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RETURN TO REVOLUTION

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COVER Demonstrators shout during a protest in Tripoli, Lebanon, November 2, 2019. (Goran Tomasevic/Reuters)

Many observers were quick to announce the failure of the 2011 uprisings known as the Arab Spring when seemingly resilient authoritarians returned to power and once-inspiring revolutions descended into vicious civil wars. Off-stage, however, many refused to accept defeat and insisted on imagining alternative futures by organizing and joining protests both large and small. In December 2018, the Sudanese people launched a grassroots uprising—persisting for months until the Armed Forces removed President Omar al-Bashir from office in April 2019—making visible this simmering regional discontent, sparking a new round of mass uprisings that some refer to as Arab Spring 2.0.

The 2019 uprisings in Sudan, Algeria, Lebanon and Iraq, in addition to resurgent protests in Morocco and Jordan—all countries that did not experience revolutionary uprisings in 2011—extend the 2011 revolts to the rest of the region. But protestors no longer merely seek to topple their unelected dictators as we saw in 2011: They are demanding a fundamental change of the entire political and economic system. In Iraq and Lebanon, they are also rejecting the political class and their use of sectarianism to maintain their wealth and power chanting "All of them means all of them!"

MERIP devotes this double issue *Return to Revolution* to assessing the nature and challenges confronting this new wave of uprisings through the interrelated themes of continuity, entanglement and counterrevolution.

We should see the 2019 uprisings as a continuation of 2011 because they highlight the unresolved structural problems of authoritarianism and economic injustice at the heart of 2011, which continue to produce mass resistance. Diverse and resurgent protest movements have sprouted up across Jordan since 2011 and small, localized protests have mobilized tens of thousands of Algerians in the past decade. Even 2011's lone success story, Tunisia, has seen mounting protests and anti-establishment politicians demanding to finish what they started in 2011.

The 2019 uprisings also reveal the entanglement of local contexts with regional and global structures, resistances and insidious repressive apparatuses. Not only are revolutionaries and regimes alike learning from experiences in other countries, but states increasingly intervene directly in the domestic politics of other regional states. While the Saudi-Iranian rivalry shaped events in the Bahraini, Yemeni and Syrian uprisings in 2011, a variety of actors, led by Saudi Arabia, are seeking to mold outcomes in Sudan, Lebanon and Iraq. Tunisia's functioning democracy has not been immune from the global populist moment, where an upstart former professor was elected president on the promise of nothing less than a social revolution. In Turkey, President Erdoğan's assault on Rojava cannot be separated from dramatic fluctuations in the global economy.

And as with 2011, authoritarian regimes, regional elites and their sponsors will go to great lengths to prevent popular victories in 2019: They mobilize sectarianism and dire warnings about terrorism, war and economic collapse as counterrevolutionary tools for quashing dissent. The counterrevolutionary military regime in Egypt deploys trauma as a tool for social and political control. Counterrevolution is also sponsored globally, and the Trump administration has emboldened regional autocrats to crack down on dissent. Russia's reach into regional politics is only increasing, and not only in Syria, Iraq and Lebanon. And the wealthy and ambitious Gulf states are flexing their muscle not only in obvious cases like Yemen, but in Jordan, Egypt, Iraq and, indeed, anywhere they feel it may have an impact.

Mass mobilizations of revolutionary ambition and proportion have returned to a region that never saw protests disappear, even in the face of repressive regimes and counterrevolutionary reaction. Protest, mobilization and the desire for change have proved enduring and will continue to shape the politics in the region for the near future. ∎

Demonstrators use a tuk-tuk to carry a wounded man during anti-government protests in Baghdad, November 4, 2019.   THAIER AL-SUDANI/REUTERS

Iraqis Demand a Country

Zahra Ali

Iraq's uprising began in early October 2019 when thousands of young men took to the streets of Baghdad. They were protesting the government dismissal of a popular army commander who had led the fight against ISIS—Iraq's

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counterterrorism chief, Lt. Gen. Abdul-Wahab al-Saadi—whose removal was widely seen to be at the behest of corrupt politicians, possibly linked to Iran. The public outrage at al-Saadi's dismissal underlined the growing chasm between the people and the ruling political elite amidst ongoing

system and calls for a revolution. Protesters chanted the 2011 Arab uprising's familiar demand, "The people want the fall of the regime" but also added more Iraqi-based slogans such as "There is no homeland" and "We want a country."

The remarkable scale of millions of Iraqis rising up in largely peaceful protest across the country has been matched by remarkably violent repression: More than 500 people have been killed and more than 15,000 wounded by government and paramilitary groups using live ammunition, machine guns, stun grenades, anti-riot tanks and military-grade tear gas.[1] The Iraqi government has also imposed media, Internet and telecommunication blackouts, as well as curfews. Many protesters have been threatened, intimidated, arrested, beaten up, kidnapped and even assassinated by security forces.

Despite the repression, protesters have remained committed to non-violent civil disobedience. The protests are led by the youth and the disenfranchised, including many women—aided by ubiquitous tuk-tuk taxi drivers from lower-class neighborhoods—but its ranks have also been joined by Iraqis from all backgrounds and regions across the country. Unions, syndicates and students of all levels have been on strike and many are calling for civil disobedience.

The unprecedented size and socio-economic diversity of the uprising indicates not only a widespread rebellion against toxic and unequal living conditions and corruption, as found in other regional uprisings. It is also a rejection of the ethno-sectarian political system—the *muhasasa* system—imposed on Iraq after the 2003 US invasion, which controls Iraq's growing oil-wealth surpluses. Chanting "We want a country," the youth-led protesters of Iraq are demanding nothing less than a new country as the uprising goes beyond narrowly defined political demands concerning electoral politics and legal reforms. The uprising also challenges dominant conservative societal norms and it is developing new codes of conduct and a new sense of belonging and inclusive community-building through collective action and organizing.

Demanding a Civic State

After suffering through the 2003 US invasion and the ensuing civil war, Iraq has witnessed waves of popular civil and political protests since 2009 throughout the country. In addition to protests in Iraqi Kurdistan, the Sunni majority al-Anbar region exploded in massive protests in 2012–2013 against sectarian repression and exclusion, which were violently repressed by the former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's government. It is only since 2015, however, that an unprecedented escalation of popular protests has mobilized a new generation of Iraqi youth and a much wider cross-section of its population across sect and class.

The 2015 Iraqi protests were launched by mostly young, educated men under 30 years of age from the lower middle class who are primarily educators, teachers or state employees. Starting in July 2015, their weekly Friday protests expanded from tens of thousands of protesters throughout the country

anti-government protests over unemployment and dismal public services, which protesters linked to pervasive corruption and failed sectarian governance. In the following weeks, a spontaneous and leaderless protest movement quickly spread across the country, developing a strong presence in Iraq's Shi'i-dominated central and southern provinces, including cites such as Najaf, Karbala, Nasryia and Basra.

Initial demands for properly functioning state services—such as the supply of clean water and provision of electricity—and disgust with widespread corruption quickly led to more radical demands, such as an end to the sectarian political

to almost a million participants at their peak. The protesters denounced corruption and demanded a functioning welfare state for redistributing Iraq's extensive oil wealth to its citizens and improving its deficient public services. What was novel and important, however, was that protesters called out sectarianism through chanting slogans such as *Bis mil-din baguna al-haramiya* (In the name of religion we were robbed by looters) and advanced the desire for a social order based on *madaniyya* (which could be translated as civic mindedness) as the basis of their struggle. The concept of *madaniyya* expresses a fundamental rejection of the *muhasasa* system established in 2003 by the US occupation, which determines political representation based on communal identities (religious, ethnic or sectarian). The protests were expressed as patriotic with widespread flying of the Iraqi flag and against all foreign influence, particularly that of Iran, in the country.

The 2015 protests were related to other initiatives and mobilizations mushrooming in Iraq at the time, especially among the youth who were experimenting with creative new forms of activism such as organizing a Valentine's Day celebration in Baghdad's downtown Tahrir Square to foster love and peacebuilding and the *Ana Iraqi Ana Aqraa* (I am Iraqi and I read) campaign that placed books on sidewalks and parks to promote a culture of reading. Many who launched these initiatives participated in the 2015 protests.

The core of the 2015 protesters grew up during the bloody sectarian civil war and in a country that lacks basic public infrastructure and where state institutions are structured by corruption and the nepotism of political parties. For this generation of protesters, the Islamist political elite, with its sectarianism and corruption, is responsible for the social and political crisis in the country. Thus, Islamism and identity-based political formation were increasingly rejected. There is an important generational gap between the activists born in the late 1990s and the ones born earlier: The younger activists are more radical in their demand for change and their rejection of the political regime, elites and the system altogether. Expressions of a "Saddam nostalgia" are even noticeable among the generation who never experienced life under former dictator Saddam Hussein's authoritarian regime.[2]

Rejecting the System in Basra

The leadership of the 2015 movement, however, belonged to the older generation—mainly men with former activist experience and affiliated with civil society or political organizations such as the Iraqi Communist Party. The Shiʻi Islamist Sadrist movement also quickly appropriated the protests and forged an alliance with secular parties and individuals. This development turned the protest into a reformist movement that created an electoral list that ran in the 2018 elections. I conducted fieldwork during these protests and interviewed several young activists who had initiated the protests in Baghdad and who later boycotted the election of 2018 due to a strong sense of

betrayal by the Sadrists and the older activists who took leadership of their movement. The sociologist Ali Taher al-Hamoud argues convincingly that the 2015 protests were the protest of a middle class seeking to assert itself after decades of silence.[3] The end of the United Nations sanctions against Iraq in 2003 saw the re-emergence of this class that had been previously destroyed by the economic crisis and successive wars.

But the next wave of protests that erupted in 2018 in Basra—an oil-rich province from which most of Iraq's wealth is extracted but which suffers from a severe lack of public infrastructure and non-existent basic services—went further than those of 2015. Protesters refused formal leadership and avoided political parties and any centralized organization. They were largely composed of educated and non-educated young men whose demands went far beyond calling for *madaniyya* against the sectarian *muhasasa* to rejecting the entire political system and calling for a functioning state that could provide for all its people. It is from the Basra protests that the now commonly heard slogans such as "No, no to Political Parties" and "We want a homeland" began to circulate in Iraq.

Basra province represents an extreme version of Iraq's major socio-economic challenges that Omar Dewachi calls the "toxicity of everyday survival" and which includes a proliferation of cancers and ill-health in the absence of state infrastructure, health, education and other public services.[4] Basra is also where many economically distressed and war-displaced populations have resettled, creating tensions between locals and those newly arrived.[5] Basra's demonstrations developed into massive protests of the poor and the dispossessed but with no centralized organization, which allowed security forces to repress it more easily. As an act of protest and an attempt to contain popular anger, Basra's provincial council voted to declare its autonomy from the central government. The council also rejected the government's blocking of the legal quota of $5 per barrel of oil that should be provided to the province to enable it to build its infrastructure and services.[6]

From Protest to Revolution

The 2019 protests are following the Basra model in their form and demands. Wider than a lower middle class seeking to assert itself, this uprising is about the poor, the disempowered and the marginalized demanding a new system. Those who initiated the rebellion are still at its core—the street merchants, the underpaid waiters, those who carry heavy boxes in the markets and the tuk-tuk drivers who are literally the heroes of this uprising (carrying the wounded to the hospital and driving the protesters from one point to another to get around the roadblocks). Their ranks also include many young men who fought ISIS in Mosul and came back after the fight to grinding poverty and joblessness. These millennials and disenfranchised often claim that they have "nothing to lose" and that they would "prefer to die in Tahrir than from poverty and despair."

The bloody repression of peaceful protests—more than 150 were killed and thousands wounded by live ammunition by mercenaries and security forces in the first week—has only exacerbated the protests and pushed more people into the street. As a result, the millennials and disenfranchised at the core of the movement have been joined by a much larger segment of the population, which includes the middle class, high school and university students and the professional and workers' unions. Demonstrations have been augmented by workers' strikes and civil disobedience against the curfew imposed by the authorities around the country.

Tahrir Square in Baghdad—the most visible locus of mass protest—and public squares of cities all over Iraq have been transformed into inclusive spaces ruled and managed by the population. In Baghdad, the abandoned building commonly called the Turkish Restaurant in front of Tahrir square is the rear base of the uprising and has been renamed Uhud Mountain in reference to the prophetic battle of Uhud between the early Muslims and their Qurayshi Meccan enemies. Although protesters differ on tactics and strategies—with some insisting on maintaining Tahrir and the streets around it as spaces liberated from corrupt and sectarian state powers while others try to cross the bridges that lead to the Green Zone where state power resides—protesters are developing new and creative modes of organizing.

This new uprising features revolutionary modes of action and expression that go beyond any previous protest movement in the country. Its inclusivity is unprecedented: from young women of all classes who feel safe and comfortable in these new spaces and participate in the uprising at all levels from the front line to cooking and providing medical care to the wounded, to the participation of differently able individuals, as well as those living in precarious and informal housing. Protesters are developing original ways to express a sense of belonging to the country and proposing creative modes of sociability that transgress social and political hierarchies. These new practices include the founding of a journal named Tuk-Tuk to celebrate the heroic role of tuk-tuk drivers and their leadership, a new radio channel, the distribution of free food, the establishment of a free medical and psychological unit and the offering of all kinds of free services (from drugs to hairdressing). The protesters are, in effect, establishing new state forms by organizing public services such as street cleaning and re-painting, as well as the restoration of public monuments and the beautification of public spaces through original art and design. They are not only demanding, but actually making a country.

