



Reports

The New Arab Uprisings: How the 2019 trajectory differs from the 2011 legacy? (Part 2)

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An Anti-government Protest in Beirut [November 10, 2019 – Getty]

Abstract:

The 2019 turbulent politics and showdown between protestors and political regimes in Sudan, Algeria, Lebanon and Iraq have triggered several comparative analyses with the popular uprisings of 2011. One school of thought has argued for a ‘second wave’ of the so-called Arab Spring. However, such an interpretation sounds rather simplistic in light of the differences between 2011 and 2019. The ceiling of popular demands has gone higher by insisting not only on the removal of the political figures at the realm of power, but also on contesting the rules of the game. From Algiers to Beirut, the slogan is one and the same, in reference to the political class: “All of them, means all of them.”

AJCS is publishing a special series of papers to probe into what 2019 has learned from 2011 in deepening the way for an Arab democratization process. In this two-part paper, Dr. Peter Bartu of the University of California, Berkeley explores the legacy of the 2011 Arab uprisings, and examines the current crises in Algeria, Sudan, Lebanon and Iraq. He argues the people of the region, through rejuvenated public spheres, might just reclaim their political future. 2019, like 2011, could be an inflection point. But war with Iran, or anyone else, will need to be avoided. Now, Lebanon and especially Iraq are most vulnerable. In 2019, the people are once again at the center of the action and they must be consulted. The first part can be accessed through: <https://studies.aljazeera.net/en/reports/2020/01/arab-uprisings-2019-trajectory-differs-2011-legacy-part-1-200105102004189.html>



One of the Symbols of the Sudanese Uprising (Getty)

Sudan

Sudan's protests began on 19 December 2018 in the city of Atbara in River Nile state some hundred miles north of Khartoum over a three-fold increase in the price of bread. Demonstrations quickly followed in many towns across Northern Sudan and in the capital. People chanted slogans from the 2011 Arab uprisings like "the people want the fall of the regime." But, one of the most uncompromising and popular refrains was "*Tasqut Bas*" ("Fall, that is all)." (1)

While the people were fed up with President Omar al-Bashir and the thirty year rule of the National Congress Party the crisis had been slowly building since the separation of South Sudan in 2011 and the subsequent loss of 75 % of oil revenues and 60% of foreign currency earnings. (2) Bashir had been walking an economic tightrope since and while the demonstrations were sparked by the lifting of bread and fuel subsidies they were also a response to years of rampant corruption, crony privatization deals and the illicit transfer of gold wealth out of the country to the Gulf.

Sudan's demonstrations were noteworthy on many fronts. Their duration, sustainability and geographical spread. The lead role of the Sudanese Professional Association. The coalition of youth groups, civil society organizations and opposition political parties. The strategic use of slogans to mobilize support across ethnic and racial categories. The highlighting of corruption,

human rights abuses and brutal wars in Darfur, the Blue Nile state and the Nuba Mountains in South Kordofan. Close observers also note the solidarity across class lines. The strikes, work stoppages and sit-ins on university campuses and secondary schools and among public and private sector workers. How ultimately, it was the coordination and linkages between formal professional associations, trade and labor unions, civil society organizations, and youth activists with the popular and working class segments of the population in the informal economy – that enabled Sudan’s unprecedented uprising.

On April 11, 2019 Omar al-Bashir was removed from office by the Sudanese army. Initially, it augured well. The Transitional Military Council (TMC) released hundreds of political prisoners and foreign correspondents were granted visas. However, talks on a political transition soon stalled. On June 3rd more than 120 people died in attacks on protestors by the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF). Led by Lt. Gen. Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo from Darfur, the RSF is said to comprise the core of Sudan’s forces supporting the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen. General Dagalo accordingly has the support of Saudi Arabia and the UAE and also controls gold mines in Darfur. (3)

Notwithstanding, a preliminary deal for a political transition was signed on July 17 between the TMC and the Declaration of Freedom and Change Forces (DFCF) (and witnessed by the AU, Ethiopia, the UN, EU, League of Arab States and the US). The subsequent Constitutional Declaration negotiated through August spelled out a 39-month transitional period for Sudan.

On September 8, the Cabinet of Sudan’s current prime minister, economist Abdalla Hamdok, was sworn in to lead a transitional government until its replacement by a government to be elected in late 2022. The government will be overseen by an 11 member Sovereignty Council (SC) with five members from the TMC (now dissolved to be the SC) and six civilians (one with a military background). The military commander Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, the head of the TMC, will be the President of the SC for the first 21 months and a civilian leader in charge of the remaining 18 months prior to elections. A 300 person Transitional Legislative Council or parliament will be 67% appointed by the DFCF. The remaining 33% will come from political groups not associated with the previous regime. An independent commission will oversee a constitutional conference and drafting exercise.



