

# The Role of the Military in Middle East/ North Africa. Protest Movements of 2019

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In the Arab Spring movements of 2011 and the years immediately following, military and security forces were able to rely on a menu of tried-and-true tactics to restore the traditional political order or manage a transition on their own terms, either through force or by leveraging their prestige as national institutions. In Tunisia, the military and security services stood aside and confined themselves to maintaining order as political pressure built on President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali until he was forced to board a plane for exile in Saudi Arabia, after which civilian activists and politicians moved to determine the way forward. In Egypt, the military general staff stage-managed President Hosni Mubarak's peaceful removal, largely to safeguard their own privileged position at the apex of political and economic power. In Libya, Muammar Gaddafi's military prosecuted his ruthless campaign to exterminate anti-regime protesters and rebels, before largely disintegrating after the imposition of a UN-authorized "No-Fly Zone" and a subsequent NATO-led bombing campaign. Some militaries escaped the test altogether, as in Algeria and Iraq, where no widespread demonstrations occurred.

But in 2019, massive political demonstrations broke out once more throughout the Arab world, just as they had in 2011, and for much the same reasons: extreme frustration with autocratic, unresponsive gov-

ernments that failed to provide economic security and even basic services; the persistence of corruption on both national and local scales that robbed countries of crucial resources; denial of political freedoms and basic human rights; and the unaccountability of the political class, either under law or through free and fair elections. But this time things were different: armies and security forces of the Arab states were forced into unaccustomed roles in the face of sharply altered political and economic circumstances; in addition, highly motivated citizens adapted their tactics based on hard-earned experience. The authoritarian crackdowns that helped surviving regimes recover their equilibrium in the 2011-14 period belied the fact that the political landscape of the Middle East had been altered irrevocably, and the relationship between rulers and ruled had undergone subtle but significant changes.

## **A New Political/Economic Landscape Changes the Rules of Engagement**

What had changed since 2011? For one thing, the collapse of world oil prices, beginning in 2014, subverted the "authoritarian bargain"<sup>1</sup> that allowed autocracies in the region to maintain order and deflect challenges to their power by purchasing political acquiescence through generous government subsidies, jobs and other economic favours. As this bargain eroded, it became much more difficult for governments to minimize criticism and dissent. Simultaneously, the decline in oil prices and the economic strains they created for Arab states – not only the oil producers but those, like Egypt and Lebanon,

<sup>1</sup> See DIAMOND, Larry, "Democracy's Past and Future: Why Are There No Arab Democracies?" *Journal of Democracy*, 21, January 2010, and DUNNE, Michele, "Fear and Learning in the Arab Uprisings," *Journal of Democracy*, Volume 31, Number 1, January 2020.

that depended on assistance from wealthy Gulf benefactors – exposed deep flaws in governance, most dramatically the inability of politicians to meaningfully address the root causes of their citizens' discontent.<sup>2</sup> Another factor was the adaptability of the protest movements themselves. Many activists had learned the hard way that mass opposition movements were highly susceptible to internal divisions and personality clashes, which had served in the past to render coherent dialogue between protest leaders and the authorities nearly impossible, ceding momentum to regimes and their supporters. The protesters of 2019 were more cognizant of this pitfall, and tended to present a more united front and coherent demands. Likewise, they now understood that persistence was a key to success; the longer massive numbers of protesters could remain mobilized and in the streets, the longer they could maintain pressure on regimes and increase the odds of achieving their political goals. Their determination in this regard was amplified by two other lessons learned.

First, regime leaders could not be trusted to carry out pledges of reform or fair elections in the absence of unremitting pressure; military leaders in particular had lost all credibility as neutral guarantors of state security, and proved to be largely self-interested actors intent on safeguarding their own power and prerogatives. The example of the Egyptian military and the ruthless manner in which it crushed Egypt's brief experiment in democracy in 2013 was absorbed by every popular movement of 2019. Protesters in Algeria specifically rejected the Egyptian model of naked military rule, while those in Sudan chanted "Victory or Egypt!" – meaning either they succeeded in pressing their demands for civilian rule, or Egypt-style military tyranny would be forced upon them.

