



مركز الجزيرة للدراسات
ALJAZEERA CENTRE FOR STUDIES

Reports

The New Arab Uprisings: How the 2019 trajectory differs from the 2011 legacy? (Part 1)

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

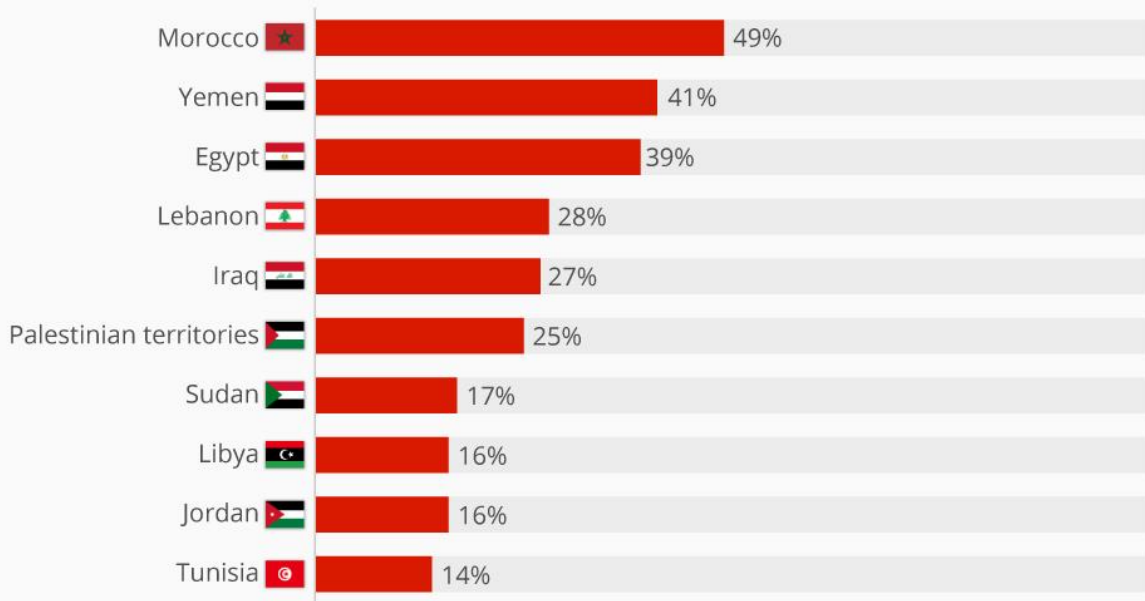
Abstract:

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 first 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.

Is The World Set To Witness A Second Arab Spring?

Proportion of respondents who support rapid political change



@StatistaCharts

Source: Arab Barometer via BBC

statista

Arab Responses to Rapid Political Change [Statista]

The 2019 uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa are strikingly similar to those in 2011. But they are best understood as a continuation of the same phenomenon rather than separate events, some of whose key trends were set in motion by the 2003 invasion of Iraq. Since 2011 the strategic environment has changed. Russia is now part of the Middle East. US policy is increasingly feckless. The Gulf States are more assertive. A global transformation in energy markets is underway with profound regional implications.

In 2019, protest movements emerged in Bolivia, Britain, Catalonia, Chile, Ecuador, France, Guinea, Haiti, Honduras, Hong Kong, Kazakhstan and Pakistan. In terms of countries affected and people mobilized it is comparable to the “people power” movements of the 1980s and early 1990s in Asia and Eastern Europe and to 1968. Is this a ‘global moment’? Beyond economic grievances and youth demographics, there is no unifying principle. ⁽¹⁾ But some are describing the uprisings in the Middle East North Africa Region as a New Arab Spring or Arab Spring 2.0.

