically in early 2021. Protester raised concerns, for example, about alleged illegal detention centers organized by former rebels close to military members of the government; this reflected the

³³ Ottaway, David. “A Bankrupt Sudan Faces More Trouble at Home over Peace with Israel.” *Wilson Center*, October 28, 2020. <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/bankrupt-sudan-faces-more-trouble-home-over-peace-israel>; *Reuters*. “Crises pile up in Sudan as aid slows and prices soar.” *Yahoo News*, September 15, 2020. <https://news.yahoo.com/crises-pile-sudan-aid-slows-112915051.html>.

³⁴ “Thousands protest in Sudan in call for faster reform.” *Reuters*, December 19, 2020. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-sudan-politics/thousands-protest-in-sudan-in-call-for-faster-reform-idUSKBN28T0RY>.

persistent tensions between civilian and military wings of the government, and between some Arab and non-Arab ethnic groups.³⁵

Internal tensions between the civilian and military wings of the transitional government also surfaced after pressures from the U.S., Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates in late 2020 triggered an announcement by Sudanese military leaders of a planned phased normalization in relations with Israel.³⁶ They argued that Sudan benefitted from this act by being taken off the U.S.'s list of states that promote terrorism, which would remove economic sanctions and bring in urgently needed aid funds.

The Sudanese experience highlights how difficult it is to remove deeply entrenched military and civilian officials who held power for decades during which they developed robust clientelist networks – a common legacy in most Arab states. The important compromise accepted by protesters, the installation of a transitional authority, affords the new authorities the space to implement reforms over time while civilian control is progressively institutionalized.

Lebanon: Crises Mobilize Masses Against Corrupt Governance



Lebanon's current protests kicked off in mid-October 2019, though the country had experienced several robust single-issue protests in 2005 and 2015 respectively. Lebanon's widely corrupt governance system, based on sectarian oligarchies since the end of the civil war in 1990, finally led to simultaneous crises in banking, foreign exchange reserves, state debt, and balance of payments. These converged and erupted in 2019 to cripple economic growth and increase poverty resulting from job losses, rising prices, currency devaluation, nonexistent social support programs, and inaccessible bank deposits. The state defaulted on its debt in March 2020, and Lebanon's

³⁵ Elhennaway, Noha. "Sudanese protesters rally, demand detention centers closed." *AP News*, January 14, 2021. <https://apnews.com/article/sudan-cairo-khartoum-crime-war-crimes-3281df341be5b79649fa653af1d3aa07>.

³⁶ Ottaway, David. "A Bankrupt Sudan Faces More Trouble at Home over Peace with Israel." *Wilson Center*, October 28, 2020. <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/bankrupt-sudan-faces-more-trouble-home-over-peace-israel>.

unemployment, poverty, and vulnerability rates have continued to rise sharply, according to official and World Bank statements, and independent economists' studies.³⁷

As unprecedented signs of hunger and malnourishment began to appear throughout the country, the Social Affairs Ministry estimated in June 2020 that 75 percent of the population was in need of assistance.³⁸ This was one consequence of the unemployment rate doubling from 25 to 50 percent, according to the most severe estimates; the poverty rate spiked by similar magnitudes.³⁹ Yet, it appeared that the state's ability and desire of its leadership to counter these trends remain mostly nonexistent, much to the dismay of ordinary Lebanese. Other aspects of national bankruptcy that contributed to the suffering of citizens and their communities included a dive in the value of the currency, a collapse in electricity generation that left many regions with just a few hours of power a day, shortages in hospital supplies, and prices of food and other essentials that doubled or tripled within six months.

The revolutionary protests in Lebanon have broadly included three phases. October 2019 through January 2020 was the most dynamic phase. The COVID-19 pandemic ushered in the February-April 2020 phase of fewer protests. However, since the end of April 2020, following the incident in which the army shot dead a protester in Tripoli, frequent but smaller public protests have taken place across the country. The protesters have used an array of methods, including road closures, mass demonstrations, mobile car parade protests, flash rallies that suspended business as usual for short periods of time, targeted attacks against banks, and dynamic social media actions. Protesters in Lebanon leveraged social media platforms and options like live YouTube broadcasts of protests in restaurants or public events where officials were sighted and shamed, or calls for protesters to gather outside the home of a minister.

³⁷ Diwan, Ishac. "Lebanon's dysfunctional political economy." *Economic Research Forum: The Forum*, August 17, 2020. <https://theforum.erf.org.eg/2020/08/08/lebanons-dysfunctional-political-economy/>;
"Lebanon / Crisis: GDP expected to decline by 9.5% in 2021 (World Bank)." *Libna News*, April 12, 2021. <https://libnanews.com/en/lebanon-crisis-gdp-expected-to-decline-by-9-5-in-2021-world-bank/>;
"Lebanon is in a Deliberate Depression with Unprecedented Consequences for its Human Capital, Stability, and Prosperity." *The World Bank*, December 1, 2020. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2020/11/30/lebanon-is-in-a-deliberate-depression-with-unprecedented-consequences-for-its-human-capital-stability-and-prosperity>.

³⁸ Qjblawi, Tamara. "75% of Lebanon needs aid after coronavirus, and hungry protesters are back on the streets." *CNN*, April 29, 2020. <https://www.cnn.com/2020/04/28/middleeast/lebanon-hunger-aid-coronavirus-intl/index.html>.

³⁹ "Lebanon / Crisis: GDP expected to decline by 9.5% in 2021 (World Bank)." *Libna News*;
"Lebanon prosecutor grills bankers over flight of billions of dollars." *The New Arab*, March 3, 2020. <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/news/2020/3/3/lebanon-prosecutor-grills-bankers-over-capital-flight>;
Alami, Mona. "Lebanon's Triple Crisis." *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, April 29, 2020. <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/81688>.

Protesters in Tripoli and the army troops trying to contain them captured one of the most poignant dynamics of the uprisings in the midst of a collapsing economy. One protester was caught on television shouting, “I’m hungry!” and the soldier confronting him shouted back, “I’m more hungry!”

This raises the question of what could happen as the pillars of the state – its security and sectarian-based bureaucrats – suffer the same persistent pauperization that has decimated the middle class. Police and army personnel whose monthly pay has dropped steadily in value routinely face off and clash with desperate protesters, making this question more relevant than ever. Protesters took to the streets in Tripoli because they could not afford to stop working despite the pandemic’s dangers; one protester captured the mood of his colleagues when he answered a television reporter why he risked going out into crowded protests, “Dying from coronavirus is better than starving to death.”

However, the protests resulted in a number of fragile gains. They elicited some tangible concessions in the initial months of the uprising: reform promises from Prime Minister Saad Hariri, followed by his resignation; promises from the president to draft new, non-sectarian electoral laws that meet protesters’ demands; and the appointment of a new government with mostly technocratic ministers (even though in the end most of those appointed were chosen or approved by the main sectarian parties). Two nominees for prime minister were dropped after protesters vociferously ridiculed them as members of the same corrupt elite that triggered the revolution in the first place. The new government of Prime Minister Hassan Diab that ultimately took office was widely ridiculed by protesters as merely a disguised version of the sectarian parties’ traditional political and economic pie-sharing methods.