Second, peaceful protest was far more effective than violent protest, which only tended to play into governments' hands, as the experiences of Syria, Yemen and Libya demonstrated starkly. Non-violent protests created forms of pressure that civilian and especially military authorities found increasingly difficult to resist, especially the longer it went on; violent crackdowns by governments against peaceful protesters only seemed to energize their cause.

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The experience of four major Arab countries that saw mass protests in 2019 – Algeria, Iraq, Lebanon, and Sudan – illustrates the predicament faced by the military and security services (which are often indistinguishable) in responding to demands for political change today. Primarily, these experiences highlight the glaring limitations military and security forces exhibited as they confronted new waves of protest in the context of a rapidly changing political and economic landscape.

### Algeria: Military Tries, Fails to Impose Solution, and Stalemate Follows

In 2011, Algeria had largely escaped the widespread agitation for political change faced by other countries of the region; the prevailing wisdom held that, having undergone the searing experience of a civil war in the 1990s following the military's cancellation of national elections that would have brought the Islamic Salvation Front to power, the Algerian people were in no mood to risk another bloody confrontation with Algeria's army. Most observers did not anticipate any meaningful challenge to the Algerian military's control over the country and presidential succession.

But the slow collapse of oil prices that began in 2014, and the erosion of the authoritarian bargain that went with them, began to loosen the military-led government's firm grip on power. This trend was abetted by the deterioration in public services, a high rate of youth unemployment (which approached 30 percent in 2018), corruption scandals, and sharply limited civil liberties.

<sup>2</sup> MUASHER, Marwan, "The Next Arab Uprising: The Collapse of Authoritarianism in the Middle East," *Foreign Policy*, Vol. 97, No.6, November/December 2018, pp.113-124.

When Algeria's longtime President, Abdelaziz Bouteflika, in ill health after a stroke in 2013, announced his intention to run for a fifth term in February, Algerians were having none of it: huge street demonstrations dubbed the Hirak (movement) quickly made his renewed bid for office untenable. The army's chief of staff, General Ahmed Gaid Salah, forced him out and picked as interim President the leader of the upper house of parliament. This move, designed to impose a solution aimed at protecting the existing military-backed order in a slightly different form, also proved unacceptable to the opposition.

With polling data revealing that 82 percent of the protesters favoured a complete change of Algeria's political system, and 80 percent of the lower ranks of Algeria's military agreeing with them,<sup>3</sup> a resort to a violent crackdown was unlikely, and the military leadership found its options significantly restricted. Nevertheless, the military continued to assert its perceived prerogative to shape the transition to the post-Bouteflika order. It brooked no disagreement on the timing of a new election, despite vehement public opposition to the exercise, which was widely (and correctly) considered a ploy to cement the military's behind-the-scenes grip on power. After a false start involving a proposed date in April, the generals moved ahead with new elections in December 2019, public opposition and calls for boycotts notwithstanding. The exercise ushered former Prime Minister Abdelmadjid Tebboune into the presidency, heading a government largely comprised, like him, of Bouteflika-era ministers, flying in the face of protesters' demands for an end to the old system.

Since then, Algeria's politics have devolved into something of a standoff, with the continuation of large-scale protests rejecting governance-as-usual, while the military-backed regime not only fails to move toward liberalization but has intensified its crackdown on civil liberties and key protest figures. The Hirak has been hampered by a lack of organized leadership able to present a coherent set of demands in negotiations with the military, unlike in Sudan. However, while the protests have not yet yielded the sweeping changes demanded by activists, the military has been denied a completely free hand. The

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### **Iraq: No Solution from the Military: It's Part of the Problem**

In Iraq, a country with a well-established culture of political violence and very little tradition of amicable civil-military relations, the mass street protests that erupted in early October 2019 posed a serious challenge to the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF). The protests began in southern Iraq and Baghdad with demands for jobs and improved government services, such as clean water and reliable electricity, but the brutality of the ISF's initial response – *killing over a hundred people* in the first five days of the demonstrations – rapidly produced stronger demands for far more sweeping change, including an end to corruption, sectarian politics and its accompanying spoils system, and overweening Iranian influence in Iraqi politics.