To be sure, the situation in Algeria, Sudan, Lebanon and Iraq is analogous to 2011; the leaders of all four countries have been removed or forced to step aside. There are familiar aspects

too. Seemingly peripheral events or policies sparked a wider confrontation. There have been murderous government and parastatal crackdowns in Sudan and Iraq. Social media is a battle space between governments and protestors. The protests have spawned songs, slogans, newspapers, vocabulary, comedy and tragedy. They are dramatic. Across the region there is a cross-pollination of strategies, tactics and sympathies. People still want bread, dignity and justice. But the mood has changed. To understand the region today one needs to consider the psychology of the people and not just their objective conditions. (2) They are fed up with everything. They want accountability.

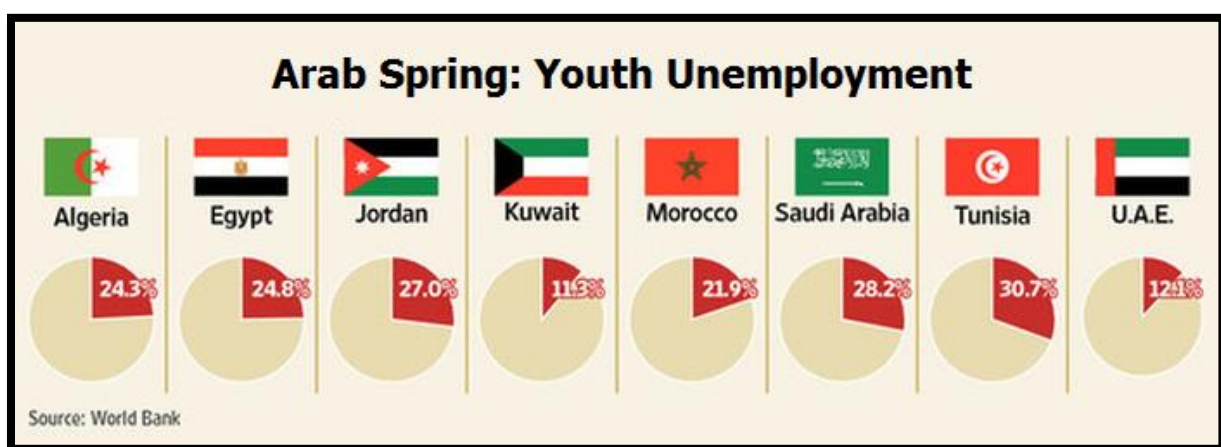
The Legacy of 2011

The French scholar Olivier Roy in his 2008 monograph 'the Politics of Chaos in the Middle East' foreshadowed the events of 2011 and beyond in several respects. He argued that the regional dynamics in the Middle East, particularly after the 2003 invasion of Iraq, had taken on a new complexity of reverse and tangled alliances with their own logic and dynamics. Roy observed the growing rift between Shia and Sunni Muslims, which put the conservative Arab regimes in the same camp as Israel. He anticipated that nobody would want to topple President Assad in Syria because by destroying him it would only make matters worse. (3) After 2011, it was the one thing Israel, Iran, Russia and the US could agree on.

Roy also believed that there was no democratic alternative to the moderate Islamists. That the secular dictatorships were structurally fragile. And, Tunisia was one of the weakest links. (4) In 2011 Jean Pierre Filiu agreed: "The Arab world has changed, and there is no turning back. Islamists have to choose, after decades of having just to oppose, and that is a revolution within the revolution. (5)" For many Egyptian Ikhwan it would be a fatal choice while tens of thousands still languish in jail. The UAE, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Egypt outlawed the organization in 2014, but have failed to convince the West to do so.

But in Tunisia, Rached Ghannouchi can talk of the Enahhda as a post Islamic political party. And, in Saudi Arabia a rights discourse has penetrated Salafi reform currents. The Salafi concept of 'commanding the rights and forbidding the wrongs' can be applied to tyrants. Consultation and shura can allow oversight and accountability of ruling families. Allegiance to absolute rule has been reinterpreted around concepts of equality and consent. Individual liberty is above sharia and this is protected by the Koran. (6) It is an important evolution that shouldn't be overlooked.