Arrayed against this unprecedented protest and demand for a country are the forces of the ruling elite's political system, which are leading the violence and repression. Iraq has no strong centralized state or regime but rather a militarized elite that developed after 2003 and which became further normalized and armed since the war against ISIS in 2014. The authorities, paramilitary forces and militias connected to the political elite,

backed by Iran, are those primarily responsible for killing, beating, threatening and intimidating demonstrators, civil society activists and journalists. Moreover, armed violence is not only the prerogative of para-military groups, militias or even the state. It is also widely practiced by the biggest social actor after the state—tribal leadership. The war against ISIS further increased the militarization of Iraqi society and the distribution of weapons: Soldiers are now back to civil life and weapons have been widely distributed beyond state security forces.

Beyond Issue Politics

The post-2003 ethnosectarian system of Iraqi elite politics that was established by the US-led occupation authorities has been dominated by what Nancy Fraser terms a "recognition" paradigm, in which ethnosectarian identity politics were imposed from the top and institutionalized.[7] Previous Iraqi protest movements rejected this paradigm, instead advancing what Faleh Jabar calls "issue politics" dominated by a "redistribution" paradigm—most clearly illustrated by the fact that these protests, while national, were primarily intra-sectarian in which mainly Shi'i citizens were protesting against the Shi'i political elite.[8]

The current uprising, however, goes beyond issue politics and economic redistribution, though those are central concerns. It is, more broadly, a revolt of Iraqi youth that has even reached Sunni areas of the country, in addition to its major presence in central and southern Iraq. Through grassroots collective organizing and the production of new spaces in Tahrir square and elsewhere, young Iraqis are challenging dominant societal norms and hierarchies, including religious and gender norms. The widespread participation of young women in this uprising highlights how the demand for economic redistribution is as central to the protesters as the demands for social freedom indicated by the slogan, "We want to live a life." This new Iraqi generation is connected to the outside world through social media and the Internet, and it does not share the traumas nor the symbolic social and religious limits of previous generations. It is a generation that is creating new imaginaries of belonging and new modes of civic and social life. It is demanding a country.

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Endnotes

1 According to the Iraqi Observatory for Human Rights.

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3 Ali Taher al-Hamoud, "Beyond Basra's Events: Problems and Possible Solutions," Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, Amman (February 2019). [Arabic]

4 Omar Dewachi, "Toxicity of Life and Everyday Survival in Iraq," *Jadaliyya*, August 13, 2013; and Dewachi, *Ungovernable Life: Mandatory Medicine and Statecraft in Iraq* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2017).

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7 Nancy Fraser, "From Redistribution to Recognition? Dilemmas of Justice in a 'Post-Socialist' Age," *New Left Review* I/212 (1995).

8 Faleh Jabar, "The Iraqi Protest Movement: From Identity Politics to Issue Politics," *London School of Economics, Middle East Center Paper Series* (2018).

Demonstrators wave Lebanese flags in Martyrs' Square during anti-government protests in Beirut, November 10, 2019. ANDRES MARTINEZ CASARES/REUTERS

Lebanon's *Thawra*

Rima Majed and Lana Salman

This uprising is demanding justice beyond sectarian, class, religious or cultural divides. In the clarity brought about by the uprising, the regime's politics of division has been challenged by the uprising's politics of solidarity.

O n November 19, 2019, protestors blocked all six entrances of the parliament building located in downtown Beirut in an effort to prevent parliamentary approval of a blanket amnesty law that was an attempt by Lebanese political elites to extinguish the 32-day-long national uprising through the appearance of reform. Although the proposed law granted amnesty to hundreds of people arrested and held for years without trial, the real thrust of the law aimed to pardon public officials accused of embezzlement, corruption and misuse of public office. The law also would have played the sectarian card by pardoning some Shi`i drug dealers from the Beqaa region and some Sunni Islamists from the north charged with terror offenses.

Putting such an item on the agenda for the first parliamentary session a month after the outbreak of Lebanon's *thawra* (revolution) was both unconstitutional and provocative—and illustrated the very corruption being called out by the protestors. In the midst of an unprecedented economic crisis and after the resignation of the government, Lebanese citizens expected the parliament to begin presidential consultations and deal with pressing issues, rather than find ways to pardon parliamentary criminal complicity in the economic crisis. Although one convoy of parliamentarians successfully made it into the building under cover of gunfire by security guards, protestors banged on pots, pans, garbage bins, steel gates enclosing buildings and anything that made noise. The protests forced the cancellation of the parliamentary session, resulting in widespread and even euphoric celebrations.

Lebanon's revolution began on October 17, 2019, as Lebanon's financial crisis was peaking. The government had proved incompetent to address such issues as the wildfires ravaging the country and shortages in gas and bread due to the US-dollar liquidity problem. Rage against the regime was finally unleashed when the government announced highly regressive taxes, including one on the popular social messaging service WhatsApp, leading hundreds of young men—mainly from deprived backgrounds—to mobilize in Beirut on their motorbikes, blocking roads and burning tires in protest. This initial protest rapidly spread to other parts of the country, from the north to the south, in a display of public disgust with the political and economic ruling class described by many protesters as "insolent corrupt thieves."

The uprising is a broad-based revolt against Lebanese-style neoliberalism—a kind of neoliberalism playing out in a context of elite-maintained sectarianism. The uprising is the first time since the end of the civil war in 1990 that large numbers have protested against both the ruling sectarian elites and the financial elites and banks they see as responsible for the crisis. Hundreds of thousands of protesters are speaking an "us versus them" language that is increasingly

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class-based: The few in power are seen as ruthlessly suffocating the many for their own benefits and interests. Both the economic crisis and incompetent government responses have made clear to many that the haves who govern and reproduce their wealth and preserve their positions of power were doing so at the expense of the have-nots, who could no longer make ends meet.

Prior to 2019, sectarian divisions were maintained and able to withstand public criticism even when exploitative and dispossessing neoliberal policies and a mounting economic crisis threatened to connect the dispossessed across sectarian lines. In fact, neoliberal policies often made sectarianism even more ruthless by fortifying sectarian enclaving. The revolution of October 2019, however, marks a turning point, as the escalating financial crisis made the economic situation appear irreparable to Lebanese across wide sectors of the society, at least in the short term. A broad swath of Lebanese citizens saw that the neoliberal sectarian system was unsalvageable and took to the streets aiming to force a major turning point in the post-1990 Lebanese political and economic order.

All of Them Means All of Them

Two main protest slogans—in addition to many profanity-laced chants—have taken over the squares across Lebanon during this uprising: the well-known chant from the Arab uprisings of 2011, "The people want the downfall of the regime" (*al-sha`ab yurid isqat al-nizam*), and "All of them means all of them" (*kellon ya`ani kellon*). The latter references the particularity of Lebanese sectarianism, whereby the regime entails not one dictator to topple but rather a number of sectarian rulers who govern in a system of sectarian power-sharing—an obsolete variation of what is known as consociational democracy.

These slogans had been heard before. In response to the Arab uprisings in 2011, a movement emerged in Lebanon under the slogan, "The people want the downfall of the sectarian regime" (*al-sha`ab yurid isqat el nizam al-ta'ifi*). A second wave of protests started in 2015 following the government's failure to find solutions to mounting public waste known as the garbage crisis under the slogan "You Stink" (*tol'et rihetkom),* associating the foul smells of refuse in the streets with the rotten politicians, who literally sunk the people in garbage. The slogan, "All of them means all of them," was chanted in the squares in downtown Beirut and subsequently spread elsewhere. At that time, however, protesters did not dare name politicians—especially not the leader of the Shi`i Hezbollah organization, Hassan Nasrallah.

In a radical shift during the first week of protests in October 2019, the taboos and unspoken fears fell. Without exception, all politicians (including Nasrallah) were named and shamed—and even cursed—in the streets. The demand "to bring down the sectarian regime" became "to bring down the regime." As if in a moment of clarity, many Lebanese realized that the ills of the regime were not only related to sectarianism and that no leader or politician would be excluded from the accusations against the ruling class.

Sectarian leaders attacked that angry language and the radicalization of demands during that first week of protests in an effort—partially successful—to roll back the demands, accusing protesters of "impoliteness" in an attempt to discipline the uprising. In one of the first speeches addressing the enraged Lebanese street, Hezbollah's Nasrallah lectured protesters about civility and proper behavior and speech, which he claimed were virtues which set "us" apart from "them." Nasrallah was not alone in patronizingly calling for civility.

Tropes of "civility" and "proper speech"—especially coming from those in power—are primarily disciplining mechanisms that aim to reinforce self-censorship. The tropes were not only calls for politeness, but they also conveyed threats of violence should the naming and shaming of politicians not stop. Yet cursing is cathartic for protesters precisely because it liberates them from this self-censorship—expressing anger that breaks hierarchies and frees the self from its own established beliefs. Embodied politics is a politics of presence (and cursing, if need be), of showing up and of putting ones' corporeal integrity on the line. The most vivid examples are the men and women from all backgrounds and age groups blocking streets and filling squares and corners while cursing all politicians equally.

Feminist to Intersectional Demands

The revolutionary uprising of October 2019 expresses this politics of presence by drawing from a deep well of distress among the general population at the current state of Lebanese affairs. In a context of manifold indebtedness, corruption and declining standards of living—overseen by an unaccountable ruling sectarian order—many Lebanese have grown tired of leading lives physically estranged from partners, siblings, children and beloved friends who emigrated in search of more dignified lives. This weariness is especially true for women who bear the brunt of the care work—the care labor of those who stay to nurture what's left of communities and families decimated because of neoliberal policies which have rendered dignified lives impossible in Lebanon.

For this and many other reasons related to the unjust patrilineal and patriarchal legal, social and cultural system, women have been at the forefront of the uprising. The feminist politics unfolded in the various squares of the uprising, aiming to dismantle interlinked manifestations of patriarchy, capitalism and sectarianism. What has come to the fore in these protests is the equating of various systems of inequality in an intersectional manner. Chants devised by

the feminist activists, for example, have focused not only on gender and patriarchy, but on all aspects of the production of inequality—including the banking system, capitalism, sectarianism, religious courts and other institutions that form the crux of the crisis today.

The tired establishment lexicon of "charity" deployed to tackle poverty, "coexistence" to tackle sectarian diversity and "religious and cultural norms" to protect patriarchy, all have failed. This uprising is demanding justice beyond sectarian, class, religious or cultural divides. In the clarity brought about by the uprising, the regime's politics of division has been challenged by the uprising's politics of solidarity.

Rule by Banks

The spontaneous solidarities that have emerged in the streets have also targeted the rule of the central bank (*hokm al-masref*)—a rule personified by the patriarchal figure of the governor of Lebanon's Central Bank, Riad Salemeh. For the last two decades, Salemeh, the master planner of the Lebanese banking system in the post-war era, hovered over the everyday lives of average Lebanese. The oft-repeated assertion that he was protecting the Lebanese lira from collapse became so normalized, that his life—his bio-political existence—came to be equated with the solid and stable macroeconomic performance of the Lebanese economy.

But rule by the banks is by its very nature dispossessing. Lebanon's economy is fully dollarized and relies heavily upon the global Lebanese diaspora that sends US dollars back home to their families. In 2016 alone, remittances accounted for the equivalent of 14 percent of the country's GDP and totaled $7.31 billion. This rentier economic system systematically kills any possibility of developing productive economic sectors since the end of the civil war and survives only on debts, remittances, real estate and a dangerously celebrated banking sector.

With the recent crisis of this banking system and the diminishment of the banking godfather figure of Salemeh—who still insists on defending big depositors at the expense of most Lebanese (by refusing to officially impose capital controls and haircuts, or loan forgiveness)—the fallout of the economic crisis has been felt unevenly. Lower- and middle-class families have been hardest hit. For the first two weeks of the uprising, for example, banks used the road closures as an excuse to not open their doors. The banks were trying to prevent the majority of small and medium depositors from withdrawing or transferring their funds, while big depositors (all closely related to politicians) had the back doors of the banks opened for them to transfer their millions abroad and save their capital. When the banks reopened their doors to everyone, chaos reigned in bank branches nationwide.

The threat of an impending collapse of the economy, compounded by rampant rumors, has turned banks into sites of confrontation between small depositors and tellers. The situation worsened so much that the government deployed armed security forces to protect the 1,200 bank branches throughout the country. The government has used the militarization of banks as a stalling tactic instead of devising a road map to restructure sovereign debt and pave the way for a productive and solid national economy. The images of armed forces protecting banks while the government refuses to take measures on the looming financial crisis again brings to the fore a moment of clarity for Lebanese: This regime protects banks at the expense of its people.

From Social Explosion to New Society

In the midst of those scattered, yet recurrent, moments of clarity, the uprising has managed so far to maintain its focus, resisting elite efforts to sectarianize the streets and divide the protestors over old fault-lines. The primary challenge will be to organize what began as a spontaneous social explosion to carry it into a transitional phase and eventually create a new political and economic system.

Lebanon's lack of organizations able to provide a clear political roadmap and mobilize people is not surprising. The post-war regime systematically worked to coopt or repress any serious attempt at organizing that threatened its neoliberal sectarian ideology. Sectarian politics has ripped through all forms of collective organizing, including rigging syndicates and labor unions of all professions: doctors, lawyers, teachers, architects and higher education professionals, among others. Unions and syndicates have mostly become defenders of the interests of the sectarian ruling class. The workers unions, for example, became so coopted that in 2011, the General Confederation of Lebanese Workers rejected the Minister of Labor's proposed increase in the minimum wage. That action speaks volumes about the challenge of collective organizing based on horizontal and interest-based lines in a country where the leaders want to make sure people remain locked into sects, never identifying collectively in ways that could threaten the established elites' rule.