These demands threatened the core interests of Iraq's power brokers and security chiefs, who likely acted on their own initiative in many cases when deciding how to deal with the protesters. The result was predictable: the ISF began escalating its level of violence as the demonstrations showed no sign of abating, and were soon joined in the streets by pro-Iran militias, which often appeared to act parallel to the ISF and occasionally in coordination with them. By early January 2020, over 600 protesters had been killed, according to Amnesty International. Thousands more were wounded or illegally incarcerated.

<sup>3</sup> GREWAL, Sharan; KILAVUZ, M. Tahir and KUBINEC, Robert, "Algeria's uprising: A survey of protesters and the military," Brookings Institution, July 2019, accessed 8 June, 2020 at [www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/FP\\_20190711\\_algeria.pdf](http://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/FP_20190711_algeria.pdf).

As subsequent events illustrated, however, these harsh tactics would not prevail in the new political environment in which the Iraqi military found itself operating in 2019. The violent response of ISF and militia forces strengthened the determination of protest leaders and demonstrators, who remained largely peaceful, to stay in the streets and populate a major protest camp in the heart of Baghdad. This persistence, and the inability of the government to meet protesters' demands or hold anyone responsible for the killings to account, led to the resignation of Prime Minister Adel Abdel Mahdi in late November, provoking a new crisis as Iraqi politicians could not agree on a replacement due to disputes revolving around the very issues the demonstrators were protesting against: the privileges of the political class and Iran's influence within the government. Mustafa al-Kadhimi, the Iraqi intelligence chief, was finally approved as the new PM in a parliamentary vote in May 2020. He will serve essentially as a caretaker until early elections can take place or regularly-scheduled national elections occur in two years.

### The ineffectiveness of the Iraqi Security Forces response to the demonstrators has been laid bare. Protests diminished only after the outbreak of the coronavirus

In the meantime, the ineffectiveness of the ISF response to the demonstrators has been laid bare. Protests diminished only after the outbreak of the coronavirus and the withdrawal of populist cleric Muqtada Sadr's support from the demonstrations. But the situation remains extremely fluid. Predictions of government failure are rife. In the meantime, demonstrations resumed in several provinces in May, focusing on the same demands as last year, including accountability for security forces and militia killings of protesters. Amidst the confusion, however, one thing seems clear: Iraq's security forces

remain very much part of the problem, and not, as currently organized and led, a national institution that can lead to a solution, or impose one of its own.

### Lebanon: The Army's Retreat To Corporate Interests

Like Iraq and Algeria, Lebanon had largely side-stepped the protests of 2011. But new tax measures pressed in October 2019 in response to a deepening economic crisis – due in no small part to corruption and government mismanagement – quickly touched off nationwide protests in the streets and online.

The role of the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) in responding to these developments was uneasy from the start. The LAF is among the few government institutions that commands widespread respect and is generally regarded as non-sectarian, in stark contrast to Lebanon's leaders and political institutions. Thus, the LAF was initially regarded as a potential ally by protesters, who publicly appealed to the army to back their demands for new elections along non-sectarian lines. Many called for the army itself to lead a peaceful transition of power.

The LAF, however, appeared to have been co-opted by the government before the protesters could do so. The day after mass demonstrations broke out on 17 October, the army used excessive force to break up peaceful protests, according to Human Rights Watch. As in Algeria, the evident sympathy of many in the enlisted ranks for the demonstrators' cause possibly prevented worse violence. But as the protests continued, and the army continued to break up peaceful protest camps and assault demonstrators physically, many began to lose faith in the LAF as a sympathetic actor and as potential leaders of a major political transition. As one man told Al-Jazeera, "The solution definitely isn't a takeover by the army, not even for transition. There is no such thing as temporary army transition in this part of the world. The army commander was brought in by the parties, you can't trust him."<sup>4</sup>

The situation did not improve much in subsequent months. Reports of human rights violations and use