Additionally, a draft law that would have protected corrupt officials was scrapped by parliament after protests twice blocked the roads to parliament and forced it to postpone its sessions. Some independent judges have initiated hearings and investigations into corruption allegations. One questioned some senior bankers about how several billion dollars were transferred abroad in early 2020 at a time when capital controls prevented ordinary citizens from withdrawing more than a few hundred dollars a month from their accounts.⁴⁰ In July 2020, a judge ordered the seizure of the personal assets of Central Bank Governor Riad Salameh, a major target of protesters for his “financial engineering” Ponzi scheme that contributed to the collapse of the lira, dragging the rest of the economy down with it.

⁴⁰ “Lebanon prosecutor grills bankers over flight of billions of dollars.” *The New Arab*, March 3, 2020. <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/news/2020/3/3/lebanon-prosecutor-grills-bankers-over-capital-flight>.

Yet, these steps reflect the fragility of progress after protests. None of these protests have achieved any serious accountability for government policies that have impoverished and devastated a majority of the population. Most notably, the Central Bank and finance ministry continue to pursue the same policies that have caused a collapse of the national currency's value, while political leaders refuse to implement the political and fiscal demands for which the IMF and others have called in return for billions of dollars of international support.

Even the devastating explosion at Beirut port in early August 2020 – which multiplied the country's challenges and pain, and drew the attention and visits by international actors such as French President Emmanuel Macron – did not result in any senior politicians or sectarian leaders being held accountable. Courts and investigators detained port staff and questioned others, and finally, in January 2021, they pressed charges of failing to take action against acting Prime Minister Hassan Diab and three former ministers close to the sectarian power-sharing system.⁴¹



An anti-government protester holds a national flag, as she passes in front of Lebanese army soldiers [AP]

President Macron's energetic intervention included a list of recommended reforms and a timetable for implementation; but just as they did with their own outraged citizens, the political elite engaged Macron in earnest-sounding discussions, then stalled and eventually ignored him. Macron's list of structural and policy reforms mirrored the protest demands, indicating the unity of views among the majority of Lebanese, key foreign actors,

and key donors like the World Bank and IMF. This episode, and the entire saga of Lebanon's imperturbable political rulers, reflects what Lebanese political scientist Bassel Salloukh calls the "systematic pathologies within Lebanese politics,"⁴² which results in autocratic rulers who refuse to leave or reform, even in the face of sustained domestic and international pressure and the intense and worsening suffering of their own citizens.

⁴¹ Chulov, Martin. "Lebanon's caretaker PM and ex-ministers charged over Beirut blast." *The Guardian*, December 10, 2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/dec/10/lebanons-caretaker-prime-minister-and-ex-ministers-charged-over-beirut-blast>.

⁴² Salloukh, Bassel. "What happens now to Lebanon's government? Here's why real reforms may be unlikely." *Washington Post*, August 18, 2020. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2020/08/18/what-happens-now-lebanons-government-heres-why-real-reforms-may-be-unlikely/>.

A significant achievement for the uprising was a reform-minded independent lawyer's victory in the bar association presidency election. This rare entry point into the oligarchic power structure triggered actions by lawyers to assist detained protesters and jailed persons. Other independent professional associations of journalists, professors, doctors, and engineers have been or are in the process of being established. They work together in the new Lebanese Association of Professionals to overcome the lethargy of the traditional unions and associations that are controlled by the sectarian forces that dominate the power structure. As in Sudan and Algeria, this could signal the emergence of professional unions as intermediate organizations between the citizen and the state as unique venues for political activism. A few civil society organizations continue to assess options for collaborating to form larger movements or parties for upcoming elections, with the aim of developing national platforms that can help them secure political power. The National Salvation Charter launched in July 2020 is one of several examples of secular efforts to define a new national system by creating working groups in political, economic, social, environmental, and other sectors to draw up their desired aims, values, and policies.⁴³

Activists have grown extremely concerned about the state's repeated attempts to clamp down on freedom of expression during the pandemic. In mid-July 2020, a fourteen-member coalition of civil society groups issued a strong statement defending free speech, accusing the government of arresting or summoning for investigation 75 people since October 2019. They decried security tactics that they claimed aimed to "humiliate, punish, and deter people from publishing content that the state deemed insulting."⁴⁴

Similarly, both community self-help responses and concern about state clampdowns on media and free expression also define the situations in Algeria, Iraq, and Sudan. This commonality demonstrates the regional nature of these revolutionary uprisings and the underlying problems that sparked them, rather than seeing them as replicated developments in isolated countries.

⁴³ "National Salvation Charter *الإنقاذ الوطني*." *Change.org*, July 2, 2020. <https://www.change.org/p/lebanon-%D8%B4%D8%B1%D8%B9%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A5%D9%86%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%B0-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%88%D8%B7%D9%86%D9%8A>.

⁴⁴ "Lebanon: New Coalition to Defend Free Speech." *Human Rights Watch*, July 13, 2020. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/07/13/lebanon-new-coalition-defend-free-speech#>.

Iraq: A Persistent Push for Accountability and Stability



Sustained public protests across Iraq since 2011 – including widespread demonstrations in the south in 2012 - 2013, and 2015 – again erupted in October 2018 and 2019 and spread to most of Iraq’s central and southern population centers. These protests slowed significantly after March 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, but also in response to assassinations, abductions, and threats by security services and major political parties against activists.⁴⁵ Many activists do not venture into the public eye for fear of getting killed – another method the established ruling elites employ to stay in power indefinitely, leaving Arab citizens no option other than nonviolent protests, despite the risk.⁴⁶

Street protests against corruption, unemployment, poor services, and an autocratic political system in need of urgent reforms resumed at the end of July 2020 in Baghdad and southern cities, during which a handful of protesters were killed by state security officers.⁴⁷ Nasiriyah, Basra, and other cities in the south have long been the main centers of citizen rebellion against the state,⁴⁸ largely due to central government disregard for the wellbeing of the citizens of the southern provinces since the days of the former Baathist regime. One study, for example, showed that some 118,000 citizens in the Basra area were treated in hospitals in 2018 due to severe water pollution, with salt levels in the municipal water six times the level considered safe.⁴⁹

⁴⁵ Robin-D’Cruz, Benedict. “Violence and Protest in South Iraq.” *London School of Economics Blog*, August 18, 2020. <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2020/08/18/violence-and-protest-in-south-iraq/>;

Fahmi, Georges. “Can Protest Movements in the MENA Region Turn COVID-19 Into an Opportunity for Change?” *Chatham House*, April 29, 2020. <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2020/04/can-protest-movements-mena-region-turn-covid-19-opportunity-change>.

⁴⁶ “Three killed in clashes in Iraq after cleric's followers storm protest camp.” *Reuters*;
Kasim, Raghad. “Renewed calls for demonstrations on October 25 in Iraq come with hurdles.” *Atlantic Council*, October 20, 2020. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/renewed-calls-for-demonstrations-on-october-25-in-iraq-come-with-hurdles/>;
Al-Rubaie, Azhar. “Despite Political Turmoil and Coronavirus, Iraq’s Protest Movement Continues.” *Washington Institute*, March 23, 2020. <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/despite-political-turmoil-and-coronavirus-iraqs-protest-movement-continues>.