Joy of Arab protest [Getty]

A key challenge for Prime Minister Hamdok will be managing the military. The Armed Forces and the RSF is under the authority of the Regular Armed Forces (RAF). While the Constitutional Declaration calls for an investigation into the June 3 killings the security forces enjoy a degree of immunity from prosecution (which can be lifted by simple majority decision in the legislative council). Bringing peace to the states of Darfur, Blue Nile and South Kordofan will presumably require negotiating increased autonomy, minority rights and religious pluralism.

Meanwhile the economic challenges facing Sudan are immense. Inflation for 2019 is running at 50.4% (4) there is a foreign currency shortage, the country is deeply indebted and \$1.3 billion in arrears to the International Monetary Fund. This restricts access to international funding, as does the US designation of Sudan as a State Sponsor of Terrorism. (5) Loans from China and the Gulf may help in the short term. But, the best plans for economic recovery assume that a political transition supported by international assistance produces a credible macroeconomic program with improved management.” (6)

Sudan’s transitional framework is comprehensive and complicated. But it is recognizable and it has international support. The ‘Friends of Sudan Contact Group’ comprising Egypt, France, Germany, Saudi Arabia, Norway, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, the United Kingdom, the African Union, the European Union, the United Nations, the African Development Bank, the

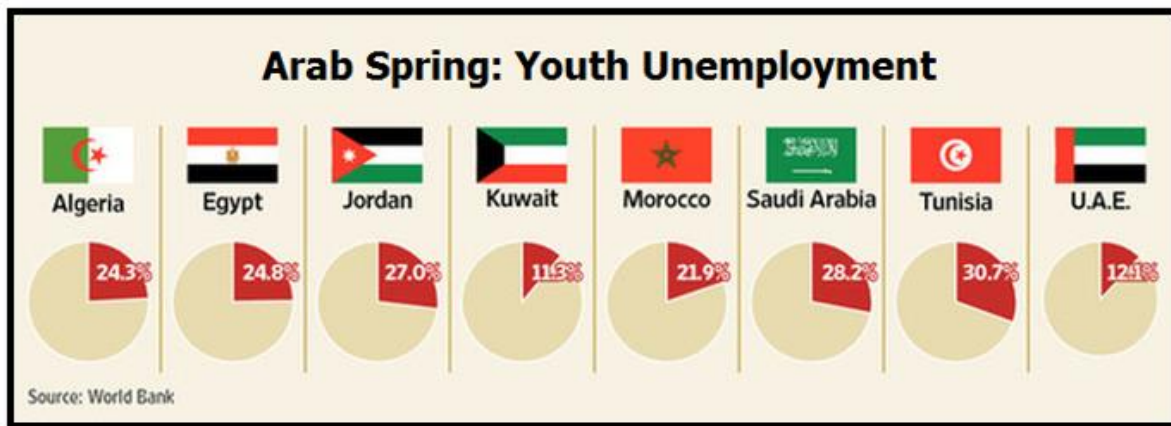
International Monetary Fund, and the World Bank. Finland, Italy, and Sweden are observers to the group. But, Yemen also had a similar support configuration for its political transition yet couldn't contain its centrifugal forces. One can anticipate many distractions throughout Sudan's transition but any success will turn on the economy.

Lebanon

The catalyst for nationwide protests in Lebanon on October 17th was a government proposal for a \$6 monthly fee to make phone calls on WhatsApp, among other taxes and austerity measures. Protestors blocked key infrastructure points and set garbage bins alight. The protests were non-sectarian, occurred in all areas and targeted the whole system. They were the largest demonstrations in Lebanon in decades. There was some violence, periodic arrests and the use of teargas.

Prime Minister Sa'd Hariri's cabinet responded quickly. The 2020 budget was approved as was a new reform package which included cuts to minister's salaries, measures to address the budget deficit and a mechanism to return embezzled funds to the public. The country-wide protest movements responded in unison called for the resignation of the entire government. Specific demands called for a new elections law to lower the voting age to eighteen to allow the young to vote and to create a level playing field for new political parties and independent candidates. The protestors want to "debate and be defined by ideas, not by religious beliefs and ideologies" (7) They wanted to hold accountable those responsible for the colossal mismanagement of the country. (8) As Lebanon's economic crisis deepened, the protests continued and Prime Minister Sa'd Hariri resigned on October 29th.