Yet the 2019 uprising has opened up new spaces and opportunities for alternative solidarities and modes of collective organization based on class or group interests. The reactivation of many syndicates and unions, the creation of alternative unions and the formation of the new Association of Professionals are all shining points in the path of an ongoing revolutionary process of social and political transformation. The November 17 election to the head of the Lebanese Bar Association of Melhem Khalaf, a competent non-partisan lawyer and academic, opens up hope for alternative unionizing. It is these moments of clarity, as scattered or condensed they might be, that highlight the path forward for Lebanon's *thawra*. ∎

From Protesta to Hirak to Algeria's New Revolutionary Moment

The 2019 Algerian protests known as the Hirak began on February 22, 2019, 12 days after the country's aging and ailing President Abdelaziz Bouteflika announced his candidacy for a fifth presidential term. The peaceful protests compelled the military to insist on Bouteflika's immediate resignation, which took place on April 2, 2019. By early May, a significant number of powerbrokers close to the deposed administration had been arrested, including the former president's younger brother Said. But protesters have not gone home, and many have vowed to stay until the underlying structure of rule in Algeria changes and its ruling elite—known as Le Pouvoir (the power)—are expelled from power. The protesters are demanding that an entirely new system–which some call a new revolution–be put in place. MERIP spoke with **Robert P. Parks***, a political scientist and the Director of the Centre d'Études Maghrébines en Algérie in November 2019 about the ongoing situation in Algeria, where he lives and works.*

Algerians gather for a Friday protest in downtown Oran, November 2019

What drove protestors into the streets in Algeria in the first place? What were their grievances?

The immediate trigger for the protests was the February 10, 2019 announcement that former president Abdelaziz Bouteflika (1999-2019) would stand for a fifth mandate. But the Hirak reflects an accumulation of grievances with the political system that evolved out of the Algerian civil war and with that system's management of state resources, especially following the president's 2013 stroke. Most observers, including myself, were surprised by the intensity and scope of the protests—which have occurred every Friday since February 22 (and on Tuesdays for students). But Algerian citizens have frequently shown dissatisfaction with the political system through both exit and voice strategies, although not at this level of national public protest.

Most visibly, participation in national and local elections has declined precipitously over the last two decades. While 46 percent of registered voters participated in legislative elections in 2002, participation has fallen to just over a third of registered voters in 2017. Citizens were clearly exiting the participative side of politics and had been doing so for some time. They were unhappy with their political choices and unconvinced that participation would lead to the types of substantive change they desired.

During the same period, citizens increasingly took to the streets to voice dissatisfaction with ineffective (yet generous) state services, sometimes high-handed government policy, or the regime itself. Some instances received Western media coverage, such as demonstrations in Kabylia in 2001–2002 (incorrectly painted as an ethnic struggle) and the widespread housing and cost of living protests that rocked the country in late December 2010 and early January 2011.

But most of the protests were overlooked, especially in the case of *protesta* that marked the period from the mid-2000s to the period just prior to February 2019.[1] During this period, the Algerian Ministry of Interior recorded tens of thousands of *protesta*: small, highly localized non-violent demonstrations, often on a particular intersection of a street, in which people loudly make claims directed at government authorities. While distributed equally in rural villages and large urban centers across the country, *protesta* were generally highly localized and in large cities generally only concerned specific neighborhoods, parts of neighborhoods or even specific streets in sub-districts of neighborhoods. *Protesta* demonstrators block intersections, burn tires and call for authorities to address promises made by the central government but not applied by local representatives, such as the right to safe housing and access to municipal water or gas.

Two interesting aspects of *protesta* were how both citizen and state learned from them. While sometimes the government's reaction was heavy-handed, in many instances it used *protesta* as a way of identifying and addressing basic citizen complaints. Citizens in adjacent neighborhoods witnessed the potential success of *protesta* as a means of getting basic service provision. In a sense, then, loud claim-making had already become an informal political articulation mechanism prior to the Hirak.

In essence, the *protesta* are a form of "rightful resistance."[2]

While such demands fit into a bundle of economic, infrastructural or basic household demands, by making loud claims on state-promised rights, citizens are simultaneously calling into question the state's ability to manage its resources. While *protesta* call into question the management of state resources–a political question–the types of immediate, material demands placed on the state effectively localized citizen demands and state responses, parceling nation-wide demands to localities.

But two important structural shifts occurred in 2013 and 2014 that began to direct the focus upward: President Bouteflika's 2013 stroke and 2014 re-election, and the 2014 drop in international hydrocarbon prices. In April 2013, Bouteflika–hitherto still quite popular–suffered a massive stroke that seriously incapacitated his ability to appear in public, thus jeopardizing a potential 2014 re-election campaign. The president did not actively participate in the campaign, which was run by proxy. His public appearances were limited to carefully tailored clips of him receiving foreign dignitaries or in mal-à-droit commemorative events, where his presence (absence) was marked by a framed photo. Citizen sympathy toward the ailing president generated a tandem sense of public and national humiliation. In late 2018, for example, soccer fans were chanting: "We don't have a president, we have a photo."

While many Algerians continued to see the president as the ultimate broker in the political system, the public absence of the president during his fourth mandate (2014–2019) and the prominence of businessmen said to be linked to the president's brother, Said Bouteflika, generated the narrative that the president was an ailing hostage, captive to extra-constitutional forces (*'isaba*) bent on securing their own financial well-being to the detriment of the Algerian national economy. This perception was exacerbated by the 2014 collapse in international oil prices and the inability of a succession of governments to communicate a realistic and effective economic reform program that would promote growth while protecting the government's popular social welfare and human capacity investment programs. What citizens saw instead was a series of prime ministers and ministers of finance discussing austerity measures while businessmen close to Said Bouteflika were increasingly involved in matters of national economy. To many citizens, such images created anxiety for the future and anger at the immediate past and present.

Under such conditions, the February 10 announcement that Bouteflika would run for a fifth mandate sparked widespread anxiety and outcry, leading to the protests on February 22 and every Friday since. The Hirak was able to annul the April 2019 elections, force Bouteflika to resign and overturn the scheduled July 2019 elections, although it was unable to prevent the December 12 polls. One of the remarkable aspects of the Hirak is that it represents citizens from all socio-economic classes of society–the unemployed, poor, middle classes and wealthy. While a plurality of protesters is young men, all age groups and genders are represented and entire families frequently participate in the marches.

Why did these protests happen in 2019 and not in 2011 when so many other regional uprisings took place, including Algeria's neighbors Tunisia and Libya?

Explaining why something didn't happen is never easy. But compared with the regimes affected by the 2011 Arab uprisings, Bouteflika's management style was politically permissive and Algerian society fairly egalitarian. Ben Ali's Tunisia, Qaddhafi's Libya and Asad's Syria, among others, were brutally repressive regimes—a far cry from Algeria then and now. More importantly, in 2011 Algeria was in a fairly good place and people were relatively happy with their quality of life. Bouteflika, then in his twelfth year in office, had negotiated the end of the bloody civil war of the 1990s and oil prices were high enough to allow his administration to play an active role internationally and domestically. Algeria reasserted itself as a regional player not just in the Mediterranean, North Africa or the Sahel but also in French politics, where presidential hopefuls actively sought meetings with Bouteflika in their hopes to win the French Algerian (if not Maghribi) vote.

Moreover, the government had close to $170 billion in reserves and was massively injecting monies into housing and other infrastructure projects that benefitted Algerian citizens. Social and infrastructural spending was high and bearing fruit and GDP per capita was at all-time highs. Algeria currently tops the African continent in the Human Development Index. The regular *protesta* that preceded (and followed) this period were not directed against the regime but rather aimed for gaining a greater share of access to the state. They were a way for Algerians to decry the mismanagement of officials who were local and not necessarily national.

So why 2019? I think in the context of the 2014 hydrocarbon crash, discussions of austerity and the narrative of corrupt businessmen hijacking the fourth mandate, Algerians began to see problems as not just local, but rather as a national management problem in the absence of a healthy president. The problem was intensified with the specter of reduced cash flow from oil and gas, a problem which, it became increasingly clear, could not be managed by Bouteflika's numerous governments. So, in a sense, citizens are demanding more transparent democratic practices under a new polity just as much as they are calling for a more careful, just and equitable management of state resources. I do not believe, however, that most Algerians support changes to the government's social and human welfare investment policies, which will likely remain a constant regardless of Algeria's political fate.

With Bouteflika now out of the picture, why do protests persist?

The Algeria protests persist over the question of presidential elections and citizens are engaged in the debate of whether elections can, if at all, lead to a significant change in the way of doing politics in Algeria and under which conditions this could occur. Elections were postponed twice. Bouteflika

attempted to freeze the April 18 elections while still in power. Following his removal from office and the invocation of Article 102 of the constitution, elections were rescheduled for July 4. Under intense opposition from the street—and after failing to attract any serious candidates for the office—interim president Abdelkader Bensalah cancelled the scheduled elections, which were eventually held on December 12.

The Hirak's initial objective was to block Bouteflika from running for a fifth mandate. His gambit on March 11 to postpone polls (until after the convocation of a National Conference to draft a new constitution) was widely viewed as a ploy to gain more time. Algerians widely rejected that effort, which led to the military's fairly rapid defection in favor of a controlled, constitutionally mandated solution to the crisis. On March 30, General Ahmed Gaïd Salah, Vice Minister of Defense and head of the military, forcefully stated that the president had lost the legal authority to rule and invoked Article 102 of the constitution, which concerns the incapacitation of the president. A day later, on March 31, Bouteflika named a new government led by former minister of the interior Noureddine Bedoui (2015-2019). On April 2, Bouteflika resigned and was replaced by Senate president Abdelkader Bensalah, who was tasked with organizing elections within 90 days and constitutionally barred from modifying the sitting cabinet.

For many, elections at this stage might still have offered a viable solution to the crisis if they could be organized in a transparent and credible manner. But the Hirak viewed neither Bedoui nor Bensalah—figures from the Bouteflika era—as credible caretakers of the interim government; nor were they transparent arbiters for anticipated elections. The Hirak called for their resignation and the creation of a neutral government that could usher in new elections.

The Hirak applauded the interim government's efforts to show good faith in cleaning up corruption by arresting former political leaders and businessmen with close connections to Bouteflika–those most vilified during the fourth mandate, including former prime ministers Ahmed Ouyahia and Abdelmalek Sellal and businessman Ali Haddad. But as the protests persisted, those efforts were no longer viewed as sufficient.

Positions hardened over the summer and the movement transformed into what some call Hirak 2.0. Efforts by self-designated groups of former politicians and opposition parties to set out a road map to move forward were rejected by many participating in the Hirak as well as by the military, which framed such efforts as extra-constitutional. The government continued to arrest businessmen and politicians implicated in corruption, while several hundred protestors and militants were arrested on a variety of charges. These arrests sent mixed messages and sparked the ire of the Hirak. On September 15, Bensalah called for elections to be held on December 12 and announced the creation of an independent national election authority. The Hirak rejected those elections and called for the dissolution of government and the creation of a second republic.

Can the Hirak sustain its ongoing mobilization?

Writing in the tenth month of the Hirak and after 42 successive marches and the December 12 elections, one gets the feeling that while many citizens are still willing to take to the streets on Fridays and Tuesdays to push for substantive political reforms, many others are relieved the elections have occurred and now attentively await reforms followed by a return to the normal order of things. The Hirak certainly has created a moment of invigorated political imagination and hope for many Algerians. But the prolonged nature of the crisis worries many others, including those reliant on the state for basic support, those with vested economic interests and those fearful that further escalation of the protests could swing out of control politically. Without polling data, however, our only observable indicator is the number of citizens taking to the streets, not the intentions or preferences of those who remain at home.

Such was the position of candidate Ali Benflis, the former prime minister (2000-2003) who ran against Bouteflika in elections in 2004 and 2014. Although an outspoken proponent of the Hirak, Benflis advocated that the best solution to the ongoing crisis was a presidential election, followed by profound constitutional reform. He was one of five candidates who ran for the presidency; others included two former Bouteflika Prime Ministers, two former Bouteflika ministers, and the former head of the FLN youth—all of whom shared Benflis' basic stance. The campaigns were all lackluster: None were able to rally significant numbers of citizens to their meetings and all were regularly heckled in public since announcing their candidacies. Here I think it is important to note, however, that being in favor of a return to a constitutional order via presidential elections did not mean that one would actually participate in the polls, as reflected in the low voter turnout. None of the five candidates was particularly charismatic and all were linked in various ways to the old order.

The key question is whether the Hirak will persist, now that elections have been held. Undeniably, the Hirak has stirred the popular imagination in ways not seen in Algeria since the late 1980s. The Hirak also brought together hundreds of thousands of Algerian citizens under a series of (evolving) demands which succeeded in removing a sitting president from power and in many ways overturned the political status quo. Perhaps most importantly, it has invigorated a new generation of activists who over the last ten months have learned new repertoires of placing demands on the state, not dissimilar from the localized *protesta* of the past decade. Algeria's new president–and future government–will need to contend with this new political landscape in their attempts to reconcile the nation and to push forward much needed institutional and political reform. ∎

Endnotes

1 For a detailed look at the protesta, see Robert P. Parks, "Voter Participation and Loud Claim Making in Algeria," *Middle East Report* 281 (Winter 2016): 23–7.

2 For an instance of citizens invoking President Abdelaziz Bouteflika over a property dispute, see Robert P. Parks, "From the War of National Liberation to Gentrification: Conflicting Claims over Property in Algeria," *Middle East Report Online*, August 10, 2018.

Dhiban as Barometer of Jordan's Rural Discontent

Colfax Phillips

Dhiban shares with much of rural Jordan a long history of seismic societal shifts and gradual economic marginalization. This history forebodes continued unrest in underdeveloped areas as long as economic problems remain unaddressed.

After evening prayers on a cool Friday night in June 2019, 35 men ranging widely in age stood in a circle next to the main road connecting the towns of Mleih and Dhiban

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in the hills south of Amman. Several gave fiery speeches into a megaphone and criticized political corruption and economic underdevelopment in their communities as well as the complicity of the government in the US-proposed plan to end the Israeli-Palestinian conflict known as the "Deal of the Century."