⁴⁷ Kasim, Raghad. “Renewed calls for demonstrations on October 25 in Iraq come with hurdles.” *Atlantic Council*, October 20, 2020. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/renewed-calls-for-demonstrations-on-october-25-in-iraq-come-with-hurdles/>.

⁴⁸ Barbarani, Sofia. “Nasiriya: City at the heart of Iraq’s uprisings and rebellion.” *Al Jazeera*, December 1, 2020. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/12/1/nasiriyah-the-city-at-heart-of-iraqs-uprisings-and-rebellions>.

⁴⁹ “Basra is Thirsty: Iraq’s Failure to Manage the Water Crisis.” *Human Rights Watch*, July 22, 2019. <https://reliefweb.int/report/iraq/basra-thirsty-iraq-s-failure-manage-water-crisis>.

The continued street protests in late 2020 and early 2021 signaled new Prime Minister Mustafa Kadhimi's delicate and difficult position amidst strong political factions and protesters who did not agree on any major issues.⁵⁰ The fact that the new government's ministers were mostly appointed on the traditional power-sharing system, distributing representation across sectarian parties, disappointed many protesters and raised questions about how much reform the government could realistically undertake.

Continuing electricity and water shortages, pollution, a nearly bankrupt national treasury, and rampant sectarian corruption are core reasons why recurring protests have erupted against recent Iraqi governments that have failed to manage their people's welfare equitably. The roughly 60 percent of Iraqis under the age of 24 face a frightening future of poor state social services, few good job prospects, and persistent poverty, owing largely to the low price of oil that accounts for most state revenues, as well as corruption among sectarian elites that still shapes state policies.⁵¹ This is why Iraqis continue to protest, even after more than 600 protesters have been killed by state security and sectarian party forces, and an estimated 25,000 wounded.⁵²

The protests in Iraq generated some concessions, as also happened in Sudan, Algeria, and Lebanon. These included the resignation of former prime minister Adel Abdul Mehdi and the rejection of two candidates who were nominated to replace him before Mustafa Kadhimi was named prime minister in early 2020. A new electoral law passed in 2020 only partially met some

⁵⁰ Alshamary, Marsin. "Six months into his premiership, what has Mustafa al-Kadhimi done for Iraq?" *Brookings Institution*, November 13, 2020. <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2020/11/13/six-months-into-his-preiership-what-has-mustafa-al-kadhimi-done-for-iraq/>;

Alshamary, Marsin. "Six months into his premiership, what has Mustafa al-Kadhimi done for Iraq?" *Brookings Institution*, November 13, 2020. <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2020/11/13/six-months-into-his-preiership-what-has-mustafa-al-kadhimi-done-for-iraq/>.

⁵¹ O'Neill, Aaron. "Iraq: Age structure in 2020." *Statista*, Apr 15, 2021. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/327299/age-structure-in-iraq/>;

"In Iraq, UN Youth Envoy says young people are 'most valuable force we have to shape a better future.'" *United Nations*, August 12, 2017.

⁵² "Iraq: Protest death toll surges as security forces resume brutal repression." *Amnesty International*, January 23, 2020. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/01/iraq-protest-death-toll-surges-as-security-forces-resume-brutal-repression/>;

"War Crimes Documentation Center in Iraq: 669 dead in demonstrations." *Al Arabiya*, January 13, 2020. [https://www.alarabiya.net/arab-and-world/iraq/2020/01/13/%D9%85%D8%B1%D9%83%D8%B2-%D8%AA%D9%88%D8%AB%D9%8A%D9%82-%D8%AC%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%A6%D9%85-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AD%D8%B1%D8%A8-%D8%A8%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%82-669-%D9%82%D8%AA%D9%8A%D9%84%D8%A7-%D8%A8%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%B8%D8%A7%D9%87%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%AA](https://www.alarabiya.net/arab-and-world/iraq/2020/01/13/%D9%85%D8%B1%D9%83%D8%B2-%D8%AA%D9%88%D8%AB%D9%8A%D9%82-%D8%AC%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%A6%D9%85-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AD%D8%B1%D8%A8-%D8%A8%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%82-669-%D9%82%D8%AA%D9%8A%D9%84%D8%A7-%D8%A8%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%B8%D8%A7%D9%87%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%AA;);

Al-Rubaie, Azhar. "'Coronavirus won't stop us': Iraqis vow to continue protests despite spread of lethal virus." *Middle East Eye*, February 25, 2020. <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/coronavirus-wont-stop-us-iraqis-vow-continue-protests-despite-spread-lethal-virus>.

protester demands, including smaller electoral districts. However, it seems likely to favor the two biggest political groups, Moqtada Sadr's movement and the Fatah group of Iranian-backed Popular Mobilization Units. Both can exploit the new law's advantages to local religious and tribal leaders, whom the leading parties can easily bring into their electoral groups.⁵³

Key protester demands in Iraq of state control of weapons and lowering the age requirement for candidates were not passed, indicating the old guard's considerable hold on real decision-making power. A newly established Higher Electoral Council promised to increase the transparency and credibility of elections, which remains to be seen in the parliamentary elections in mid-2021. Some political parties and coalitions have campaigned for office on policy issues that respond to protesters' demands, rather than on traditional sectarian identities. Yet, protesters show little confidence in the political party system that has ruled the country since the American-led invasion in 2003.



A protester waves an Iraqi flag while security forces prepare to remove concrete blocks to open roads [AP]

The protests that have ebbed and flowed since 2011 were largely related to economic and public service deficiencies, but they gradually expanded to include demands for an overhaul of the entire political system. This happened, in part, as a result of the widespread participation of youth groups that formed local committees to articulate their demands, and in many cases were supported by their tribal groups, whose impact is often significant in

Iraq. Many youth, women, and local groups have assumed roles in service provision at the local level (e.g. water, sanitation, electricity, food), which often provide them with entry points into political discussions. If this persists, and the extensive networks of protesters across the country try to create non-sectarian political parties, it might help shape new participatory and accountable governance structures anchored in local realities and constituencies. This would contrast with the current system that is Baghdad-based and run by a few elite sectarian leaders, some hereditary and others with foreign backing.

⁵³ "Iraq's New Electoral Law: Old Powers Adapting to Change." *Arab Reform Initiative*, January 12, 2021. <https://www.arab-reform.net/publication/iraq-elections/>;
Al-Jaffal, Omar. "Iraq's New Electoral Law: Old Powers Adapting to Change." *Arab Reform Initiative*, January 12, 2021. <https://www.arab-reform.net/publication/iraq-elections/>.