<sup>4</sup> Timour AZHARI "Lebanon protesters weigh army's role amid political crisis," *Al-Jazeera*, 24 October, 2019, accessed 9 June, 2020 at [www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/10/lebanon-protesters-weigh-army-role-political-crisis-191023154228426.html](http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/10/lebanon-protesters-weigh-army-role-political-crisis-191023154228426.html).

of excessive force by the LAF continued throughout early 2020. In January, security forces attacked protesters who were trying to block the entrance to parliament before a session scheduled to discuss the annual budget; dozens were injured by rubber bullets, tear gas canisters and beatings. A similar scene was repeated in front of parliament on February 11. In the meantime, the use of military courts to try civilians charged in connection with the protests drew international condemnation.

In spite of all this, the LAF retains a considerable reservoir of public respect, and protester deaths have been minimal compared to, for example, Iraq; indeed some of the most egregious human rights violations have been attributed to Hezbollah and allies in the Amal movement, which repeatedly attacked demonstrators and burned protest encampments. But the armed forces, as in Iraq, remain uncomfortably in the middle, between the protest movement and the new government, now dominated by Hezbollah since the January 2020 resignation of former Prime Minister Saad Hariri. Unable to serve as a disinterested mediator between activists and the government, and incapable of restraining non-governmental forces such as Hezbollah, which had seized a role in confronting the protesters, the LAF opted instead to protect its corporate interests. It essentially abrogated responsibility for managing the crisis, taking no action that would further jeopardize its standing with the public, thus protecting itself and the system from which it benefits. As 2020 began, Lebanon remained in turmoil, with the military, having been outflanked by the political classes and unable to play an effective role, no longer seen as a potential agent for change.

### **Sudan: Military and Civilians Working Together, for Now**

Faced with a major challenge to its control, Sudan's military in 2019, as in Algeria, found itself in a difficult position: as a key regime pillar, it risked unraveling along with the other elements of the country's power structure if it acceded to sweeping demands for change by Sudan's population. But, at the same time, it was no longer in a position to use force to drive events and dictate the outcome. Throughout 2019, the Sudanese military was thus forced to walk

a tightrope, uneasily negotiating the new realities of popular protest as it was pulled between accommodating protesters' demands and unleashing a violent crackdown.

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Massive demonstrations in Sudan began in late 2018, for much the same immediate reasons as in other countries: in this case the sudden imposition of austerity measures, including cuts to electricity and bread subsidies, invoked by the government on an emergency basis in response to rapidly falling oil prices. The measure touched off large street demonstrations in Khartoum and other cities, and activists soon focused their attention on what they saw as the root cause of their immediate difficulties: the corrupt and repressive military-backed dictatorship of Omar al-Bashir, who had been in power for 30 years. Protesters occupied the public square outside military headquarters on 6 April, demanding that the generals spearhead a change in government; five days later, having concluded that his personal tenure was no longer tenable, the military forced Bashir from power. Three months later the former dictator appeared before a Khartoum court to face corruption charges. But the military quickly came up against the limits of its own power. The military initially installed a Transitional Military Council led by Lt. Gen. Abdel Fattah Abdelrahman Burhan to maintain order and rule the country for an unspecified transitional period until new elections could be held, presumably on terms set by the generals themselves. But in the face of contending protests, the military soon turned to violent repression in a failing effort to enforce its edicts. On 3 June a bloody massacre of protesters drew sharp international condemnation; the violence, which was reportedly encouraged by Egyptian advisers, failed to drive the protesters from the streets.

As a result of this persistence, even in the face of government violence, and the increasingly untenable



ble political position in which the military found itself, army leaders felt they had no choice but to engage in genuine negotiations with civilian activists. After months of talks, the Forces for Freedom and Change, an umbrella opposition coalition comprising the Sudanese Professionals Association, other civil society groups, opposition parties and protest leaders, came to an agreement with the military on a genuine transitional arrangement that avoided the trap of early elections, which had been proposed to maximize the military's chances of remaining in power. Under the terms of the agreement, a Sovereign Council, to include six civilians and five generals, was established to run the country until elections in 2022. The chairmanship was set to rotate between the military and civilian leaders. In September 2019, a new 20-member cabinet comprising military and civilian officials was seated.