"We have to demonstrate on the streets to create real change," an elderly man shouted into the megaphone. Two men held a banner that read "Freedom for the Arrested Activist," with the picture of Sabri al-Mashaleh—a local man who was recently sentenced to two years detention in the infamous Suwaga prison for posting online comments critical of the regime—featured prominently on one side. The banner criticized the detention of citizens charged with sedition under the Cyber Crimes Law for posting politically sensitive and controversial opinions online. One of the banner holders had marched from Dhiban to Amman the week before Ramadan and demonstrated alone in front of the Royal Court where, at one point, he was allegedly encircled by Jordan's Darak (gendarmerie) forces.

The June 2019 protest was the latest in a long history of political activism in the area. Dhiban was the birthplace of the Jordanian Arab uprising protests in January 2011 and its residents have continued pushing the boundaries of activism in the kingdom. The 2011 Dhiban movement fostered the nationwide Hirak ("the movement" in Arabic)—a broad coalition of rural, decentralized popular movements that coordinated large, nationwide protests. The Hirak was a manifestation of economic and political grievances in rural communities increasingly marginalized from the wealthier urban elite centered in Amman.

In the years following the 2011 uprisings, Dhiban residents continued their activism as others retreated. High unemployment afflicts the area: While the official national unemployment rate in the fourth quarter of 2018 was 18.7 percent—the highest in 25 years—the unemployment rate in Madaba governorate where Dhiban is located was 28.5 percent—the highest anywhere in Jordan.[1] In the summer of 2016, Dhiban residents erected a tent in the town's main square to demonstrate against their chronic unemployment. When Darak forces dismantled the tent, violent clashes broke out with residents.

Protests broke out again in January, February and March 2018 across rural governorates, including Dhiban, in reaction to rising prices of bread, fuel and other basic commodities.[2] Protesters complained that the privatization and austerity reforms instituted by King Abdullah II over the past 20 years had consistently benefitted corrupt Amman-based capitalist elites at the expense of the Jordanian people.[3] In February 2019, jobseekers marched from Aqaba to the Royal Court in Amman to protest youth unemployment and demand jobs in the public sector.[4] According to Dhiban activists, about 100 residents of Dhiban marched to Amman in solidarity with the Aqaba protesters—and also to express their own demands for jobs in front of the Royal Court.

But in May and June of 2018, when urban and middle-class voters mounted large demonstrations in Amman against proposed changes to the tax code, Dhiban remained silent. The reason for their inaction lies in the roots of Dhiban's economic, social, and political discontent—a history indicative of the widening urban-rural divide in Jordan and of communities forced to political action by dire economic circumstances. Dhiban shares with much of rural Jordan a long history of seismic societal shifts and gradual economic marginalization. This history forebodes continued unrest in underdeveloped areas as long as economic problems remain unaddressed.

Neglect and Decay of Traditional Livelihoods

Dhiban is a town of more than 15,000 at the center of a district of the same name, located within the Madaba governorate south of Amman. The total population, including surrounding villages, totals some 39,000.[5] Residents settled Dhiban in the 1950s and reside in three main areas: the towns of Dhiban, Mleih and Jabal Beni Hamida. The majority of the local population hails from the Beni Hamida, former semi-nomadic Bedouins who controlled many lands east of the Dead Sea in the early twentieth century.

According to local activist Mohammed Sneid, residents of Dhiban relied upon the herding and breeding of livestock and small-scale cultivation of wheat and barley for sustenance before the establishment of the Hashemite regime in 1921 until the 1980s. Bassem, a teacher in Dhiban, views livestock as the true bedrock of the local economy; not until the 1960s and 1970s did the cultivation of crops become popular. Pastoral activities were the economic backbone of many rural communities throughout Jordan, with owning livestock a household's only escape from poverty. Indeed, livestock was often more valuable than land ownership, particularly as land and farm sizes decreased in the twenty-first century. Livestock also served as a backup source of income in times of drought or famine, ensuring food security at the individual family level and when surplus was available to be sold to community members.[6]

Animal husbandry, however, has suffered dramatic declines in recent decades and livestock-owning families often lack the skills or ability to transition to other sectors of the economy. Because Jordan relies on high-cost animal feed imports to support domestic livestock production, the government long subsidized the feed to make it affordable for local breeders and herders. As these subsidies were slashed over the years as a result of IMF-mandated austerity measures, the prices of livestock feed skyrocketed and many poorer households were forced to sell their animals for below-market prices.[7] Large farm holders and corporations came to dominate the feed and livestock markets. Pressured by a lack of water resources and rising consumption trends, the Jordanian government also began to import livestock from countries such as Australia and Romania, further hurting local breeders and reducing the value of domestic livestock.

Consequently, many households in Dhiban and the surrounding area were forced to sell their livestock to offset economic losses. According to one local breeder, "The price for a sheep is around 80 Jordanian Dinars (JD) and we used to sell it for 200JD. My neighbor had 400 sheep but now he has 60 and is thinking about selling them because there is no economic benefit to retaining them." A Mleih resident who once owned many livestock also reports that his family now owns only four goats. Other locals tell similar stories, and many believe that the government is trying to coerce their communities into entirely abandoning their traditional way of life by inflicting harmful policies upon breeders and herders. "There are people dependent on livestock for their livelihoods in the entire kingdom, not just in Dhiban," asserted Bassem, "These are the people who are suffering."

Farmers have also faced losses in recent decades, with the share of Jordanians in the agricultural sector decreasing from 16.8 percent in 1973 to 2 percent in 2010.[8] Guest workers—including Egyptians and more recently Syrians—now provide the majority of labor on farms. The conflicts in Syria and Iraq have also resulted in border closings that have cut off Jordan from traditional export markets, leading to a dramatic decrease in agricultural exports and further exacerbating losses for farmers.[9] Like the plight of livestock breeders and herders, most rural farmers do not have the skills or capital to shift to a different economic sector.

The government has attempted to invest in agricultural development projects to revitalize these traditional pillars of the rural economy, but many of these projects failed to address the priorities of local communities. In Dhiban, one project mockingly called "The Happy Farm" by locals is a failed almond tree farm. Constructed in Dhiban 18 years ago by the Jordan River Foundation (JRF), the farm was intended to provide long-term employment to locals in the area. Because local residents understood that an almond farm would require large amounts of water and would not provide sustainable employment, they asked the JRF to invest in other agricultural projects. The almond farm was established anyway, only to fail within two years.

Locals also describe corruption and financial negligence in other development projects. "All of the development projects are neglecting the core elements of Dhiban's economic history that have always been its strengths. The government is neglecting agriculture and breeders," stated Sneid as he gazed at the desolate plot of dead almond trees. "We need knowledgeable people from the local area to lead these projects, not someone unknown and unqualified. They will fail otherwise."

Beginning in the 1960s, the public sector and security apparatus served as alternative sources of employment for people in Dhiban and other rural, mainly Bedouin communities. These professions offer low wages, however, and the bloated public sector has contributed to slow economic growth and a lack of available jobs. IMF austerity measures also demand that this sector be reduced, so even low-paying jobs are increasingly unavailable. While rural Bedouin communities like Dhiban are celebrated in the national narrative as "true" Jordanians and traditionally viewed by many analysts as politically privileged in the kingdom, the reality is that they are among the most economically marginalized in Jordanian society.

Emergence of Local Protest Movements

As Dhiban's economic situation worsened into the twenty-first century, dissent among the local population increased. In 2006, Sneid and others organized the Day Waged Labor Movement (DWLM, or *Hirak 'Ummal al-Muyawama* in Arabic) to demand permanent employment for day-waged laborers who worked often for years without job security or benefits. The movement mainly involved impoverished laborers within the Ministry of Agriculture and quickly spread across many of the governorates. Organizing demonstrations between 2006 and 2015, the movement included female laborers from rural and conservative backgrounds in "sleep-in" protests with fellow male activists in front of government offices in Amman—a first for a Jordanian protest movement. The movement successfully pressured the government to abolish the day-wage laborer category and to raise the minimum wage, among other achievements. The success and progressiveness of the DWLM revolutionized how Jordanians demanded economic and political rights through a focus on class rather than traditional diatribes of Palestinian-East Bank Jordanian identity politics.[10]

The DWLM was a significant precursor to the nationwide demonstrations that began in 2011. The Dhiban Youth Committee, founded by local youths and aided by Sneid and other experienced local activists from the DWLM was also formed in 2006 and initially organized events and demonstrations to improve economic opportunities in the area and combat pollution. In contrast to the labor-rights focus of the DWLM, the Dhiban Youth Committee focused on poverty and health issues that spoke to a broader portion of the population. Committee members were mostly poor: low-wage workers, teachers, the unemployed and others from low-income backgrounds.

In late 2010, the government of then-Prime Minister Samir Rifai publicly announced a rise in the price of fuel, angering locals already struggling to pay for basic necessities. The Dhiban Youth Committee, with its broad platform of local grievances, was perfectly placed to organize demonstrations that spread across Jordan in the following weeks.

On Friday, January 7, 2011, seven members of the committee decided to march after prayers in front of the mosque in the center of Dhiban. They decried the fuel price increases and called for the ouster of Rifai. Unsure

of how locals would react to their demands, committee members were surprised when hundreds of people joined them in the street.

As the first demonstration of Jordan's Arab uprising, the march received widespread attention and inspired protests across the country. On January 14, 2011, thousands of Jordanians—including in Amman, Ma'an, Irbid, Karak, al-Salt and Baqa'a refugee camp—protested against economic marginalization and echoed the calls for the removal of the Rifai government. On January 28, 2011, the Muslim Brotherhood joined the protests in Amman in unison with leftist organizations and trade unions, swelling the ranks of demonstrators in the capital to the thousands. These protests in Amman organized by formal opposition groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood called for reform and dialogue without directly challenging the king.[11] While formal opposition came to dominate most protests in the capital, the Hirak movements in Dhiban and other rural areas called for deeper changes.

Birth of the Hirak Movement

The Hirak movement emerged following the Dhiban protests on January 7, 2011. A broad collection of rural, decentralized popular movements demanding an end to corruption, the Hirak rallied for extensive economic and political reform and mobilized Jordanians from nearly every sector of society. Avoiding divisive Palestinian-East Bank Jordanian rhetoric, the Hirak instead focused on issues of class and economic marginalization. "Raising the prices does not only affect Dhiban, it affects everyone from Ramtha to Aqaba and even the refugee camps," said Sneid. "Those who went out with the Hirak were poor people affected by the price rises and the economic policies of the government."

Dhiban's central geographic location in Jordan put it at the center of the coordination of different communities involved in the Hirak. Because the region is not considered to be in either the south or the north of Jordan, demonstrations in Dhiban were not viewed as belonging only to the concerns of one specific area. Rural communities found common ground in their grievances and the boldness of the initial demonstrations in Dhiban lent inspiration to other communities and propelled the expansion of the Hirak across the country.

Hirak activists nationwide quickly began to test the limits of regime-acceptable protest and cross traditional "red lines." They directly criticized the king and questioned the legitimacy of the Hashemite regime, for example, with Dhiban protesters half-jestingly calling for the establishment of a "Republic of Dhiban" independent of the Hashemite monarchy. They openly criticized the prime minister and other political elites. "These were previously red lines, but crossing the red lines is freedom of speech at its most basic," said Ahmad, an activist in the Dhiban Hirak. "There

should be no red lines." Dhiban activists also argue that participation in their Hirak taught many local residents how to demand collective economic, social and political justice through peaceful protests. They assert that the Hirak nationwide facilitated the entrance of many Jordanians, and especially youth, into activism, equipping them with a deeper knowledge of their political and economic rights.

By late 2013, the Hirak lost momentum and the scale of protests dramatically decreased. The worsening of the conflicts in Syria and Iraq, heightened domestic security measures and alleged government efforts to delegitimize the movement created a climate of fear and uncertainty that discouraged organized protests.

The Continued Fight for Economic Justice

Dhiban, however, remained at the forefront of Jordanian activism. But why then was it silent during the 2018 tax protests? The answer lies in the class interests of the Hirak: The inaction of Dhiban residents reflected the wide gap between the economic priorities of urban and rural communities in the kingdom. The proposed law would have increased taxes for the middle class while reducing the personal tax rates for earners in the lowest tax bracket (1-5,000 JD per annum) and increasing it for those in the highest tax bracket (20,001+ JD per annum).[12] With the average monthly net salary in Jordan about 460 JD after taxes (at the time of the protests),[13] the poor would have benefited from the proposed law. Despite the June protests, the law was passed in December 2018.

The widening wealth gap between Jordan's urban and rural populations is a core grievance of poorer activists. "Raising taxes is an Amman issue," said one resident. "The raising of prices is an issue for Dhiban and the governorates." In fact, increasing the tax burden on the rich had been one of the demands of the Hirak movement in 2011.

Yet the socio-economic situation in Dhiban continues to worsen. Local shop owners describe low profits and wages, a decrease in demand for goods in their shops and an increase in overall unemployment—despite the increase of privately owned shops in town. Most shop owners work multiple jobs to support their families. Teachers lament the poor quality of local schools and the inability of students to attend university due to high tuition and transportation costs. Local water distributors described an outdated sewage system and the unaffordability of filtered water sold by government-owned companies. A doctor at a health center in Mleih noted that health education and culture are unsatisfactory. Many locals are unable to afford quality health treatment, and high blood pressure and diabetes are common health issues in the area. "The root cause of all these problems is poverty," said the doctor, who often covers part or all of the cost of a patient's medical treatment if they require immediate attention.

Many residents also express bitter feelings toward international aid programs that target refugees residing in Jordanian communities. "The real refugees living the true conditions of refugees are the Jordanian citizens, because nobody helps them," declared Ahmad. Activists in Dhiban describe feeling like both non-Jordanians, specifically Syrians, and the urban elite have greater influence on government policies than they do. "No Beni Hamida [the tribal confederation to which most residents of Dhiban claim kinship] has ever been prime minister. No Beni Hassan has ever been prime minister. Instead, someone like Hani al-Mulki [an ex-prime minister] and his family have been at the head of the government when his family is originally Syrian and is not from a big Jordanian tribe," said another resident. "We in Dhiban are the heart of Jordanian culture. We are Jordanian by blood and heritage, but we do not control our own country."