Since early 2020, signs have repeatedly emerged that young Iraqis plan to organize into political parties and social movements that can contest the 2021 elections. One was the big increases in turnout for student elections in Baghdad in 2019, compared to the very low voter turnout in the 2018 parliamentary elections.⁵⁴ In mid-January, three new parties announced their plans to run, with one of them named Imtidad (continuation), referring to its roots in the current uprising that started in October 2018.⁵⁵

Algeria: Resilient Protest Movement Demanding Democratization



The Algerian protests, known as the Hirak, reached the two-year mark in February 2021; they were interrupted only because of COVID-19 and have resumed with weekly protest marches every Tuesday. Algeria's protests have been driven by similar grievances as other Arab uprisings. The majority of citizens suffer erratic delivery of basic services, worsening economic conditions, rising poverty, and a lack of political means to improve their wellbeing or future prospects. Over the past several decades, Algeria's military-based government was unable to diversify the economy beyond its reliance on oil and gas exports, which eventually triggered severe

economic stresses and shortages and higher prices of key commodities; this only worsened when energy prices declined, and global economic activity slowed down in 2020.

The corruption and inefficiency of the ruling elite sparked the nationwide revolt in 2019 when the incapacitated president, Abdelaziz Bouteflika, announced he would run for a fifth term in office. Those protests achieved some limited gains in their early months, starting with the decision by the armed forces, the real power in the country, that Bouteflika would not seek a fifth term. The armed forces subsequently announced new presidential elections to replace him — yet, these were postponed twice due to street protests that cast doubt upon the military's sincerity in

⁵⁴ Al-Nidawi, Omar. "Will young protesters be the dark horses in Iraq's next election?" *Middle East Monitor*, September 3, 2020. <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20200903-will-young-protesters-be-the-dark-horses-in-iraqs-next-election/>.

⁵⁵ "Algeria's contested presidential election sees historically low turn out of 40%." *France 24*, December 11, 2019. <https://www.france24.com/en/20191211-algeria-bouteflika-vote-election-poll-opposition-boycott-algiers-salah-africa-presidential-election-president-protest-benflis-tebboune-mihoubi>; Schaefer, Cathrin. "Iraq's new protester parties plan to change the country." *DW*, January 22, 2021. <https://www.dw.com/en/iraqs-new-protester-parties-plan-to-change-the-country/a-56312305>.

allowing genuinely free elections. Ultimately, only military-approved candidates from the old guard were permitted to run for office. Sixty percent of voters abstained in the December 2019 presidential election, which meant the elected president approved by the military, former minister Abdul-Majid Tabboun, entered office lacking legitimacy in the eyes of many – perhaps even most – Algerians.⁵⁶ Tabboun was further hampered by the fact that his son was in jail after being convicted of narcotics trafficking. A sign of the new fearlessness of protesters was that many people threw flour (a symbol for cocaine) from their balconies as protesters passed by to show their disdain for the new president who promised to “moralize public life.” Protesters also regularly showed up at large demonstrations carrying house plants to be watered by the water cannons security forces used to disperse them.

The armed forces, president, and senate all made initial gestures in response to the protests, following the playbook of regime responses in other Arab revolutionary uprisings. These gestures included reforming the election law, releasing hundreds of prisoners, and putting on trial a dozen powerful figures from Bouteflika’s government and security agencies. Similar to responses to such gestures in 2020 by autocrats in Lebanon, Iraq, and Sudan, protesters saw the regime’s offers as giving them mere sacrificial lambs, while the military maintained its grip on power behind the scenes and met none of the Hirak’s major demands. Protesters insisted on a total change of leadership and have remained in the streets, except for the COVID-19 break, throughout the two years of their citizen rebellion.



Security forces stand guard as Algerian demonstrators take to the streets in the capital Algiers [AP]

After the initial months passed with no progress in sight, and finally unconvinced that real change was imminent, the revolutionary uprising persisted with mass marches on Tuesdays for students and on Fridays for the citizenry as a whole. One popular protest slogan, *bahdalouna* (“they humiliated us”) refers to the widespread sense of shame by many Algerians that their country under military rule had lost its previous diplomatic influence and

⁵⁶ Based on author’s interviews with Algerian scholars and experts in February 2020, as well as: “Turnout at record low in Algerian referendum aimed at giving parliament more power.” *France 24*, November 1, 2020. <https://www.france24.com/en/africa/20201101-algeria-votes-on-revised-constitution-aimed-at-giving-parliament-more-power>

stature across the Middle East. Protester demands articulated in posters and chants included, “A new democratic republic and a state of law,” “They all go,” “Our demands are legitimate,” and “It is time to listen to the voice of the street.”

As in the other uprisings, the protests in Algeria have been an ongoing open laboratory where young men and women learn how to engage with others in discussing, debating, or shaping public policies and cross previously impermeable sectarian boundaries. The COVID-19 pandemic slowed down the protests after the government banned demonstrations, but some protesters still marched. Many leaders were arrested, tried, or jailed, as they declared that, “life under the mafia [existing military] system is not much different from death.”

In early July 2020, the new president, Abdul-Majid Tabboun, announced that a referendum would take place in the autumn to expand parliament’s powers, but protesters saw this as another meaningless gesture to coopt them and cement the military’s rule under a different guise. The November referendum ultimately attracted less than 25 percent of eligible voters, reflecting citizens’ widespread skepticism about the regime being able to reform itself.⁵⁷

Just before the referendum, the vibrancy of the Hirak was expressed on October 5, 2020 in widespread protests in commemoration of the 32nd anniversary of the 1988 pro-democracy movement that ultimately forced the armed forces to end the one-party system of rule and hold elections.⁵⁸ Those protests led to the 1992 elections won by Islamists, which in turn triggered an army coup d’état that opened the door to a decade-long bloody civil war. Other major protests that took place in the northern Kabyle region in 2011 were also harshly suppressed. This ongoing legacy of civilian protests resonates deeply with most Algerians, and young activists, many of whom were not alive during the post-1922 violence, are not afraid to challenge the state nonviolently, given the bleak future in store for them if conditions remain unchanged.

Like many other Arab protesters, Algeria’s activists have used the COVID-19 pandemic slowdown to reconsider their earlier refusal to name a public leadership cadre; some of them now recognize that this may be needed to engage in negotiations for a future transition, as happened in Sudan and Tunisia. It is possible that the Hirak could engage the government via representatives of the independent unions and professional and civic organizations that continue to be formed. Thirteen new trade unions in 2020 formed a confederation to represent the people

⁵⁷ “Turnout at record low in Algerian referendum aimed at giving parliament more power.” *France 24*, November 1, 2020. <https://www.france24.com/en/africa/20201101-algeria-votes-on-revised-constitution-aimed-at-giving-parliament-more-power>.

⁵⁸ “Algeria’s sleeping revolution is reignited.” *The New Arab*, December 22, 2020. <https://english.alaraby.co.uk/english/comment/2020/12/21/algerias-sleeping-revolution-is-reignited>.

more faithfully than the government-controlled official unions, which had backed Bouteflika's bid for a fifth term. University professors in 48 governorates formed a coalition to show their nationwide support for the protests. Dozens of other civil society coalitions and organizations were launched by women, workers, professors, lawyers, and others since 2019, which expanded citizen participation in the protests. A telling sign of the popular mindset is that "Algerian constitution" has been among the most searched words on-line, suggesting a widespread desire among internet users to know their rights.