It is by no means clear that this arrangement will lead to free and peaceful elections, and much less that the armed forces will acquiesce to civilian rule in the future. The Sudanese military has disputed would-be transitions in the past. But the results so far are promising, and show how a determined civilian protest movement can neutralize a harsh authoritarian response through force of numbers, persistence, organization and clear political goals.

### Lessons Learned

The protests in Iraq, Algeria, Lebanon and Sudan reflect the unique experiences and histories of each country, but can offer certain lessons in common that might serve as a wakeup call for regional military and security services. Foreign backers of MENA-region autocrats should take note too; all too often they have focused on military and security agencies as guarantors of stability and bestowed on them the lion's share of foreign assistance, to the exclusion of broader political trends and emerging popular voices.

- In all four cases, the sharp deterioration of economic conditions and the clumsy efforts of governments to address them brought to mind larger failures of governance, including corruption and the inadequacies of entrenched systems that seemed to reward politicians and their wealthy

allies at the expense of the majority of citizens. Public perceptions of systemic failure did not spare the security forces, whose self-interest and double-dealing were soon in the spotlight too, once people focused on their responsibility for propping up these systems in the first place. This loss of credibility will continue to have a strong impact on the ability of regional militaries to influence demands for, and the pace of, political change going forward.

- Use of force by the military is no longer the deterrent it once was, and cannot be counted on to compel protesters to back down from their demands or drive them permanently from the streets. State violence will remain an effective short-term response in some cases, but is no longer decisive. This will require regional militaries to think beyond their own corporate interests and be willing to accept compromise solutions – even to the point of sharing or ceding power – offered by other voices and other interests, including activists and civil society.
- Public opinion matters, perhaps now more so than ever, and opinion within the lower ranks of regional military and security services matters too. Many enlisted see themselves as being of the people, not of the generals, and this self-identification can not only limit the application of state violence in some instances, but can also restrict the political options military and security chiefs have at their disposal.

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### The COVID Crisis and the Future of Popular Protest

The depredations of the novel coronavirus temporarily drove many protesters from the streets, often

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with a push from security forces ostensibly acting on “public health” concerns. Demonstrators have now begun to return in significant numbers in Iraq and Lebanon, but with possible spikes in infection rates caused by mass gatherings and no effective treatment or vaccine expected in the immediate future, the status of the protest movements going forward is in some doubt. Moreover, governments have seized upon the coronavirus emergency to crack down on political gatherings: Algeria, for example, banned all public protests on 17 March after Hirk leaders had called for the suspension of street protests because of the viral outbreak, and subsequent-

ly stepped up arrests and harassment of Hirk activists, perhaps thinking that the movement was less able to mobilize opposition during the pandemic. The possibility that regional authoritarians will move to make coronavirus restrictions permanent, or use the crisis as an excuse to enact sweeping restrictions on political freedoms more generally,<sup>5</sup> is not only very real but being played out in a number of key countries, such as Egypt.

SARS-CoV-2, as the virus is formally named, might provide some breathing space for authoritarian regimes to recalibrate their tactics and consolidate their positions, but the pause will by no means be permanent. As nationwide protests in the United States and Europe against police killings of black Americans and systemic racism more broadly have shown, mass demonstrations for political change cannot be suppressed for long, pandemic or no pandemic. This will remain true in the Middle East as well, where both regimes and their military backers will find it difficult to rely only on the old tactics of repression and insincere reform measures in a political environment that has changed considerably in the years since the Arab Spring.

<sup>5</sup> DUNNE, Charles W., “Authoritarianism and the Middle East in the Time of COVID-19,” Arab Center Washington DC, 2 April, 2020, accessed 8 June, 2020 at [http://arabcenterdc.org/policy\\_analyses/authoritarianism-and-the-middle-east-in-the-time-of-covid-19/](http://arabcenterdc.org/policy_analyses/authoritarianism-and-the-middle-east-in-the-time-of-covid-19/).