These residents do not trust in political processes or government officials, especially those at the highest level of government, such as the Royal Court. Allegations of corruption among the political and economic elite of Amman remain at the top of local grievances. Many view Prime Minister Omar al-Razzaz as an honest politician but believe that he is unable to make the necessary anti-corruption reforms within the national economy and political system. Locals assert that only the king has the authority to undertake such reforms. Until he does so, Dhiban and other rural areas will continue to be overlooked in future investment and development plans.

"There is nothing for us"

The societal effects of Dhiban's tumultuous history are visible in the youngest generations in the area. Unable to find sustainable employment in the public sector and forced to search for employment in a struggling local private sector that does not provide sufficient salary, benefits or job security, their despondency and anger at the lack of work is palpable. That this generation is well educated by national standards only adds to their malaise.

"There is no work, there is nothing," said a young man as he stood with his friends in the main square of the town. "The only thing for us to do is smoke cigarettes on the street. Nothing changed in the past year and if you come back here in a year nothing will have changed. Youth sell drugs because they cannot find jobs. Young men cannot get married because they have no money. There is nothing for us."

Residents of Dhiban have also vented their frustration on social media, criticizing the government's inability to address chronic unemployment and corruption. From March to June, authorities arrested several locals under the Cyber Crime Law (passed in 2015) and its stipulations against inciting "sedition" online, fomenting significant unrest in the area. On April 10, activists erected a protest tent in Mleih in solidarity with those detained, attracting prominent activists from the area to criticize the arrests. Sneid was arrested at the end of August and held in prison for more than two weeks for accusing Hani al-Mulki and his family of corruption in a Facebook post. In response to his arrest, locals erected a protest tent next to Sneid's house in Mleih, this time drawing activists and sympathizers from across the kingdom. Proposed amendments to the Cyber Crimes Law expected to pass later in 2019 would further limit freedom of speech online and enforce tougher penalties for those prosecuted.

Yet despite crackdowns on activism, Hirak activists in Dhiban continue to demand justice. "They have arrested many of us and have said that we were trying to undermine the government, that we wanted to overthrow the system," said Ahmad. "I do not want to become king, and I do not want to overthrow the system. I want the king to remain the king. But I want a system with authorities that respect our rights and give us our rights and listen to us."

The plight of Dhiban's residents underlines the ever-widening economic gap between rural and urban areas in Jordan and the extent to which austerity reforms are worsening it. This divide is continuing to spawn unrest and demonstrations in economically marginalized communities across Jordan and will do so until the government commits to positive government reforms and international action to address their grievances. ∎

Note on Interviews:

Interviews with 30 residents of greater Dhiban were conducted from March 2017 to June 2019. All names have been changed to protect their identities except Mohammed Sneid, whose activism is well known and who gave permission to attribute his name to his words.

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Tunisians protest against a bill that would protect those accused of corruption from prosecution, Assembly of People's Representatives headquarters in Tunis, July 2017.
ZOUBEIR SOUISSI/REUTERS

Cracks in Tunisia's Democratic Miracle

Laryssa Chomiak

Less than a decade after the 2011 uprising that ousted a dictator, the election of an anti-establishment president amidst popular turmoil indicates that many Tunisians reject the narrative that all is well with Tunisia's new liberal democracy.

Popular news outlets have declared 2019 the year of street protests, ranging from Algeria to Hong Kong and Lebanon to Chile. In Tunisia, too, protests rocked the political landscape in two major ways: First, 2019 witnessed the peak of growing protests, popular activism and contentious oppositional movements since the 2011 uprising; and second, Tunisians elected as president an unassuming retired law professor named Kais Saied in October 2019 who promises to create an anti-establishment form of direct democracy in Tunisia. These two coalescing events of 2019 are easily plotted as coordinates on a global political map of pro-democratic and anti-austerity uprisings. While the Tunisian political establishment treats these two events as serendipitous, the persistence of widespread discontent expressed both in the streets and at the ballot box casts doubt on halcyon visions of Tunisia's supposed democratic success story.

Since Tunisia's 2011 revolution ousted the autocratic President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, its political and economic establishment and key international donor partners have touted its embrace of liberal democracy. But that vision is disconnected from a parallel reality: Thousands of protests, sit-ins, strikes and attempted suicides underscore Tunisians' chronic discontent despite its supposed democratic success.[1] Saied's surprise election was based on a campaign that advanced the revolutionary slogan "the people want" in which both the people and the vision of democracy are constructed around popular visions of equality and the rightful distribution of the country's resources. Labelled a populist by his adversaries, Saied's support base views him as a true democrat and proponent of the people's voice and demands.

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How did a revolutionary slogan transform into a successful and essentially penniless political campaign for direct democracy in less than a decade, and what does political protest in Tunisia tell us about the flip side of Tunisia's democratic success narrative? The election of Saied amidst popular turmoil indicates that many Tunisians do not accept the continuing separation of politics (as a form of dignified leadership) from economics—especially the current model of economic reform and its management in a new liberal guise. Tunisians likewise reject the narrative that all is well with Tunisia's new liberal democracy.

From Popular to Electoral Dissent

Between October 2018 and October 2019, the Tunisian Forum for Economic and Social Rights (FTDES) reported a significant spike in economic, social and political protests.[2] Whether linked to the 2019 waves of protests globally or a sign of the increased popular discontent with Tunisia's transition since 2011, Tunisian voting behavior signified a further channeling of this rising discontent via elections, at least for the moment. Saied gained, for example, the largest share of his votes in all but one governorate (Jendouba), while winning his highest numbers in areas where protests were the strongest. Yet while Saied's voter base maps closely with the protests, the election more broadly signifies that a large percentage of Tunisian voters reject the status-quo of the last eight years, if not the status-quo of Ben Ali era politics. The more precise reading, for now, is that the anti-establishment vote signifies discontent with the failure of post-revolutionary governments to deliver on their promises. This discontent has manifested in both protests and social movements as well as targeted (electoral) criticism of existing policies and political actors.[3]

As a result, without the aid of a glossy political campaign and resilient in the face of dramatic criticism from multiple configurations of the post-revolutionary consensus-seeking political elites, Saied reignited the revolutionary wave of 2011 with a pared-down campaign built around the revolutionary slogan *Ashaāb Yūrid* ("the people want")—but without calling for "the downfall of the regime" as was declaimed in 2011. The inexpensive campaign was built around Saied's students and followers, who for years had engaged in spontaneous conversations in and around local coffee shops. He earned adulation for his non-establishment status, his commitment to public service and his disinterest in the material gains of joining the elite political class. His dose of social conservatism around issues of personal status law also united political tendencies across the spectrum.

With both nation-wide and local-level support, Said secured over 70 percent of the vote in a run-off against media-mogul Nabil Karaoui, who had been leading in earlier polls. Early analyses of the results mapped closely onto the large-scale social movements that had materialized after 2011. Saied polled highest in regions with a strong presence of movements, especially the southwest and southeast. These movements included

the sovereigntist *Winou El-Petrol?* (Where is the petrol); the pro-transitional justice and anti-corruption *Manish M'Sameh* (I will not forgive);[4] the anti-austerity and pro-dignity *Fech Nestannew* (What are we waiting for?); and the radical *Harakat Yezzikom* (Enough!) established in the impoverished Kasserine region. While any landslide voting victory would overlap with patterns of protest, the most telling aspect about this geopolitical configuration is the intensity of protest and the high levels of support for an anti-establishment candidate reigniting a revolutionary call for change.

The broad-based support for Saied's revolutionary call is rooted not only in the last decade of post-revolution protest but in a context of heightened economic austerity and technocratic governance that has caused dissent to spread beyond anti-establishment protest to consider more fundamental and even revolutionary change, especially after 2014.[5] The 2019 elections, therefore, are not simply another step within Tunisia's progressive democratic transition but are rather the product of Saied's ability to connect his campaign to a long durée of popular activism and social movements by rejoining economic despair with demands for a just and dignified political project in Tunisia.

A Political Economy of Contention

The intensified protests of 2019 are neither new nor are they a rejection of the political configurations that emerged in the transition period after the 2011 revolution. By taking to the streets and then translating their grievances into a protest vote, Tunisians have rejected both the opposition's national-political pacts of the Ben Ali period and the post-2011 centrist-led consensus matrix, the hallmark of Tunisia's democratization experiment—an experiment that has excluded most Tunisians from the political game and eroded public trust in political institutions. This condition is reminiscent of a widespread public sentiment of political exclusion during pre-revolutionary regimes, which ultimately culminated in the 2011 uprising and demands for a new system of political dignity.

The widespread sense of exclusion felt by most Tunisians emerged from the neoliberal politics of the Ben Ali years, which were themselves inherited from previous ruler Habib Bourguiba's austerity measures that sparked the 1984 bread riots. The elite political class has long followed neoliberal dogma to insist on austerity measures, public sector contraction, management of debt burden, employability and job creation around social entrepreneurship. The goal of increasing economic competition has distanced citizens from the state, although in surprising ways.

Tunisians protesting today are not so much expressing a rejection of the state as they are calling for more state—one that is invested in providing social security (if ensuring the most minimal of social survival) rather than global economic competitiveness.[6] Unquestionably, the country's heavy debt burden is in tension with demands for more equitable and performative social service delivery. Tunisia remains

enmeshed in the global economy and political pressures since the 1970s—riots, a coup, a revolution, thousands of protests and Saied's surprise electoral win—all are effects of the country's inequitable political economy.[7]

Mapping and Timing Political Marginalization

Both the regime and international financial institutions described Ben Ali's Tunisia as an economic miracle. A *bon élève* (good pupil) of international financial institutions, Tunisia was celebrated as a Mediterranean Tiger for its liberal investment structure that attracted considerable foreign direct investment (FDI).[8] Domestically, the Ben Ali regime cemented this image by heavily investing in public relations to advance the economic success narrative as separate from the regime's repressive political project.

The 2011 revolution and subsequent protests and social movements have brought this tension to the surface. Among other grievances, these contentious voices are calling into question the division between political and economic systems by demanding dignity and a moral state. The 2019 protest map in Tunisia and its overlap with pro-Saied electoral results precisely reflect the demand for a democratic state that also provides for dignified lives for its citizens, resembling the Hirak in Algeria (along with other protest movements globally) in its insistence and frequency. The challenge for post-2011 Tunisia is how to establish such a dignified state at a time when neoliberal economic projects have relegated politics either to the contractual (social contracts, legal reforms) or the street (protest and contention).

Asef Bayat examines how this neoliberal effect of an "economic rationality that solicits contention" is intertwined with "a form of governmentality that cultivates compliance."[9] Referring to decades of autocratic rule entrenched in economic neoliberalism, Bayat captures the tension of an economic project that by its exclusionary logic calls for protest embedded in a political project that instead forces compliance, if not quiescence (and for decades criminalized dissent). The Tunisian political elite pre- and post-revolution largely implemented precisely this mix, reinforcing and reinventing a tension that clashes with its own post-independence developmentalist narrative that emphasized unionized labor, protectionism, social subsidies and an interventionist state.

The project of portraying Tunisia's economy as separate from its political system dates to the early 1980s. At that time, the space and possibility for capitalism was accelerated, with two noticeable effects. The first effect of a new capitalist potential was the necessity of managing the economy via technocratic expertise–the rule of experts–disconnected from political and moral considerations. By 2012, 70 percent of Tunisians held 20 percent of the national wealth, while youth unemployment, already at 30 percent in 2008, continued to rise. Job creation, employability, leadership and social entrepreneurship are the names of the international development

game—a game that ignores the demands of citizens such as those who voted in the first round elections (on September 15, 2019) for Saied and his populist contender, the media mogul Karaoui, both of whom challenged—at least discursively—this technocratic and de-contextualized rule of experts.

The second effect of maintaining this status quo of economic rule by experts has been reinvigorated dissent. Activists are now more visibly pushing for the state to recognize the political and moral underpinnings of the current economic reform proposals. The 2019 elections reflected protesters' demands to re-link the political with the economic and to move from prioritizing the reconciliation of corruption to what the people want. While the technocratic and internationally funded reform projects aim to save the lone democratic success of the 2011 uprisings, the protests and elections reopen the question of precisely what type of democracy it is that the people want.

A Striking Continuity

Rather than a straightforward democratic success story, therefore, the Tunisian case reflects a striking continuity between the pre- and post-revolutionary periods in terms of Tunisians challenging the political matrix in which the economic sphere is treated as separate from politics. What was once an economic miracle story against the backdrop of authoritarianism is today a democratic miracle story transposed onto a backdrop of economic failure.

The tens of thousands of protests, strikes and sit-ins registered in the last five years are operating against a political formula similar to that of the previous Ben Ali regime—or the multiple post-1970s political-economic regimes. But the protests today differ not only in their frequency and geographic sprawl but also in their ability to reconnect the economic with the political through the language of social movement. Whereas in 2011 the uprising called for a disruption in the status quo and the fall of the regime, the endurance of a rule of experts linked with a particular form of liberalization and modernization is now being challenged through protest, the ballot box and demands for a new and more substantive democracy. ∎

Endnotes

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2 *Forum Tunisien Pour les Droits Economiques et Sociaux (FTDES)*, "Rapport du mois Octobre 2019: des mouvementrs sociaux, suicides et violences," 76 (November 11, 2019), pp. 2-4.

3 A fuller explanation lies in the political geography of discontent pre-dating the 2011 revolution. See Chomiak, *Archipelagos of Dissent*, forthcoming.

4 Lana Salman and Laryssa Chomiak, "Refusing to Forgive," *Middle East Report* 281 (Winter 2016). The campaign opposes various iterations of an "economic reconciliation bill" put forth by late President Beji Caid Essebsi to forgive corruption among business elites and the administration that enabled such corrupt practices.