Roy saw for Iraq an implosion or an inevitable slide toward three separate entities: Sunni, Shia and Kurd, that could ultimately redraw the map of the Middle East. (7) Jean Pierre Filiu disagreed. He believed that the Arab nation states, no matter how violent the crisis, stood firmly behind their post-colonial borders. “The Arab revolution, far from sweeping away those borders, is a heterogeneous mix of movements, depths and scopes.” (8) Whichever interpretation, Iraq came close. ISIS theatrically tore up the border berm between Iraq and Syria in June 2014. Iraqi-Kurdistan voted to be independent in September 2017. The current protests in Baghdad and its southern provinces predominantly concerns the Shia. The supposed beneficiaries of Saddam Hussein’s overthrow the Shia have seen few tangible benefits from the government. They are also fighting against Iran’s encroachment.



Arab Youth Unemployment [World Bank]

The 2011 uprisings also showed the importance of the buy in of the security forces and a given countries institutional memory with pluralism and tolerance. A supportive external environment helped but also necessary was elite miscalculation and an organized opposition. And here Tunisia ticked all these boxes finding in Yadh Ben Achour, the Constitutional Lawyer and son of the former mufti of Tunisia, a person of gravitas and moral authority to design the political transition.

But even Tunisia’s successful political transition may yet be tripped up by the political economy of the ‘deep state’. Tunisia has to cut its public sector wage bill, reduce subsidies, restructure loss-making state-owned enterprises, fight corruption and build a more equitable tax system. (9) Tunisia’s revolution will only be considered a success when it tackles tax fraud, and the ruling-class oligarchs who are deeply rooted in the economy through state-owned enterprises and monopolies. They are enabled by outdated regulations and clientele networks and protect themselves through tax evasion and political collusion. (10)

And process also matters. While all countries make their own choices and take different routes from crisis to Constitutional government, Egypt's bizarre transitional sequence, concocted against all legal advice, between the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces and the Ikhwan, in no small way produced disastrous results. Simply put, the military entered the political transition hoping that there wouldn't be one and the design reflected this. It compelled President Morsi to rule by decree in 2012 and set up conditions for the coup by General Sisi in 2013. A young Egyptian friend who had experienced the euphoria of Tahrir Square recalled weeping silently on the family sofa while his relatives cheered the shooting by police and soldiers of 800 Muslim Brotherhood supporters in Rabaa al-Adawiya Square on August 14, 2013. It was the worst incidence of political violence in the country's modern history. He wept not for the Ikhwan but for Egypt.

This was the death knell of the first Arab uprisings and the clarion call for the Saudi-Emirati counter-revolution. It shattered the Doha-Ankara-Cairo axis: Qatari funding, Turkey as model, Egypt as center. A regional proxy war ensued among the Sunni led by the UAE against the Muslim Brotherhood and Qatar and it is unresolved today.

Regional Developments

Since 2015, the royal house of Saud has undergone a generational transition in the line of succession. Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman, stands to be the next King. The Yemen war and Qatar blockade partly served to obscure his divisive rise. The Crown Prince has initiated overdue and ambitious reforms which require Saudi nationalization and diversification of the economy and radical growth of the private sector. Optimistically called Vision 2030, the most sober analysis suggests a timeframe of decades before these reforms can diversify the Kingdom into productive areas other than oil and ensure a reasonable standard of living for its growing population. In parallel, a global energy transformation is underway that might hasten the turn toward renewable energy sources. And, an unprecedented global abundance of oil and natural gas will depress prices just when Saudi needs to maximize the value of its current reserves. In this context Iran's normalized re-entry into oil markets and the regional economy will drop prices when the world is moving away from fossil fuels. Hence, a hedging strategy for Saudi Arabia would be to support policies that keep Iran's energy resources in the ground.

ARAB UPRISING: A NEW WAVE IN 2019



IRAQ

The country is seeing the largest demonstrations since the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003. Since the mass unrests erupted in Baghdad and southern Iraq on October 1, more than 330 people have been killed. Protesters are demanding the overthrow of a political class seen as corrupt and beholden to foreign interests.