As with the other uprisings, Algerians have responded to their new economic stresses by launching hundreds of local community self-help and solidarity initiatives, building a more robust civil society that provides them with the services and support they need and which they do not receive from the government. This trend has accelerated in 2020 - 2021; since the onset of COVID-19, the government slashed its expenditures and investments budgets by 50 percent, which sharply curtailed new jobs and consumer imports and led to deficiencies in many households. The government has rapidly drawn down its foreign reserves (from \$194b. to \$62b. in the past seven years), which is unsustainable in view of the continued low price of oil and gas that account for nearly one-third of GDP and 60 percent of budget revenues.⁵⁹ As poverty and hardships increase across the country, the marginalized southern populations might connect with the more urbanized protesters in the north once the COVID-19 lockdowns end. This would continue the pattern emerging across the region – of people of all different demographic, ethnic, sectarian, age, gender, tribal, and economic profiles marching together to replace the entirety of the ruling power structure that has caused them all to suffer.

⁵⁹ Ghanem, Dalia. "Algeria: Toward an economic collapse?" *Middle East Institute*, May 26, 2020. <https://www.mei.edu/publications/algeria-toward-economic-collapse>; Ahmed, Hamid Ould; "Algeria plans spending cuts, tax rises in 2017 to counter oil drop." *Reuters*, September 7, 2016. <https://www.reuters.com/article/algeria-economy/algeria-plans-spending-cuts-tax-rises-in-2017-to-counter-oil-drop-idUKL8N1BJ3DV>.

NEW TRENDS AND TACTICS IN ARAB UPRISINGS AND THE REPRESSIVE RESPONSES

The ongoing revolutionary uprisings embody innovative approaches that reflect key lessons learned since 2010 and have generated new realities that will impact the region for years to come. Many factors explain why these uprisings were able to persist and secure some initial gains in the face of heavily militarized responses. Most important was the combination of largely nonviolent protest tactics and nationwide solidarity and coordination among a very wide range of citizens and local and professional groups, countering regimes' divide-and-rule tactics. Also critical was a disciplined insistence on revolutionary demands, embracing broad-based goals on issues that matter to all constituencies (e.g., sexism, patriarchy, homophobia, sectarianism, environment), while building incrementally on small gains and moving towards the big goals. The effective use of social media to inform and mobilize protesters and shame officials helped protesters stay on the streets for months and disrupt normal life for all, even in the face of violence and death.

The protests' weaknesses and vulnerabilities, on the other hand, included a lack of identifiable leadership (except for Sudan) that could negotiate change with the regimes. Fatigue in the face of prolonged economic stress, strikes, and road closures eventually weakened the protests, especially if blocked roads meant that some people could not go to work and earn the income they need to care for their families. Some citizens were dismayed by the occasional violence by a select group of protesters, state security forces, and counter-revolutionary political thugs, which prompted fears of a return to civil war in countries like Lebanon, Iraq, Sudan, and Algeria that had long suffered from that scourge. The widespread worry among many protesters about their ability to sustain nonviolent street actions over months in the midst of a deadly pandemic, and the prospect of failing to force ruling elites to reform or leave, also sapped the energy of the protests in 2020.

The prolonged protests have forged unprecedented cross-communal solidarities among political, professional, geographic, and sectarian groups that previously had engaged the state for their own needs. Many were propelled to better collaborate due to the common grievances of unjust economic policies and callous political elites. The unprecedented national scope of coordinated

protests allowed activists to get to personally know their fellow citizens across the country, which strengthened solidarity and facilitated nationwide protests/strikes. Demonstrators throughout Iraq, Lebanon, Sudan, and Algeria consistently call out to their compatriots in other parts of the country, thereby preventing the political elite from playing groups against each other, as happened regularly in the past. Some demonstrators also hold up signs and paint wall slogans expressing solidarity with protesters in the other countries experiencing uprisings, including in some cases young Arabs who expressed solidarity with demonstrators in Iran in January 2020. A few protesters across the region carry Palestinian flags, acknowledging the longest running national cause in the Arab region.

The protest movements also allowed every interested citizen to share in redefining a new national identity through daily discussions of public issues of concern, where they help propose new solutions to problems they all face. Many gatherings looked like classroom-style teach-ins where experts discussed topics like jump-starting the economy, fair electoral laws, gender equity, environmental protection, or mechanisms to hold powerful politicians accountable and retrieve the billions of dollars of stolen public money. At small and large gatherings, in the media or in person, citizens routinely shared their complaints and proposals on such important issues that they had never before tackled collectively, freely, openly, and in solidarity with other citizens.

A new protest tactic based on past lessons was the decentralized nature of the opposition, often referred to as “leaderless” uprisings that actually rely on a growing network of personal relationships, many community-based civil society groups, and extensive use of social media. The decentralized management of protest allowed the movements to persist despite regime assaults against any one group. For example, when Algerian state security services clamped down on coordinating committees in provincial centers in 2019, groups in the capital Algiers maintained the momentum of organizing and publicizing the weekly protests. When protest camps were attacked in Beirut in early 2020, supporters from Tripoli in the north and Sidon in the south rallied to lead the national uprising until the groups in the capital regained their footing.

Yet, with the exception of Sudan, protesters refused to appoint one or several leaders to represent them in public or in discussions with the government; they felt this protected them from being killed, detained, harassed, or coopted by the regime, which could weaken the uprising. Activists argued that the ruling elite understood the demands of the uprising clearly expressed in public; all they had to do is accept the public’s verdict and quit. However, without leadership or a capacity to concretely and democratically build public consensus, the points of public activism remain quite broad. Protesters across the region say privately that they are reassessing this approach in order to be best prepared for the next third stage of the protests they expect to happen in 2021, as the COVID-19 threat recedes.

Profound Transformations in Social Values

Beneath the surface of the street protests and political developments, not so readily visible to casual or outside observers, the revolutionary uprisings have triggered profound transformations in social values, citizen behavior, and power control systems that will likely impact political life for decades to come.⁶⁰ Perhaps the most visible new dimension of the Arab protests is the extensive, often leading, role of women in the protests and other dimensions of public life, whether on the streets leading marches, chants, and discussions, or behind the scenes in organizing and strategizing. Women in Lebanon, who made equal citizenship rights in civil status laws a recurring public discussion, at one point revised the words of a patriarchal phrase in the national anthem to make it gender neutral. In several countries, women regularly formed lines to shield male protesters from the security forces confronting them. A dramatic photograph of a young woman in a traditional flowing, white Sudanese dress leading protesters in a pose evoking images of Joan of Arc emerged as a symbol of the revolution in late 2019, as did a photo of a young Lebanese women karate-kicking a soldier in the groin.

Perhaps the most visible new dimension of the Arab protests is the extensive, often leading, role of women in the protests and other dimensions of public life, whether on the streets leading marches, chants, and discussions, or behind the scenes in organizing and strategizing.