5 In 2014, protests begin to call for the reemergence of the revolution against the consensus-based liberal political establishment.

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Thinking Critically About Regional Uprisings

Jillian Schwedler

The new wave of large-scale popular uprisings across the Middle East, coming less than ten years after those of 2011, challenge journalistic and academic analyses that view them as a set of individual and largely unconnected cases—the Iraqi Intifada, the Egyptian Revolution, the Lebanese protests and so on—save perhaps some "contagion effect" across the region. Many analyses examine each uprising within a nation-specific, protest life-cycle narrative—that is, each discrete case "begins" with a moment of mass mobilization within national boundaries, evolves along some trajectory and then "ends" with either success (transition to democracy) or, most often, failure (civil war, counter-revolution). While this framework produces some insights, the focus on the nation-state level—a kind of methodological and epistemological nationalism–obscures other processes, dynamics and explanations that link or distinguish these uprisings across both time and space.[1]

Both the 2011 and 2019 protest waves highlight similar combinations of grievances across diverse geographies, suggesting not only shared regional but also global processes at play. Moreover, these mobilizations occur within a variety of dimensions of the past, present and future not reducible to any pre-determined national lifecycle and protestors and regimes alike learn from other regional and even global uprisings. The diverse and transformational grievances expressed in these movements also indicates the necessity to go beyond structural determinism or overlooking complex forms of power that include the interweaving of political and economic spheres and to question the epistemological and methodological investments that analysts have and perform in explaining (and sometimes, explaining away) uprisings in the region.

In order to broaden our frameworks for thinking critically about the new round of uprisings, MERIP editorial committee member **Jillian Schwedler**, a member of the editorial committee and board of directors of this magazine, asked a number of critical scholars for their perspectives on how we should be thinking about regional protests and what is often overlooked or misunderstood. Their responses have been edited and condensed for publication.

Since December 2018, mass mobilization has taken place in four countries where it was relatively absent during the Arab uprisings of 2011.[2] In Sudan, mass protests—dubbed the Sudanese Revolution—began on December 19, 2018, and demanded economic reform, the resignation of the long-standing president, representative institutions and an end to military rule. In Algeria, mass protests known as *al-hirak,* or movement, broke out on February 16, 2019, ten days after an incapacitated president announced his candidacy for a fifth presidential term.[3] In Iraq, the "intifada" began on

October 1, 2019 with protests beginning around unemployment, corruption and poor public services and quickly evolved into demanding the fall of the regime and the end of Iranian intervention into Iraq's domestic politics. In Lebanon, subaltern and middle-class constituencies went into the streets in large numbers on the night of October 17, 2019. Triggered by a new tax, they began protesting more broadly against economic crisis, the failure of socioeconomic provision, corruption and sectarianism; they are calling for the fall of a ruling class entrenched since the civil war.[4]

Just as in 2011, many have been surprised by these mass protests and explanations based on standard comparative politics methods seeking to isolate decisive variables based on the country-by-country analysis of sameness and difference have proven difficult to sustain. Many analysts (including myself) had maintained, for instance, that an important reason for the lack of mass political uprisings in Algeria, Iraq, Lebanon, Sudan and Algeria in 2011 had to do with recent histories of civil war and painful memories that deterred those worried about instability and violence from protest. But recent histories of civil war and violence are still present in these four countries and negative views about the consequences of mass uprising have actually been reinforced in many quarters by civil war and violence in Libya, Syria and Yemen since 2011 and counter-revolution elsewhere.

Similarly, explanations based solely on political economy, social media or globalization can be overly deterministic. While it is undoubtedly true that all of these countries suffer from acute inequality, political corruption, economic crisis and drastic failures in social provision, these features were also present in all four countries in 2011. As for social media, the epoch of Internet puffery is surely over: Increased government and security surveillance, use and manipulation of the Internet has surely put paid to the idea of the Internet as a privileged space of autonomy and freedom undergirding challenges to domination.

If these approaches have limits, the alternative is not a wholesale rejection of generalization in favor of particularism and contingency—the idea that each case is simply unique. We might think instead about alternate critical frameworks of action-embedded understanding. Antonio Gramsci, the communist revolutionary and philosopher of praxis—even as he studied 1917 and the revolutionary protests across Europe from 1918–1920—hewed away from comparative politics and socioeconomic determinism alike. Gramsci's work, together with the mass uprisings of 2018–2019, confront us with the importance of maintaining a place in our analysis for leadership, historical protagonism and political initiative.

Gramsci's writings on leadership, the crisis of authority, popular explosion, cultural transformation and the dangers in the situation are particularly suggestive. Algeria, Iraq, Lebanon and Sudan present many features of such a crisis of authority, a crisis in the hegemony of the state—for example, in the

capacity of the dominant classes to maintain consent in the national social formation. These republics, for different reasons, have certainly failed in major undertakings—to deliver bread, dignity and freedom to their populations over the decades. Vast and diverse masses have become politically active and advanced major demands. But the demands—although revolutionary in their sweeping rejection of the established order, their transgressive mobilization and their many forms of what Gramsci called subversivism—are not organically formulated: They are not yet substantially developed as an alternative form of hegemony, fusing the economic-corporate with the ethico-political and capable of becoming universal nationally or regionally. The result is thus a crisis (of hegemony), an uprising, not a revolution.

Indeed, Gramsci's concept of a popular or syncretic explosion, replete with anti-government sentiment, has considerable relevance for understanding the current uprisings. Such a syncretic explosion is not in Gramsci spontaneous, except in the sense that it is not under the organizational control of an established actor. Instead, it is a movement whose subaltern leaders are often unknown, the fruit of a much longer preparation. It also comprises repeated experiences of abuse, economic struggle and speechlessness among subaltern populations, as well as the persistent activism of alienated activists and intellectuals.

Even amid effervescence, there are great dangers in the crisis of authority just as there are in the current uprisings. As Gramsci writes, anti-government sentiment can be fleeting, mass energies can dissipate and the ruling class can re-organize faster and more effectively than first-time protestors, who may lack organization, strategy and mental preparation. The protestors may, as in recent times, put their trust in the military, for instance, or cleave to an abstracted faith in the will of the national people.

Further, Gramsci's writings weave together different kinds of temporality, reminding us to not confuse a short-term popular explosion with a long-term cultural change. The latter beats to a slower rhythm and involves a protracted cultural and organizational war of position in civil society, the molecular transformation of quantity into quality, the circulation of ideas and the re-working of conceptions of the world more broadly—including among subaltern groups. Gramscian optics suggest that we should pay attention to longer-term temporalities around cultural struggle, the role of organic intellectuals, civil society and subaltern cultural politics in our critical interpretation of these uprisings.

Finally, Gramsci's embrace of leadership and democratic centralism—as against both spontaneism and Vanguardism—and his appreciation of the importance of political society and the state alerts us in the present to the cultural, socioeconomic, political, organizational and strategic weaknesses of horizontalism—the idea of popular organizing without any leadership. Many of these weaknesses shape the disappointing post-2011 trajectories as a number of activists have learned.

More insightful than analyses of the uprisings based on cross-national variation or political economy are critical frameworks that eschew mechanical determinism and allow for historical protagonism, understood as transformative activity challenging subordination and hegemony. Such alternative frameworks can grasp processes of revolutionary learning, even across national borders. Protest organization crossing national borders is still only embryonic and nationalist and statist imaginaries and practices remain all too directive in the insurgent imagination. Nonetheless, these uprisings have involved the transnational social life of ideas, strategies and tactics, a transnationalism which, beyond the methodological nationalism of academics and populist nationalism more generally, has been and could be an ever more significant feature of popular challenges to subordination in the region and beyond.

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I certainly agree that much analysis of the uprisings (and the Middle East in general) is marked by a kind of methodological nationalism, where the borders of the nation-state are assumed to be a natural pre-given container of social relations. The 2011 uprisings (and those of today), however, not only confirm the striking commonalities that exist across different states in the region but also help highlight the crucial importance of moving beyond such state-centric frameworks to place regional developments within a broader transnational framework of understanding.

The profound cross-border flows of people, capital, ideas and resources mean that many of the social science categories we typically use to describe the region need to be re-considered. How do we fit, for example, the millions of people who have recently been displaced across borders in the Middle East—or the millions more who are temporary migrant workers lacking basic rights of citizenship—into our thinking about labor and working classes in the region? Likewise, does it make sense to speak of a national bourgeoisie (as parts of the Arab Left continue to do) when we see such significant levels of cross-border ownership and investments in the region and where for many of the region's largest businesses their national territory is often no longer the main space of their accumulation?

I also think the uprisings have confirmed the close interweaving of the political and economic spheres in a way that runs against the grain of much mainstream policy and theorizing around the Middle East—where free markets are said to promise greater political freedoms and the region's problem is viewed as simply one of authoritarianism, corruption or nepotism. I think we can now clearly see that there is no essential contradiction between neoliberal economic policies and political authoritarianism—indeed, the opening up of markets and the steady creep of neoliberal policies throughout the region depended precisely upon authoritarian rulers (as it still does). This reliance is not an anomaly globally—indeed, the term authoritarian neoliberalism is increasingly used to describe this twinning of authoritarian and repressive states and free-market capitalism. The supposed authoritarian exceptionalism of the Middle East now seems like an anachronism given these global trends.

In this sense, I think we should understand the uprisings that swept the region throughout 2011 as targeting both the neoliberal economic policies that were so heavily promoted by Western financial institutions over the last few decades as well as the political structures with which they were twinned. Not all uprising participants thought about the protests in this manner, of course, but the demands that emerged through the uprisings—the focus on social justice, wealth inequalities and autocracy—make this fusion of the economic and political spheres quite evident. For these reasons, I think one of the clear lessons of the last decade is the necessity of reversing the extreme disparities in the control and distribution of wealth in the region. It's not enough to focus solely on political demands such as new elections or governmental corruption without simultaneously addressing the question of socio-economic power. And as John observes, what has been interesting over the last few months is the ways in which key countries that were to a degree outside the protests of 2011 have now seen their own uprisings–Sudan, Algeria, Iraq, Lebanon and Morocco. In all these cases, the interweaving of the political and economic spheres has been an essential driver of the protests.

At the same time, it is important to think about these uprisings (those of today and years past) in a global frame. First, the 2011 uprisings were related to the effects of the 2008–2009 global economic collapse and the ways that this crisis was transmitted throughout the region. Today's mobilizations are also occurring at a moment when global economic growth has slowed considerably and many analysts are predicting a re-run of the global crash a decade ago. Second, the protests of 2011 were an integral part of—and helped to shape—other global struggles at the time. I'm not just talking here about the high-profile cases of Occupy, the Indignados in Spain and so on, but also about the less widely acknowledged protests, particularly throughout the African continent. Indeed, an overly restrictive geographical rendering of the 2011 Arab uprisings was the subject of an excellent book edited by Firoze Manji and Sokari Ekine in 2011, which drew attention to the protest movements in Benin, Gabon, Senegal, Swaziland, Ethiopia, Djibouti and Uganda that were contemporaneous with the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt but largely ignored at the time.[5] Likewise, the Middle East today is part of a wider set of international mobilizations, be it in Chile, Hong Kong, Haiti, Colombia, Ecuador, Spain and elsewhere.

These protests are a global phenomenon, and for this reason, it's important to situate the current uprisings in the Middle East within the complex transition of the world system that

we are currently living through. Are we witnessing a relative decline of US power and the rise of new global challengers? If so, what does this mean for the Middle East and popular protest? The attempts by foreign powers to project and protect their influence in the Middle East are yet another confirmation of the strategic significance of the region to global politics.

Closely connected is the struggle for regional hegemony by local powers. My own work has particularly looked at the role of the various Gulf states, which has a political economy dimension related to the outcomes of neoliberal restructuring over the previous period—a process that accentuated the weight of the Gulf throughout many key economic sectors in the region.[6] One of the conspicuous features of the current protests is the prominence of slogans against Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, something that was much less apparent in 2011. Obviously, we can also see these regional power struggles reflected in the various interventions of Turkey and Iran. In general, I think we need a much better understanding of how these regional and international dynamics intersect. We need to take local struggles seriously and avoid trying to explain everything through geopolitics.

It's striking how the current protests closely echo the same concerns and demands of the 2011 uprisings. At the same time, I hope the anti-sectarian impulse that seems to be evident in today's protests (at least for now!) speaks to an internalization of the experiences of the earlier uprisings. And we need to place these waves of protest in much longer time frames—we can't understand the current moment without looking at the roll-out of neoliberal structural adjustment packages from the 1980s and 1990s, or the disastrous consequences of the decade-long US invasions and blockade of Iraq from 1991 onwards. Indeed, the current protests in Iraq are just as much about the constitutional system foisted on Iraq by the US occupation post-2003 as they are about Iran's sectarian domination of the current political establishment.

Thinking about diverse time-frames, or temporality, Walter Benjamin spoke of the non-linear and discontinuous moments that occur at moments of rebellion—which recuperate and validate earlier periods of struggle—contrasting this to the kind of homogenous, empty time that we typically experience. He also emphasized the importance of seeing the traces of the past in the present. I've always liked these ideas, as they speak to the ways in which the effects of protest and rebellion persist in ways that may not be immediately obvious (even when these movements have been apparently unsuccessful). One of these effects, which I think is often underappreciated in our rush to talk about success or failure at the level of the state, are the profound personal changes that often occur in individuals during their participation in mass political action. People experience a kind of shaking-off of apathy and breaking down of the individualized and competitive ways in which we are accustomed to live our lives—the potential to get a small glimpse of a different future. This experience may only last a short period of time, but these moments live on in how

people think and act and can thus help form the ground for future movements.