For Lebanon's economy there is a sense that time is running out. A technocratic government would need to, *within weeks* implement comprehensive macroeconomic reforms to address the interlinked currency, banking, fiscal, and financial crises. This would require a recasting of the Paris hosted CEDRE conference (Conférence économique pour le développement, par les réformes et avec les entreprises) into a multilateral economic stabilization and liquidity fund conditional on reforms in the finance, electricity, water and transport sectors. (9)

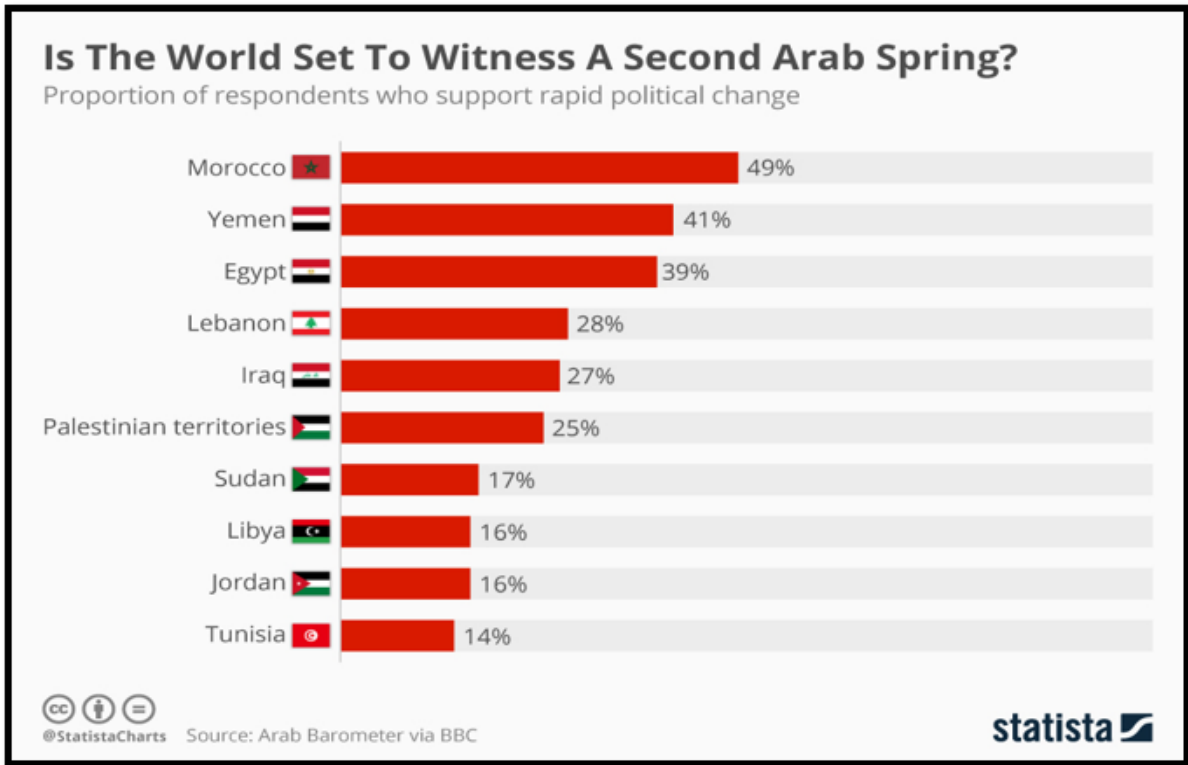


Arab Unemployment [The World Bank]

Currently, thirty cabinet ministerial positions are distributed among the sects: 15 Christian members of parliament, six Sunni, six Shia and three Druze. “Parties within the cabinet are loosely organized into two opposing blocs – the nationalist March 14th movements (Hariri’s Future Movement, the Progressive Socialist Party and others) and the pro-Syria March 8th alliance (Hizbullah, the Free Patriotic Movement and others).” (10) The division between the two blocs creates stalemates and it is this structure which needs to change.

Lebanon’s political elite will struggle to find a technocratic prime minister and cabinet which meets the approbation of the four political blocs: Hizbullah, the Free Patriotic Movement (FPM), the Future Movement (FM) and Amal and the street; and, who can get the job done. A related but more difficult question was how to remove a “dysfunctional, confessional-based party power-sharing system ... wholly inadequate” to address Lebanon’s economic challenges. (11)

The protests are also an implicit rejection of how Lebanese politics has played out, and been played, in the decade since the 2008 Doha Agreement and the last adjustment to Lebanon’s power-sharing formula. Lebanese political blocs are more focused on channeling regional competition than channeling the needs of their constituencies. This was the meaning behind the protest slogan: ‘All of them means all of them.’ The population is fed up with the ‘system’. And this includes all external patrons, all of them.