LEBANON

Prime Minister Saad Hariri announced the resignation of his government on October 29, days after a pan-sectarian movement began an unprecedented protest against the country's ruling elite on October 17. Demonstrators are demanding a complete overhaul of the political class saying they are fed up with the same families dominating government institutions.



ALGERIA

President Abdelaziz Bouteflika had to resign in April after months of demonstrations on the street. Demonstrations against the political elite have escalated in recent weeks ahead of the next month's presidential election. The protesters claim all five candidates in the fray to replace Bouteflika are known to have links with him.



SUDAN

The country has been in the midst of a political crisis since long-serving President Omar al-Bashir was overthrown in April in a military coup. The military and pro-democracy movement have been locked in a tussle for power that has led to mass protests and killings.

CGTN

New Arab uprisings [CGTN]

Russia's dramatic entry into the Syrian conflict in September 2015 has altered the strategic landscape further. Putin's gambit in Syria has been years in gestation and is better than a weak hand and more than a gamble. Russian designs in Syria are linked to a strategic vision that has Russia expanding its influence from the Arctic Circle through Crimea, the Black Sea

and the Caspian Sea, Turkey and Syria. This vision, as presented by Rosneft CEO Igor Sechin has Russia controlling the energy production areas and acting as a go-between for the non-energy producing area, i.e. Europe and Asia. Russia and the Middle East are now part of the same geopolitical unit, for the first time in history. (11)

Importantly, Russia is talking to everybody from Algeria to Iran and from Turkey to Northern Kenya. The dialogue concerns energy (oil, natural gas and nuclear), S400 air defence systems and private security contractors. It certainly doesn't include democracy or political transitions which Putin doesn't believe in. Russia is the only country, outside Saudi Arabia, UAE, Bahrain and Egypt to classify the Muslim Brotherhood as terrorists. Only Russia and Israel supported the Iraqi Kurds ill-fated September 2017 independence referendum because Kurdistan has become the region's cheapest supply of energy.

In May 2018 the Trump administration withdrew from the JCPOA. The subsequent 'sanctions war' has led Iran back to a path of pursuing enrichment and suspended the habit of cooperation achieved through negotiations, to deal with regional concerns. The blithe withdrawal by the US President from the accord, and against the wishes of all other signatories, suggests that Iran's nuclear enrichment may not actually be the guiding concern here.

The September 14th strikes on Saudi Arabia's Abqaiq plant and the Khurais oil field seemed a plausible response by Iran to a relentless media and economic assault waged against it by John Bolton, Mohamed Bin Salman and Israel's Benjamin Netanyahu. Yet, till now there is still no forensic evidence as to who carried out the attacks, and this for an incident that might well have sparked the region's next war. Subsequently, Saudi Arabia has indicated a willingness to talk with Iran and also with the Houthi in Yemen to end that hapless fiasco. The UAE has signed maritime and security agreements with Iran. The two countries that couldn't afford a war in the first place found themselves confronting a country that has nothing to lose.

US policy through all of this has reflected narrow interests over national interests. The US seems to see the region through the prophylactic of video screens and drone lens. The Levant populations have had the threat of yet another war hanging over their heads for the past two years. This threat peaked in the summer of 2019. It's no coincidence that Lebanon and Iraq

erupted shortly thereafter. With such erratic policy on display the people had no choice but to take to the streets. The gestation of protests in Algeria and Sudan began earlier.