I agree with John that the work of Gramsci can really help in understanding these processes, particularly his critical assessment of the relationship between consciousness, social movements and political leadership. It has become fashionable in some circles to speak of leaderless movements or to counterpose horizontalism to vanguardism as forms of political organization. Gramsci helps us see that all social movements are about the contention of different leaderships. What matters is the politics of those leaderships and their ability to connect with, learn from and articulate the interests of particular subaltern classes. In this respect, I feel something often obscured in academic work on Gramsci is that his writing was primarily concerned with the category of class—what are the class interests represented in particular movements, which classes have leadership and how is this leadership maintained? As Maya points out, class is key to understanding the current uprisings. In Iraq, for example, we saw a general strike by oil workers in support of the demonstrations and also strikes by teachers' unions in the south. In Lebanon, the demands around nationalizing banks similarly help to identify where actual power is held in Lebanese society and how capitalism works in the country.

But Maya is also absolutely right to stress that we can't think of class simply in economic terms. In any concrete place, as anti-racist Marxist feminists such as Angela Davis have long noted, classes are simultaneously constituted through gender and other relations (including that of race). We need a much better understanding of how this works in the Middle East. It's no accident that one of the features of the counter-revolution in places such as Egypt has been the violent reassertion of particular gender roles and norms of sexuality.

We also need to recognize the many smaller and less visible protests that have taken place over the last decade. Huge numbers of strikes, protests and other actions across the region barely register in media coverage, such as the recent women's protests in Palestine. Even as the mass uprisings subsided, protest never disappeared despite war, mass displacement and the apparent restoration of authoritarian rule. When we rush to periodize uprisings we can overlook these continuities of mobilization and organization that are essential to the emergence of large demonstrations such as the ones we see today.

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Methodological nationalism and other intellectual blinders manifest themselves in several ways in analyses of the 2011 and 2019 anti-regime uprisings in the Middle East. At the metatheoretical level, there is a particularly Euro-American academic nationalism about its own authoritative role in producing methods and knowledge

related to the uprisings. On a different scale, the national frame obscures what Adam elaborates upon—that nation-states in the region are themselves already trans- and multi-national. Finally, these forms of contemporary analysis often privilege particular understandings of political difference and transition that circumscribe our ability to understand not only the content of protestor demands, but also the varied methods protestors are employing and the knowledge they are producing across the region.

Scholars have devoted considerable attention to whether this or that uprising in the Middle East meets the definition of a revolution. This scholarly debate has not been value-neutral, but rather reveals the investments of the Euro-American academy in its authority to define the terms of the mass protests demanding political, economic and social change. If people are claiming the mantle of a revolution or an uprising, who are we to explain to them (most of the time from far away) why they are wrong?

Moreover, why must uprisings in the region (and in the global south more generally) be measured as successes or failures according to the dominant theoretical and epistemological frameworks in the Euro-American academy? Why not ground new theory or thinking about the meaning of political protest and revolution from the region? After all, our archive for the term "revolution" is partially produced through obscuring and silencing—in Michel Rolph Trouillout's terms[7]—the enslaved-led Haitian revolution and other historical events that were not led—or theorized—by white men of all classes. The terms we use and the histories we draw on to understand and to measure mass protests in the Middle East are themselves produced through political, methodological, epistemological, economic and ideological power. This power amplifies particular histories as much as it silences others.

The limitations of the nation-state frame of analysis prevents us from recognizing how the 2019 uprisings—from Iran to Hong Kong—are all in some part against global neoliberal austerity and wealth concentration on the one hand, a hyper-connected international political and economic elite who are benefitting from this regime on the other hand, and an increasingly global, digital and highly personalized and efficient security apparatus on yet a third hand. If we take the examples of Iran, Iraq and Lebanon, important differences and similarities emerge. First is the role that the United States and international sanctions play (and did play in Iraq) in the economic crises felt most acutely by ordinary people in Lebanon and Iran. Iran has been in a long-running proxy war with the Saudi-American alliance that manifests in post-US invasion and occupation Iraq and in Lebanon. Both Iran and Iraq have resource-rich economies, while Lebanon is primarily a service-based economy in which the banking sector plays an oversize role.

Both the prime ministers of Iraq and Lebanon have resigned, although these resignations have different effects structurally and politically. The Lebanese state has yet to repress protestors with the scale and intensity of violence we are seeing in Iran and Iraq, partially because protestors themselves have not forced the armed forces to show their hand. In addition, the protests in Iraq and Lebanon share many demands, such as ending corruption, holding political elites accountable and rolling back political sectarianism. In addition, personal status law in both Iraq and Lebanon is an intensifier of sectarianism, with feminist and anti-sectarian protestors in Iraq drawing attention to the dangers of passing separate personal status laws for different religious and sectarian groups.

As John notes, Lebanon, Iraq, Algeria, Sudan and Iran are all post-war countries, and the wars of the past animate the uprisings and embolden them. Protestors acutely feel that they have suffered too much, and for far too long—and that many civil, regional and international interests prefer civil wars or violence to regime change. The Lebanese model was cited as an antecedent to American-imposed political sectarianism in Iraq. This model facilitates corruption, as leaders seek to control access to state services through cultivating sectarian-clientelist networks. It is important to note here that the "Lebanese model" is in fact a French imperial model of rule through difference, recalibrated decades later by American imperial power in Iraq. Comparative or regional analysis must pay close attention to historical difference and similarity, as well as to international and regional articulations of power and rivalry.

As Adam notes, the uprisings' demands of 2019 are not only resonant with those of the 2011 uprisings: They bear the lessons and warnings of 2011. Protestors in Lebanon, for example, have learned from Egypt the unique threats that the army poses and the ways that sexual violence was weaponized by counter-revolutionary forces. They are likewise wary of the ways in which Syria's uprising evolved into a protracted civil war marked by heavy foreign intervention. Protesters across the region also share tactical and strategic knowledge such as how to deal with tear gas, how to effectively occupy public space and how to mobilize and distribute alternative legal, media and medical support.

Methodological nationalism obscures not only connections across states but also complex dynamics within them. In Lebanon, unemployment and weak public services and institutions were endemic to post-civil war economic restructuring, which led to the hollowing out of the middle class and its spending power. The class and social interests of the professional and remaining middle- and upper-middle classes are closer to those of the elite than they are to the 30 percent of the country living in poverty. Elite universities and private K-12 schools are both containers and incubators of economic and social segregation. Economic segregation—and the resulting class alignments and polarizations between poor, working, middle and upper classes—has social and political consequences, some of which are beginning to be seen on the ground.

Furthermore, a third of Lebanon's residents are not Lebanese citizens but migrant workers and refugees from wars in Syria,

Iraq, Sudan and Palestine. The oft-repeated statistic that a third or even half of the Lebanese population is in the streets discursively erases a third of the population by not counting migrant workers and refugees as part of the population. In fact, 2019 saw not one but two uprisings in Lebanon. The first was a Palestinian uprising against a xenophobic and punitive labor law and against the conditions of neglect and corruption under which Palestinians live. The second and more widely recognized uprising began months later, in October 2019, and has yet to substantively address non-Lebanese concerns. The nation-state framework works to further obscure revolutionary and mass movements of peoples in the region for self-determination, including Kurdish-led movements that have also been invigorated in the region post-2011.

Life-cycle analysis, as Jillian put it, also limits our temporal understanding of political uprisings and transitions. The October 2019 protests in Lebanon are years in the making: They have important antecedents in the 2011 anti-regime Hirak and the 2015 YouStink Protests. Life-cycle analyses also generate the unwarranted confidence of scholars to declare each uprising either a success or a failure, based primarily on whether there has been regime change at the time of their writing. Yet regime change is not the only measure of whether or not an uprising has been successful, just as structural transition should not be the only measure of the effects of an uprising. An uprising is a temporal order in and of itself and it causes a temporal break—there is a before and after 2011 Egypt, just as there will be a before and after 2019 in Iraq and Lebanon. Moreover, regimes are not only made of laws, policies, bureaucracies, constitutions and institutions. Regimes are also ideological and affective—they are the logic, relations and practices that course through and define the relationships between a government and a state and a body public.

Thus, if the regime in Lebanon is understood as neoliberal, patriarchal and constituted through political sectarianism—the logic and practices that make this regime cohere are what I have called "sextarianism."[8] Simply put, sextarianism unpacks how the political technologies of the state articulate sectarian and sexual difference together legally, bureaucratically and ideologically. This co-constitutive nature of sectarian and sexual difference is self-evident to those who have studied the law and bureaucracy of Lebanon, but epistemological and methodological nationalisms and hierarchies are so strong that analysts can at once see and unsee that co-constitution. Political sectarianism is a system built on two poles: 1) personal status law and the system of census registration to which it is tied, which produce the legal and bureaucratic architecture of separate and measurable "sects," and 2) a power-sharing agreement between these bureaucratically and legally differentiated sects and citizens. Sects and citizens and sectarian-citizens are not naturally occurring phenomena. We must understand the ways that political difference is structurally reproduced in order to both analyze and mobilize effectively—a point that feminist and legal groups have stressed throughout.

Political sectarianism also has a temporal register: It claims to represent and channel pre-existing and discrete sectarian interests until the population is made ready by the state for liberal democracy. This forever temporary nature of political sectarianism should be understood as securing the liberal, redemptive and pedagogical work of the Lebanese nation-state, as well as its futurity. In short, the forever temporality actively reproduces the future tense of the nation-state precisely because it keeps citizens suspended within the temporality of the temporary, backed by a fear of the tyranny of the majority if political sectarianism is ended before national citizens have been successfully made out of sectarian citizens. According to such logic, political sectarianism should end only when citizens are no longer sectarian.

Thus far, protesters have made gains in putting these two aspects of the regime under stress—its sextarian nature and its temporal order. Protesters are refusing the temporality of the temporary, and they are drawing attention to the ways that sectarian difference is structurally produced through masculinist and patriarchal bureaucracies and policies. These seemingly small achievements stand outside conventional academic notions of structural change, yet they are crucial precisely because they strike at the affective and ideological edifice of the power regime in Lebanon.

In sum, sectarianism, neoliberalism, patriarchal power (authoritarian or not) and corruption are co-travelers in protestors' minds across the region and should be in the forefront of our analyses as well. Comparative analysis is an invitation to develop new analytics as to how and why political uprisings take shape, and what the culture of neoliberalism has come to be associated with beyond economic and political policy and practice across different locations. The intifadas of 2019, and of 2011 before them, should inspire us to intellectual intifadas that refuse to naturalize the ways that our analysis of power and of uprisings in the Middle East are always already bound to the structural conditions and stakes of producing knowledge about the Middle East in the Euro-American academy.

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Endnotes

1 Schwedler develops this critique further in "Comparative Politics and the Arab Uprisings," *Middle East Law and Governance* 7/1 (April).

2 Chalcraft analyses the 2011 uprisings in the context of more than a century of resistance in *Popular Politics in the Making of the Modern Middle East* (Cambridge University Press, 2016).

3 See Robert P. Parks in this issue.

4 See Rima Majed and Lana Salman in this issue.

5 Sokari Ekine and Firoze Manji, eds., *African Awakening: The Emerging Revolutions* (Pambazuka Press, 2011).

6 See Adam Hanieh, *Money, Markets, and Monarchies: The Gulf Cooperation Council and the Political Economy of the Contemporary Middle East* (Cambridge University Press, 2018), winner of the 2019 British International Studies Association International Political Economy Group Book Prize.

7 Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Beacon Press, 1995).

8 See Maya Mikdashi, "Sextarianism: Notes on the Studying the Lebanese State," in Amal Ghazal and Jens Hanssen, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Contemporary Middle-Eastern and North African History* (Oxford University Press, 2018).

Resurgent Protests Confront New and Old Red Lines in Jordan

Curtis R. Ryan

In response to multiple waves of protests, including a surge of protests in 2019, the Jordanian state has worked hard to establish and enforce five red lines for the protests not to cross in order to rein in the potential impact of unified protests across the kingdom.

L ike elsewhere in the region, Jordanian activism declined but did not disappear after the peak of the Arab uprisings from 2011 to 2013, especially in the shadow of regional conflicts and rising insecurity. But from 2014 onward, Jordan has seen a resurgence of protests, demonstrations and activist movements. The sheer breadth of activist movements across the Jordanian political spectrum suggests the potential for a broader unified opposition coalition that could demand major change in the Hashemite Kingdom. But in practice this has proven to be difficult to achieve.

In response to multiple waves of protests, including a surge of protests in 2019, the Jordanian state has worked hard to establish and enforce five red lines for the protests not to cross in order to rein in the potential impact of unified protests across the kingdom.[1] These red lines include, among other things, prohibitions on certain protest tactics and targets as well as deeper restrictions on cross-sectoral and national organizing. The result is a state of contentious politics as the state and protestors face off across these red lines. But in the context of mounting social, economic and political grievances against the state that include corruption, unemployment and declining living conditions—as well as new national uprisings over similar grievances across the region—it is uncertain how long these red lines can hold back widespread demands

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for change or whether the state will have to add major reforms to its policy tool-kit in order to stave off its own national uprising.

Resurgent Protests Since 2011

Jordan did not experience a national anti-regime uprising in 2011 like Tunisia and Egypt, but it did see mass mobilization in the form of (mainly) pro-reform demonstrations. New movements and actors emerged from this regional wave as part of a growing configuration of protests and grievances in Jordan and these continue to pose a major challenge to Jordan's political system.

Activists from the town of Dhiban in the central Madaba governorate south of Amman—regarded by many as the epicenter of Jordan's uprising—claim credit for starting the protests in January 2011. Dhiban activists formed the first of many movements that together became known as the Hirak—mainly youth-led activist movements that also sprang up throughout the kingdom, including in Kerak, Tafila, Ma`an, Mafraq, Irbid, Zarqa and Amman. Many Hirakis have roots in Jordan's tribal and East Jordanian communities and see themselves as representatives of an authentic Jordanian society that is increasingly estranged from the Jordanian state.

The Hirak in 2011 represented a new form of activism and organization in Jordan, adding to the established activism of Jordan's trade unions, professional associations

Public school teachers protest during their strike in Amman, Jordan, October 2019.