Arab opinions about a 'second' wave of the uprisings [Statista]

Iraq

Iraq's current protests had been building for some time. For example, there had been sustained demonstrations throughout 2018 in Southern Iraq. The 2018 national elections were fought over corruption and reform. In June 2019 I met in Baghdad parliamentarians who were alert to the prospect of large demonstrations including a potential invasion of the International Zone and the Council of Representatives building. Calls to demonstrate began to appear on social media posts. By October 1st the government had deployed its security forces in anticipation of widespread protests in Baghdad, Babil, Dhi-Qar, Diyala, Karbala, Missan, Muthana, Najaf, Qadisiya and Wasit. Multiple units reporting to the Ministry of Interior and Defence were tasked by the National Operations Command to respond to the demonstrations which rapidly turned violent. (12) In the first week of October 157 deaths and 5,494 injuries had been recorded. 'Unknown snipers' deliberately targeted some of the crowds.

On October 8 the Council of Representatives (CoR) voted on a reform package to address youth unemployment and provide a monthly stipend for families living below the poverty line. It suspended the Provincial Councils (which have exceeded their legal term). Victims of the protests were to be recognized as martyrs (their families to receive compensation) and

detainees who had not damaged public property were to be released. The Council of Ministers (Iraq's cabinet) presented a 13 point package addressing poverty, subsidies and housing and on October 16 the High Judicial Council said it would establish an Anti-Corruption Criminal Court to deal with 'major' cases. An official three day mourning period commenced on October 10. (13)

Large scale demonstrations resumed on October 25, but the demands began to shift toward reform of the political system. Crowds in Baghdad are estimated to have reached one million around Tahrir square. Initially, protestors came from working class neighborhoods of Baghdad. They subsequently broadened to all segments; youth, women, students, Tuk-Tuk drivers and spread to cities and towns across central and southern Iraq. Professional associations like the Iraqi Teacher's Union and the Iraqi Bar Association would also become involved.

Bloodied but unbowed by repeat lethal crackdowns by the security forces the protests continued and eventually led to the resignation of Prime Minister Adel Abdul Mehdi on Friday November 29th after the withdrawal of support by leading cleric Grand Ayatollah Ali-Sistani. By mid-December close to 500 Iraqis had been killed and thousands injured, often in murky circumstances. Shia political parties and Shia militias considered close to Iran had been targeted. The Iranian consulates in Najaf and Karbala had also been torched. Human rights organizations received credible allegations of deliberate killings, abduction and arbitrary detention by 'unknown armed men' described as "militias, unknown third parties, armed entities, outlaws and spoilers." (14)

The demands of the people include: the dissolution of parliament, a new constitution and a new election law, an independent electoral commission, early elections under UN supervision, accountability for those implicated in killing protestors including Adel Abdul Mehdi and political party reform all aimed at delivering improved governance, accountability and rooting out corruption. A clear rebuke of Iran's involvement in Iraq should also be understood as against all foreign meddling. For example: the Kurds have demonstrated against Turkish military bases in northern Iraq. The US is routinely called out by Iraqi politicians.

A new Iraqi nationalism and identity is evident. When Iraq's national soccer team beat the UAE in the Gulf Cup the Iraq team read the *Fatiha* prayer for the fallen martyrs of the revolution. (15) But there has been less participation in the Sunni areas and in Iraqi Kurdistan. The Sunni are afraid of being labelled as ISIS but have been sending support over social media platforms. Iraqi-Kurdistan is wary of what reforms might mean. For example: whether a new constitution might roll-back their enhanced autonomy under the 2005 Constitution.

Fundamentally, the protests represent sixteen years of frustration with conflict and corruption. Four themes emerge: the state cannot protect its population. No-one has been held responsible for ISIS. There is zero accountability in the political class. Iraq, ostensibly a rich country, is unable to deliver electricity, sewerage and clean drinking water to its population.

Iraq is a rentier state par excellence. Its oil wealth is distributed to the ministries, run by political parties, which in turn hand out non-productive jobs. The public sector is the economy. Thus, salaries, pensions and employee benefits are the biggest component of current spending in Iraq. Political party members compete and pay to be elevated on election lists to guarantee a seat in the Council of Representatives and lock-in a \$20,000 per month salary. After two full terms in office many leave for other countries.