Algeria

Algeria's peaceful protests known as the Hirak movement began on 16 February 2019, ten days after President Abdelaziz Bouteflika announced he would run for a fifth term. Bouteflika had been incapacitated since a stroke in 2013 and was not running the country in any case. The prospects of a marionette leading the country, while its oil and gas wealth is expertly mismanaged, sparked daily protests throughout Algeria which have lasted for months and have settled into weekly demonstrations each Friday for the general population, Tuesday for students and more recently night marches. The fundamentally leaderless Hirak movement has drawn widespread support from parts of the state apparatus but has struggled to shift the authorities toward reform. (12)

By contrast Algeria's military, the Peoples National Army (PNA) under the leadership of General Ahmed Gaïd Salah seems determined to wait it out and in the second half of 2019 has cleared out political and business leaders close to the old regime as well as potential political rivals. Plans to hold a broad-based national conference to consider legislative reforms were abandoned in July 2019. The protesters see the military and the transitional authorities as too closely linked to a group of politicians, business leaders and military figures collectively called *le pouvoir* or *Le mafia*.

Leading up to 2019 Algeria had in fact experienced successive waves of unrest since 2013: an ecological protest movement against shale gas exploration in In Salah, sectarian clashes between Sunni Arabs and Ibadi Berbers in Ghardaia and in Ouargla, a youth movement protesting high unemployment and government neglect. (13) By 2016 it was clear that the state had to cut spending, reform subsidies and diversify the economy. A "new social contract" was required in the face of shrinking hydrocarbon reserves; decreasing exports, increasing domestic consumption, an inefficient energy sector and protracted corruption scandals with Sonatrach the state-owned oil company which had seen off four energy ministers and six heads of Sonatrach since 2010. (14)

New hydrocarbons legislation approved by the Assemblée Populaire Nationale (APN, the lower house) allows for more favourable terms for foreign partners through contracts similar

to production-sharing agreements rather than the in-place concession agreements, which favor the state. This is deeply unpopular and a sign of desperation because it's akin to selling the family jewels at a discount. The military is also seeking assistance from the UAE and Russia. The future is highly uncertain given the military's decision to orchestrate a managed transition. (15) But Algeria's economic woes; it needs an oil price of \$116 per barrel in order to balance its budget, could yet force the military's hand to allow genuine change. (16)

Part 2 of this paper will be published next week.

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teaches courses on political transitions the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the Gulf States in the Middle East at the University of California, Berkeley. He was a member of the UN's stand-by mediation team and worked in Benghazi and Tripoli during the Libyan revolution in 2011 among other assignments in Djibouti, Iraq and Malawi.

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- 2) Kapuscinski said it best. "Books about revolutions should begin with a psychological chapter, "one that shows how a harassed, terrified man suddenly breaks his terror, stops being afraid ...man gets rid of fear and feels free. Without that there would be no revolution."Ryszard Kapuscinski Shah of Shahs (Vintage Books New York 1992) p.111.
- 3) Olivier Roy The Politics of Chaos in the Middle East (Columbia University Press New York 2008) p. 9.
- 4) Ibid; pp59-61.
- 5) Jean-Pierre Filiu The Arab Revolution: Ten lessons from the democratic uprising (Oxford University Press New York 2011) p. 105.
- 6) Conversation between the author and Saudi religious scholar Abdullah Aloudah November 4, 2019.
- 7) Olivier Roy The Politics of Chaos pp 110-116.
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- 9) Economist Intelligence Unit Country Report Tunisia generated on December 7, 2019 p.6.
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- 11) Bruno Maçães 'Russia's new energy gamble' Cairo Review 28/2018 pp. 56-63.
- 12) See Thomas Serres interesting dialectic on critiquing the revolution 'Can the Algerian revolutionary speak? The challenges of analyzing a political crisis realtime' October 12, 2019 <https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/40331/Can-the-Algerian-Revolutionary-Speak-The-Challenges-of-Analyzing-a-Political-Crisis-in-Real-Time> last accessed October 12, 2019.
- 13) International Crisis Group 'Algeria's South: Trouble's Bellwether' Middle East and North Africa Report N°171 21 November 2016, pi.
- 14) Ibid, p.3.
- 15) Economist Intelligence Unit Country Report Algeria generated on December 4th 2019, p.4.
- 16) Dalia Ghanem 'A Military in Transition Mode' Carnegie Middle East Center September 27, 2019 <https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/79931> last accessed November 30, 2019.