Iraqi women, perhaps the most socially constrained among the four contexts highlighted here, took advantage of their opportunity to act and speak for themselves during the extensive street protests, and countered attempts by conservative tribal or clerical men to shame them. They chanted slogans like, “women of the October revolution are revolutionaries, not whores,” and “no, no, no, do not say it is shameful, a woman’s voice is a revolution.” Women also painted public walls with murals and slogans, provided food and medical aid for protesters and needy people, joined in street-cleaning operations, installed local electricity networks, sewed face masks, arranged hosts for homeless people, and even started a newspaper.

⁶⁰ This may be analogous to the changes in personal attitudes and political behavior in the United States that African-Americans, feminists, Hispanics, environmentalists, Native Americans, and anti-war activists experienced in the 1960s - 1970s; they impacted American society for decades afterwards, and took major leaps forward in the #MeToo and the Black Lives Matter movements half a century later.

Women in Lebanon took their interests to a national level when they chanted feminist slogans in Arabic to promote women's control over their personal health choices and bodies – “we want to bring down the patriarchy, it will go” (to the tune of “She’ll be coming ‘round the mountain when she comes”) and “A woman’s right to own her body; A woman’s right to speak for herself; A woman’s right to orgasm; A woman’s right to abort.”⁶¹ Because ordinary men and women from all regions, economic levels, and demographic categories participated in public discussion forums on political, social, and economic issues that impact them, their traditionally single-issue interests slowly blended together into cohesive national change agendas.

Women have been active in political life and public protests for many decades across the region, including in their roles in culture and the arts that both mirror and prod citizen activism. In the decades from the 1940s to the 2000s though, women participated publicly mostly in activism that society deemed particular to their gender identities, such as honor killings, sexual harassment, nationality rights, or equal education opportunities. In the past ten years, Arab women broke out of their patriarchally-imposed cultural and political constraints and fully participated in – and often led – activities that sought equal rights for all citizens, regardless of gender or other identities.

Most political discussions in the public sphere today focus less narrowly on the interests of a single constituency, but more often demand policy changes that impact all citizens across issues like education, labor, police violence, water policies, and taxation. These citizens who engaged in the thrill of shaping public policies once will expect to do so regularly in the future, signaling the slow demise of the silently suffering, acquiescent Arab citizen in societies where uprisings persist, even if temporarily subdued by COVID-19. The uprisings have provided the first signs of genuine, common, national identities that are forged by the citizens themselves to replace the sectarian, tribal, ethnic, class, ideological, or regional identities that have long defined modern Arab states. This is especially true for young men and women, who still drive the revolutionary uprisings, because their lives as adults are most threatened by the current economic and political systems that have bankrupted their countries.

A common slogan among protesters in Iraq — “we want a homeland” — captures similar sentiments expressed across the region as protestors discovered their shared interests and identity with people from other socio-economic, political, or ethnic groups. Such cross-sectarian solidarities are likely to promote new parties and coalitions to compete in elections in the future, at the national, local, or professional associations levels. The uprisings also have propelled into the public political sphere the voices and demands of certain communities who were often less

⁶¹ Beck, Zeina Hashem. “Taking the Bus Alone.” *The Public Source*, January 29, 2020. <https://thepublicsource.org/taking-the-bus-alone>.

publicly heard. These include women, professors, journalists, high school and university students, people with special needs, environmentalists, provincial leaders, cultural figures, new media, members of the LGBTQ community, farmers, minorities such as migrant workers or children of Lebanese women without full citizenship, the elderly, and others. They discovered that when they rallied together in the public square under the banner of common citizen rights, their distinct needs carried equal weight, reinforced each other, and were more impactful collectively.

The extensive, often autonomous, participation of provincial towns and cities in protests have routinely complemented the main demonstrations in the capitals, and revealed the broad nature of the movement beyond the capitals and epicenters of government power. In some provincial regions that have long been dominated by a single sectarian/ideological group, especially in Lebanon and Iraq, thousands of citizens loosened their sole allegiance to those groups and demonstrated in favor of national reforms that were the demand of the majority of citizens throughout the country.⁶²

Across the Arab region today, hundreds of millions of citizens in a dozen countries have joined to demand social justice, corruption-busting, and accountability under the rule of law. These citizens persist in their demands, confident that their views are shared by most other citizens across the entire region. Individuals who protested with their fellow citizens for months on end discovered that they could rely on their compatriots to assist them if they were threatened or detained. They now feel empowered to do things they had never attempted before – to publicly demand their rights and actively and personally challenge the individuals who dominate the patriarchal oligarchy that rules them, while also seeking to hold authorities accountable.

In the same vein of newfound confidence and dynamism, civil society groups, academics, some political parties, and professionals work behind-the-scenes to hold consultations and draft the new laws and regulations that must be ready to introduce to parliament, should they achieve the constitutional democracy they seek. Despite a lack of major reforms thus far across the region, the nature of collective actions and protests indicates that citizens have a newfound realization of their rights and opportunities to transform the systems of government that have long oppressed them.

Protesters also use the legal system to investigate and hold accountable individuals accused of corruption or stealing public funds, as well as to challenge police actions such as detentions or indictments of activists. In all four countries highlighted in this essay, former officials, including presidents, have been detained and tried in court, and more cases are likely to follow. In countries

⁶² Fahs, Badia. "A Revolution in All Its Implications." *Malcolm H. Kerr Carnegie Middle East Center*, September 2, 2020. <https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/82388>.

that do not witness major protests, like Jordan, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, and others, officials intermittently detain lower-level officials or put them on trial for corruption to show that they are responding to citizen demands for ending corruption and recuperating stolen funds.

Social media, including live television coverage, played a major role in maintaining protesters' momentum and generating new street tactics.

High school students also entered the Arab political sphere, usually with their parents' approval, when they went on strike and marched with university students, professors, and the general public. In cities across the region, they set up their own tents to hold meetings and study sessions. One Lebanese student who left school to protest downtown in December 2019 captured the sense of playing a role in the national public sphere for the first time ever, by holding up a sign that read, "On this day I won't be learning history, I will be writing it." This augurs well for a more engaged citizenry in the future.

In a dramatic new trend, protesters now personalize and target their criticisms of individual politicians in a way they rarely did before for fear of physical, economic, or political retribution. Where once the very names of political leaders stoked fear, and calling them out by name appeared unthinkable, protesters now call out political leaders by name, label them criminals and thieves, sing sarcastic songs about them, or ridicule them in photographs, cartoons, videos, and jokes. In an environment where reverence for leadership has been ingrained for many years, this represents a newfound willingness among citizens to recognize that such leaders are not invincible. In some cases, in Lebanon – with live coverage on YouTube via dedicated social media channels – protesters taunt and hound politicians out of restaurants, theaters, and public events when they spot them there. One chant about Central Bank Governor Riad Salameh goes, "Corona, Corona, we don't care about Corona, Riad Salameh is Corona," while a common chant in Tripoli, long the poorest urban area in Lebanon, addresses the political elite with, "Our people should not starve; Master, Master, you are a thief."