The emergence of ISIS in mid-2014 coincided with a 50% collapse in global oil prices; it was a huge external shock to Iraq's revenues. In exchange for budgetary support from the World Bank and the IMF the government agreed to implement a hiring freeze, cancel payments to ghost workers and ghost pensioners and to adjust the public pension system which was considered overly generous. (16) The government also agreed to reform 176 State Owned Enterprises (SOE) with over 550,000 employees, of whom 30-50% represent excess labor and where "many of these SOEs have limited rationale beyond providing public employment. (17) Finally, the government committed to finally establish the Commission on Integrity to combat corruption.

However, as explained to me in June 2019 by the former finance minister who negotiated the World Bank-IMF deal. Iraq was committed to reform but then the price of oil rebounded and suddenly everyone lost the appetite for change. An opportunity was missed. The wage bill for the 2019 budget expanded further. Among the biggest beneficiaries was the Hashd Al-Shaabi

militia whose budget grew by 54%. Although their numbers have remained frozen at 122,000 the budget increase was to ensure Hashd members achieve wage parity with other members of the security forces.

Through all this Iraqis have inconclusively debated how to improve governance and decentralize under the country's 2005 federal Constitution. In 2019 there is a palpable degree of frustration and attempts to decentralize are being wound back. (19) Quixotically, neither model promises a silver bullet where the 'system', as it is, had begun to rot in 1991, worsened post-2003 and then distorted again in 2011. This occurred during Al-Maliki's second term as prime minister, seen as a disaster, and when US influence on everyday politics was slowly usurped by Iraq's neighbors.

In this period US sanctions were applied against Syria and Iran and this increased demand for US Dollars in both countries. Daily hard currency auctions by the Central Bank of Iraq were accessed by businessmen from Syria and Iran, and later too by ISIS supporters. Non-performing loans in the Trade Bank of Iraq went from 4% in 2010 to 41% in 2018. In 2018 Iraq had 68 private banks where 90% of transactions are in cash. Behind every bank is a political party and a politician. There is no market for lending credit to Iraqi businesses and the private sector has contracted. To describe Iraq's financial sector as dysfunctional is being generous. (20) Even Iran's Central Bank Governor Abdunnasser Hemmati has bemoaned the foreign exchange markets in Suleimaniyeh and Iraq which impact his ability to manage monetary policy in his own country (21).

Finally, the Iran-Iraq relationship has changed in existential ways. The annual Haj pilgrimage in Saudi Arabia attracts between 1.8 – 2.5 million pilgrims from around the world. But, the annual Arba'een commemorations in the holy cities of Najaf and Karbala in southern Iraq have in recent years attracted many millions more. In historical terms it is a new phenomenon. It has changed the complexion of Iraq since 2003 and it impacts Shi'a communities throughout the Gulf also. Iran seems intent on appropriating these rituals as their own. It can't. Like elsewhere, Iraqis want their country back.

Conclusion

It is tempting to frame 2019 and 2011 as a tale of two uprisings. A better conceptualization might be to see the last decade as but prologue and Act One of a three part drama. In this context the uprisings of 2019 are only the second Act. The region has changed and continues to evolve. And the people of the region will be central in this especially when we forget they exist. Expect to see more of them.

Contemporary developments in the Middle East have been shaped by a toxic combination of internal and external factors which have produced militarized and deinstitutionalized environments, in more than a few countries. However, the region has also shown extraordinary resilience and progress. Borders and boundaries have held fast. The struggles today are within nation states. The ISIS phenomenon is seen as false path, a theological and political cul-de-sac. It was a collision between the consequences of the 2003 Iraq invasion and the Syrian revolution. The regional battle over Political Islam has not been settled but it is evolving in important ways.

Paradoxically, the September 2019 attacks on Saudi Arabia's Abqaiq plant and the Khurais oil field may have swung the pendulum in a different direction. Regional protagonists began to entertain cooperation over Yemen, reconciliation with Qatar and resignation to the fact that Iran is too part of the neighborhood. It shouldn't have been a surprise in this moment that the Lebanese and the Iraqis demanded to be counted, as the Algerians and Sudanese had done months earlier. All four countries have experienced their largest demonstrations in living memory. It's not clear how each will resolve the complex economic challenges they face. *Le Pouvoir, le mafia* and the 'deep state' is present in all. However, what is clear is that the region doesn't need any more grand schemes or fancy weapon systems. It needs forensic accountants and tax specialists.

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