Social media, including live television coverage, played a major role in maintaining protesters' momentum and generating new street tactics. In Lebanon, protesters use social media to generate, within just an hour or two, crowds of people at police stations or state courts when individual protesters are detained. Such pressure tactics, including using the Thawra (Revolution) live television feed on Facebook and YouTube, allows anyone in the country or the world to stay

informed about developments, show their support if they wish, and join nearby protests.⁶³ A survey of media use by Lebanese protesters and the rest of society, conducted in 2019 by the Institute of Media Research and Training at Lebanese American University, found that two-thirds of Lebanese support the protests, but only some 28% took part in activities, while just three percent said they are members of a political party.⁶⁴ WhatsApp messaging groups have also been common across most of the region for protest-related activities, as well as non-political associations among friends or colleagues. Expatriate nationals and individual donors abroad also use them to stay abreast of the latest developments.

Militarized Responses and Limited Concessions by Powerful Elites

In response to the sustained protests, ruling elites used several common tactics to maintain the decaying status quo. First, they ignored the protests. Second, they offered limited concessions that did not change their fundamental control of power. Third, they used militarized violence and other less brutal intimidating means, especially jailing, indicting, and threatening activists. This happened in the four revolutionary uprisings discussed, as well as in other countries that only saw localized protests by individual ethnic, sectarian, or political groups (e.g., Egypt, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Morocco). In Jordan in late July 2020, the government closed the activist teachers' union – the largest in the country – detaining its executive council and banning the local media from reporting on the next day's street confrontations in support of the teachers.

Often with external support from fellow Arabs or foreign allies, ruling elites try to physically suppress protests using a common tactical toolkit. These have included shooting with live ammunition or rubber bullets, using tear gas and water cannons, and charges by security units that seem equipped for warfare; they erected concrete and barbed wire barricades, blocked roads or entire sections of cities, turned off the internet for days, set loose party or sectarian thugs on the protests, burned protesters' encampments and tents, arrested or beat-up hundreds of protesters, indicted dozens of them, and resorted to other nefarious means. The use of live fire and tear gas resulted in hundreds of deaths and thousands of injuries in Sudan and Iraq, as well as in Lebanon to a lesser extent.

⁶³ Frakes, Nicholas. "Reality revolution TV: Protesters in Lebanon turn to alternative media to spread their message." *The New Arab*, February. 5, 2020. <https://english.alaraby.co.uk/english/indepth/2020/2/5/lebanese-protesters-turn-to-alternative-media-to-spread-message>;

Battah, Habib. "In Lebanon, a Bold New Era for Accountability Journalism." *Nieman Reports*, December 18, 2020. <https://niemanreports.org/articles/in-lebanon-a-bold-new-era-for-accountability-journalism/>.

⁶⁴ Melki, Jad and Claudia Kozman. "Media Uses and Trust During Protests: A working paper on the media uses of Lebanese during the 2019 uprising." *Lebanese American University: Institute of Media Research and Training*, 2020. <http://imrt.lau.edu.lb/sites/default/files/IMRT%20Media%20and%20War/Media%20Uses%20and%20Trust%20During%20Protests%20Web.pdf>.

Such tactics, however, usually only resulted in brief pauses of a day or so, before the protests resumed, and often intensified. When police, security agencies, and gangs of thugs militarized their responses and brutalized the protesters, most of their actions were caught on video tape or even broadcast live. This generated fresh waves of protesters into the streets and worried officials who feared they might one day be held accountable for their actions, as happened when some Sudanese and Algerian senior officials were detained and tried.

Governments took advantage of the COVID-19 pandemic in different ways in their attempts to slow down or stop the uprisings. They prohibited street protests and arrested, tried, jailed, or intimidated protest organizers. The National Committee for Liberation of Detainees in Algeria, for example, said in April 2020 that at least 50 activists had been arrested for their Facebook posts in the COVID-19 period, while 237 had been detained since the start of the protests in 2019. Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch both issued statements accusing the Algerian government of using the pandemic to harass activists, by detaining them or blocking their websites.⁶⁵ When poverty spread among many citizens due to severe economic slowdowns, they tried to regain their lost legitimacy by offering constituents food, fuel, cash grants, and other items.

External actors and foreign interventions have also shaped transitions to democratic governance. The July 2020 no-confidence vote against the Muslim Brotherhood elected speaker of parliament in Tunisia, which failed, was widely seen as an attempt by the United Arab Emirates (UAE) to keep beating back the spread of Islamist political groups in the region – even if they were elected democratically. These typically included offers of billions of dollars in cash and direct military and intelligence assistance to strengthen threatened regimes, as well as strategic agreements that included establishing foreign military bases and port management deals. Most such external intervention, however, usually only heightens the repression, renewed protests, economic disruptions, counter-interventions by other countries, and the economic and political poverty that triggered the uprisings in the first place.

⁶⁵ “Algeria: Repressive tactics used to target Hirak activists two years on.” *Amnesty International*, February 22, 2021. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2021/02/algeria-repressive-tactics-used-to-target-hirak-activists-two-years-on/>

CONCLUSION

The historic 2010 - 2020 decade in the Arab region reflects possibly the most dramatic transformation in the past century of Arab statehood – citizen-driven national self-determination – but it also confirms that progress towards this goal will be slow and erratic. Four core elements of statehood – citizen, society, power, and governance – have been shaken by pauperized Arab citizens who now challenge their militarized states. Many profound changes have occurred in how individual citizens see their place and rights in society, most evident in how they have shed their passive condition and collectively risen up to change their failing economic and governance systems.⁶⁶ Many of these changes are probably irreversible, and others may prove to be only temporary, while authoritarian Arab states strike back to maintain the status quo that favors them, often violently and with foreign backing.

It is now clearer to the protesters themselves and their governments alike that these are “unfinished revolutions,” in the words of Lebanese sociologist Rima Majed.⁶⁷ “Mobilize if you wish, celebrate if you can, or disregard it and carry on. But whatever you do, remember that this is an unfinished revolution,” she wrote on October 17, 2020, a year after the revolutionary uprising erupted. Any analysis of this and other Arab uprisings should see them as a process, rather than an event, she said, which is why many who have lived through the past half century of protests across the Arab region advise that the phrase “Arab Spring” is inappropriate. The current citizen rebellions against their cruel and inefficient governments continue dynamics first forged in the 1970s, and even before that; these continue the spirit of pan-Arab activism for independence, rights, and dignity that was born over a century ago, when the first stirrings for freedom from Ottoman and European rule were felt before and during World War I.

The manner in which regional and big power military and political interventions exacerbated conditions in many Arab states in the past decade should remind the world of the lingering, mostly destructive, aftershocks of the colonial and imperial centuries, which spawned the modern

⁶⁶Comaty, Lyna, Mona Fawaz, Ogarit Younan, Rania Masri, Nizar Hassan, Sana Tannoury-Karam, and Carmen Geha. “Has the October 17 Revolution Accomplished Anything At All?” *The Lebanese Center for Policy Studies*, October 17, 2020. <https://lcpss-lebanon.org/agendaArticle.php?id=197>.

⁶⁷Majed, Rima. “Lebanon’s unfinished revolution: Where next?” *Middle East Eye*, October 19, 2020. <https://www.middleeasteye.net/opinion/one-year-lebanon-marks-unfinished-revolution>.

Middle East and Arab state order around World War I. Three specific reasons for this are important to keep in mind.

First is the manner in which many Middle Eastern states were shaped by the will of European colonial powers, working with hand-picked local elites, to establish new countries whose citizens were largely excluded from defining their own countries' borders, values, and governance system. That lack of citizen agency has been a handicap for the past century across the region.

Second is the way the foreign and regional powers – the U.S., U.K., France, and Russia mainly – and regional powers – Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Hezbollah – have intervened at will in the internal affairs of Arab states to pursue their own interests. Such sustained military and political interference have defined the region since the days of Napoleon's assault on Arab cities in the late 18th century; foreign military and political interference inside Arab lands has now spanned four consecutive centuries, and shows no signs of abating.

Third is the legacy and consequences of the Palestinian-Zionist and Arab-Israeli conflict that started in the first decades of the 20th century, when European Zionists persuaded the United Kingdom to issue the 1917 Balfour Declaration that promised the creation of a national homeland for the Jewish people in Palestine. The Arab-Israeli conflict has persisted since then, often erupting in wasteful local wars, and more recently including intense antagonism between Israel and non-Arab Iran. The Arab-Israeli conflict was a central cause of military officers seizing control of Arab governments starting in the 1950s; and for the next 70 years, these leaders drove Arab economies into the ground while leaving behind legacies of failed authoritarian and autocratic systems that are the leading driver of the current uprisings.

Most Arab states have not entered their current dilapidated condition purely due to their own misdeeds, but rather they have been mightily assisted by the burdens of their colonial origins, over two centuries of nonstop foreign military interventions, historic lack of citizen participation in governance, and the multiple impacts of the century-old-and-still-ongoing Arab-Israeli conflict.

This is why the past decade of protests is an important chapter in the story of erratic Arab statehood. It confirms the key dimensions and drivers of the many distortions and inequities that sparked hundreds of protests in the last half century, and also offers hints at what might follow in the years ahead. Today, we can only identify common aspects of these citizen rebellions across the region. The most important ones are the driving forces that sparked these revolutionary uprisings and how they mirror each other across the entire region, indicating the same deep structural reforms that are needed in all Arab states. We also see more clearly now the many

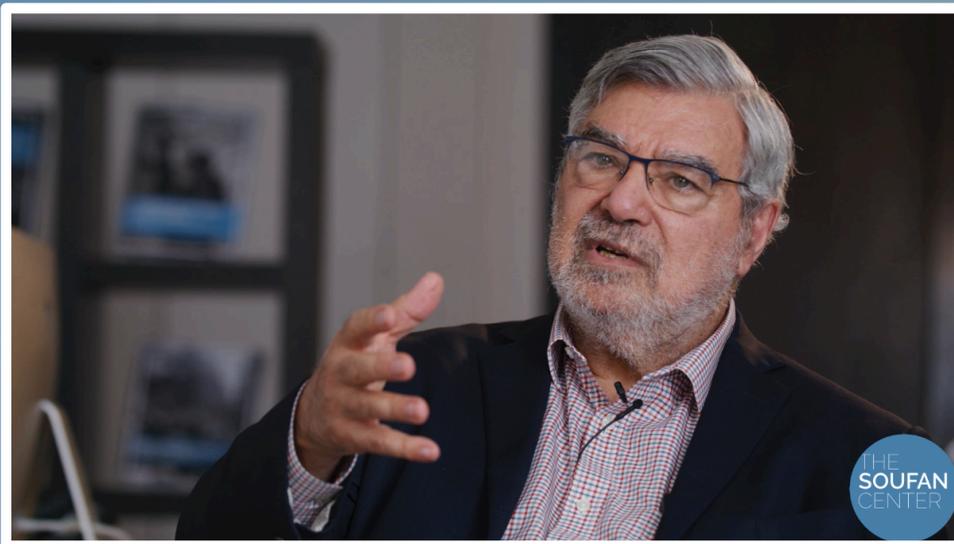
different, and always evolving, tactics that rebelling citizens use to achieve the law-based democratic governance systems they seek, usually learning from the experiences of other Arab countries.

The most important dynamics we can identify today are the lasting changes that have already occurred within the minds of several hundred million men and women who have transformed the narratives of protests from single issues, to achieving rights, freedoms, and equality across social, sectarian, and economic divides. The sentiments these have fostered will transform societies in the future when the moment favors change. The most difficult lesson being learned now – and since the 1970s – has been that sometimes many years are required to unseat entrenched and violent autocratic regimes. Some deeply conservative, change-averse rulers in countries like the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt have directly intervened militarily and politically in several countries experiencing prolonged uprisings, in order to slow or reverse citizen-driven political reforms towards democracy. Foreign powers have been equally destructive in their military interventions, especially Russia, the United States, Iran, Turkey, France, and the United Kingdom, to mention only the most prominent ones. Armed non-state actors have also played their part in supporting or challenging Arab governments, including Hezbollah, Ansarullah (Houthis), and dozens of militias and mercenary forces in Syria, Libya, Yemen, Iraq, Somalia, and other countries. The ease with which foreign military and political forces have engaged in conflicts inside nominally sovereign Arab countries suggests that structural changes are required across the entire Arab region to varying degrees. State-building in every Arab country during the past century has followed a common trajectory that largely eliminates the ordinary citizens from participating in national decision-making. This has culminated in today's wide-spread outrage and demands for change. Rarely does the world witness such a phenomenon of simultaneous protests and common objectives across an entire region. Perhaps the former Soviet bloc in Eastern Europe was the last such instance of this, which occurred in relatively advanced societies. It offers important lessons for how democratization occurs slowly over time, with many countries transforming into liberal states while others retain conservative or autocratic tendencies.

The Arab revolutionary uprisings will add to history's playbook of how authoritarianism can transform into democratic rule, and how it does not affect that result in some places. From the perspective of the hundreds of millions of Arab citizens who have been in the streets for decades and are now exploring engagement in electoral politics, this is a unique moment: the first time since modern Arab states were born around World War I that we witness ordinary citizens agitating, demonstrating, planning, debating, strategizing, and experimenting to bring about the elusive but tantalizing goal of Arab governments anchored in the consent of the governed and the rule of law. Moreover, that they are doing so in unison, across the very boundaries that

previously divided them, makes this regional Arab moment both a historic rejection of the modern legacy of the Arab autocracy that has shattered so many states and numbed hundreds of millions of citizens, and also a weather-vane that points towards their better – and perhaps inevitable – future.

In Conversation with Rami G. Khouri



Related video content elaborating on many of the issues highlighted in this paper, including conversations with Rami G. Khouri, will be available shortly on The Soufan Center website.

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ABOUT THE SOUFAN CENTER

The Soufan Center (TSC) is an independent non-profit center offering research, analysis, and strategic dialogue on global security challenges and foreign policy issues, with a particular focus on counterterrorism, violent extremism, armed conflict, and the rule of law. Our work is underpinned by a recognition that human rights and human security perspectives are critical to developing credible, effective, and sustainable solutions. TSC fills a niche role by producing objective and innovative reports and analyses, and fostering dynamic dialogue and exchanges, to effectively equip governments, international organizations, the private sector, and civil society with key resources to inform policies and practice.