MUHAMMAD HAMED/REUTERS

and leftist, pan-Arab nationalist and Islamist political parties.[2] For several years prior to 2011, Jordan had seen a resurgence of labor activism.[3] The emergence of the Hirak broadened and in many ways deepened the politics of opposition across the kingdom. Unlike the traditional opposition parties, the Hirak were mainly rooted outside the capital in cities and towns large and small. Hirakis see themselves as activists in genuine grassroots movements, organized along local lines and committed to democratic principles for organizing the movements themselves. They organize against corruption and challenge the state on what they see as misplaced policies and priorities.[4]

The Syrian civil war, meanwhile, split traditional activist groups inside Jordan. While many secular leftists and nationalists supported Asad, most Islamists—including the Muslim Brotherhood—strongly opposed the Asad regime and called on Jordan to support the rebels. As the war worsened and hundreds of thousands of refugees fled Syria for Jordan, Jordan's streets were quieter, but the opposition—now divided—was far from acquiescent. Activists continued to rail against corruption and the status quo, even though they briefly limited protests and other public expressions of dissent—a calm before the next storm.

One of the first signs of an activist revival came from

Jordan's movement against Israeli gas. In 2014, Jordan's National Electric Power Company (NEPCO) announced that it had signed a letter of intent with the Noble Energy company to begin importing gas from the Leviathan field, controlled by the State of Israel. Jordanian public opinion then and now was strongly opposed to the agreement, seeing it as de facto Jordanian subsidization of the occupation of the Palestinian people. The movement against Israeli gas formed in response, but also attempted to create a new form of activism in Jordan. In addition to protests, it undertook extensive research on the effects of the state's gas policy and presented alternative policy approaches for the country. The movement re-energized many Jordanian activists and crossed ethnic, religious, class and gender lines in an attempt to create an inclusive and nationally representative movement.[5] While the anti-gas movement failed to derail the state policy, it did force parliament to vote in December 2014, 107 to 13 against the deal—albeit in a non-binding vote.

As innovative and organized as the anti-gas movement was, it did not bring out the massive numbers that have turned out to protest austerity measures mandated by International Monetary Fund (IMF) agreements over the years.[6] As with the landmark protests of 1989, IMF-inspired

austerity measures have proven to be the quickest route to reviving protests in Jordan, motivating tens of thousands to take to the streets nationwide. In November 2012, Jordan saw some of its most volatile protests, with protesters hurling stones and Molotov cocktails at state security forces in clashes over price increases for heating and cooking fuel. Those protests died down after several days of clashes, but they echoed the 1989 protests in anger and intensity.

In June 2018, protesters returned to the streets nightly throughout the month of Ramadan in the largest protests since 2011. IMF conditionality programs had pressured the government to further cut the budget, reduce subsidies and reform (and enforce) tax laws. A proposed new income tax law generated what first appeared to be a middle-class tax revolt—most Jordanians are too poor to pay income tax. But the protests quickly expanded in composition and focus. Organizers called for a day-long work stoppage across all major sectors—the first general work stoppage in Jordanian history. The turnout soon outnumbered the organizers and core activists, leading to nightly protests for days afterward in Amman and other cities throughout the country.

Both traditional and Hirak forms of activism were well-represented in the 2018 Ramadan protests, but so were ordinary citizens who subscribed to no party, professional association or Hirak movement. The protests were among the most diverse in Jordanian history, ranging across age, class, ethnicity, race and gender. The protests were also effective: The government suspended the new tax laws and Prime Minister Hani al-Mulqi and his cabinet resigned. The new prime minister, Omar al-Razzaz, was widely regarded as a liberal and a reformer, but he was also a former World Bank economist, representing the kind of neoliberal approach to political economy against which so many Jordanians were railing.[7]

In the wake of the massive June 2018 protests, other movements also caught fire, some in unexpected ways. A handful of protesters, for example, staged a march from Aqaba (Jordan's port in the south) to Amman. Hundreds joined them along the way, hiking on foot to the capital, demanding jobs in Jordan's difficult economy. This March of the Unemployed caught the imagination of many across Jordanian society, who followed this journey on social media. The grievances of these activists were familiar to most Jordanians, striking a sympathetic chord with many: unemployment, the unaffordable cost of living and the basic issue of personal dignity.

Other protests have focused on foreign policy issues with profound domestic implications. Jordanians across the political spectrum rallied against the Deal of the Century—the supposed peace deal of the Trump administration helmed by the president's son-in-law Jared Kushner. Jordanians widely feared that the deal promised not a chance for peace but capitulation for the Palestinian people. Many

Jordanians also worried that the deal would force Jordan to accept millions more Palestinian refugees. Conservative nationalist Jordanians had long opposed *watan badeel*—the idea of Jordan as an alternative homeland for Palestinians. But now Jordanians across the spectrum were worried that such an alternative was what their US ally had in mind. The deal triggered numerous demonstrations, including large rallies by Islamist and leftists organizers in June 2019.[8]

Still other protests emerged far outside the capital, including volatile protests in the border town of Ramtha after the government attempted to rein in the illegal trafficking of goods to and from Syria. But it was the October 2019 teachers' strike that most comprehensively mobilized not only grassroots protesters across the country, but also much of public opinion behind them. Shortly after the academic year began, Jordan's public-school teachers began a nationwide strike demanding a 50 percent increase in salaries—an increase they argued had been promised three years earlier. The government responded that it was unable to afford such a large outlay of spending, especially during a recession and under yet another series of IMF austerity measures. Four weeks later, the government conceded, agreeing to salary increases ranging from 35 to 75 percent.

Five Red Lines

In response to the growing potential of widespread dissent illustrated by the resurgent protest movements over a wide array of national grievances, the Jordanian government sought to establish and enforce red lines that citizens are not to cross. While some red lines are known and consistent, others have emerged more recently. Activists and protesters tend to be familiar with what Jillian Schwedler calls a script for protests—a clear understanding of what kinds of protests and locations for protests are acceptable to state authorities.[9] Some of these red lines are longstanding, but others have emerged or shifted in the wake of the 2011–2012 protests. There are (at minimum) five key red lines for protest and activism in Jordan today.

1. Focus on the government, not the monarchy

Like many regimes in the Middle East, Jordan maintains laws on *Lesse Majeste*. It is illegal to verbally or symbolically attack the king, queen or monarchy directly. Protesters instead direct their anger at the government, particularly the prime minister and cabinet, even as they are aware that the king sets policy. Protesters have been successful in generating enough pressure to oust numerous governments, from the April 1989 austerity protests to the many governmental changes during the 2011-2012 uprising (including five prime ministers and cabinets in less than two years).

While prime ministers have acted as shock absorbers of political dissent, Jordanians joke that prime ministers are appointed in order to be fired. Most protesters refrain

from directly criticizing the monarchy, but during and since the 2011 uprising, a small but growing number has crossed that red line. Some Hirak protesters, for example, engage in dances, songs and chants that directly criticize the king or queen. But most do not. Even at the height of the uprisings in 2011, most Jordanian protesters remained moderate in their positions, adapting the regional chant from *"al-sha`ab yurid isqat al-nizam"* (the people want to bring down the regime) to *"al-sha`ab yurid islah al-nizam"* (the people want to reform of the regime).

2. No insulting key allies

The regime has sometimes been more tolerant of criticism of the Jordanian government and policy than it is of any attack on its key allies. As a small country with a weak economy, and one that is prone to chronic fiscal crises while remaining deeply dependent on foreign aid, Jordan has tried to rein in critiques that might be seen or heard in the capitals of some but not all allies. The regime tends to be especially sensitive to any slights against the Arab Gulf monarchies. Zaki Bani Irshayd, for example, a leader of Jordan's Islamist movement, was arrested in 2014 not for his activities on behalf of the Muslim Brotherhood or the Islamic Action Front political party, but because he authored a Facebook post critical of the United Arab Emirates. More recently, in 2019, four soccer fans were detained after making derogatory chants about Kuwait during a Jordan-Kuwait football match in Amman. Jordanian officials quickly apologized to their Kuwaiti counterparts and they launched an investigation and branded the chanters as hooligans unrepresentative of the views of Jordanians. While Jordanian officials do not like direct verbal attacks on their many European allies, they are far more concerned about insults against their allies among the Arab Gulf monarchies.

3. No long-term occupation of protest spaces

Like many other states across the region, Jordan responded to the 2011 protests by tolerating protests only in certain spaces and of limited duration. No long-term camps were permitted, as the government feared anything that approximated the iconic Tahrir Square protests in Egypt that helped spawn the Occupy Wall Street protests later in 2011. Even on a much smaller scale, the Jordanian government broke up any effort to establish encampments, particularly in Amman.

As Schwedler notes, government efforts to restrict protests have led to shifts in urban geography, planting flower beds and erecting ornate fences ostensibly to beautify squares; those projects also closed off those spaces to protesters.[10] For activists, one of the most well-known spaces for protest is the Fourth Circle, the location of the Prime Ministry. The center of the now-fenced traffic roundabout is no longer an accessible place for protesters to gather. The massive June 2018 protests against tax hikes and other austerity measures initially began at that circle, but the gendarmerie quickly closed down that space and forced protesters to relocate to the nearby parking lot of the Jordan Hospital. The Fourth Circle itself remains mostly off-limits.

4. No linking the capital to the governorates

After the 2011 protests saw increasing links between the Hirak movements in the governorates and activists in Amman, the government has sought to prevent such linkages from deepening—in essence, establishing a new red line. Activists complain that they are being deterred from linking with counterparts elsewhere in the country, preventing protests from building from local phenomena to a unified or national movement. Activists in the movement against Israeli gas, for example, were blocked–physically–from spreading their activities outside of Amman to cities like Irbid and Zarqa. Police intercepted their convoys of vehicles, blocking them and forcing them to turn back. Other activists have run afoul of the intelligence services only when they have tried to extend their local protests and connect to activists in other governorates. State sensitivities appear to have increased in the wake of the nationwide June 2018 protests.

5. No cross-class or cross-national alliances

The newest red line seeks to restrict the emergence of cross-class alliances. The teachers' strike of 2019, for example, worried many government officials because, as many activists in that strike noted, their middle-class grievances were easily relatable to Jordanians in similar social and economic circumstances. Indeed, the teachers' strike hit a sympathetic cord among many Jordanians. Like other segments of Jordan's supposed middle class, the teachers could not afford anything close to a middle-class lifestyle. Many Jordanians feel that they should be part of the middle class in terms of their level of education and employment, and yet they cannot obtain a middle-class standard of living. Low wages combined with rampant inflation, have left many Jordanians feeling economically marginalized. Amman consistently ranks as one of the most expensive cities in the region.

The Razzaz government barely survived the 2019 teachers strike, which remained limited to just one sector. But what if other social forces had joined the strikes and protests? The government is fearful that after acquiescing to many of the teachers' demands, other sectors will be inspired to strike.[11] Most worrisome is the possibility of a relentless series of work stoppages or–worse–the emergence of simultaneous strikes in solidarity.

The worry over cross-class alliances is born of the fear of a nationwide movement. A unity of labor, Hirak and traditional activist sectors could mount a major challenge

to the regime. While such an alliance has yet to emerge among Jordan's many protest sectors, one of the most influential to emerge in the past decade has been the retired military veteran's movement.[12] If that movement threw its weight behind another strike or protest, it could be a game-changer. Indeed, even as the government argued that it could not afford to meet the teachers' salary demands in 2019, it quietly increased the pensions of the retired military officers. The king himself praised them as foundational to Jordan's stability and standing as a state.

Citizens Have Red Lines, Too

As the government extends its red lines, protesters do not always honor them, pushing against the boundary to make their point but retreating to fight another day. Activists are angered and resentful when the government abruptly shifts the red lines, in effect changing the rules of the game, or when it itself oversteps its boundaries in ways that activists see as violations of the script.

Organizers of the June 2019 protests against the Deal of the Century, for example, felt that they had not crossed known red lines. They begin their protest march at a shopping area in the affluent neighborhood of Abdoun where the US embassy is located. They then marched peacefully toward the embassy but, as expected, were prevented by the gendarmerie from reaching the embassy grounds a few blocks away. There they held a peaceful demonstration, with prominent figures in the traditional opposition leading chants against the deal and urging the government to remain steadfast against it. Given that the king had himself expressed opposition to the deal, the demonstrators were surprised when key organizers or chant-leaders were detained following the event by state security officials. Many activists complained that through such harassment, the government had not honored its own red lines. Similarly, striking teachers demanded—and eventually received—an apology from the prime minister for what they regarded as inappropriate coercion at the outset of their strike.

Jordan remains beset with myriad problems–refugees, corruption, fiscal crises and economic recession—let alone the implications of the Deal of the Century. Many government officials feel that given these challenges, protesters should scale back their efforts, lower the political temperature and rally around the country at a time of need. But activists argue that these issues and challenges are precisely why there will be more protests—and why they are necessary. Jordan, many argue, is always in some sort of time of difficulty and need. If activists honored calls for "not now, later," the time for expressing dissent would never come.

The October 2019 teachers' strike hit a nerve with many Jordanians, who identified with their grievances and goals. One might have expected some backlash from parents whose children were out of school for four weeks. But Jordanians identified with the striking teachers because they shared the same concerns: the high cost of living, inadequate salaries, the inability to make basic ends meet, corruption in government and public life and the belief that they–the teachers of all Jordanians, really–had already suffered and sacrificed enough. Jordanians deserved support, dignity and respect. The government has expanded its red lines in order to rein in protests, but it has had to do so because protests persist around grievances of corruption, governance and the poor quality of daily life. Until the government substantively addresses these issues, protests in Jordan will continue; especially as both government and opposition in Jordan are well aware that these are many of the same issues that have brought massive protests to the streets of Lebanon, Iraq, Algeria, Sudan and across the region. The regional context of protest—and what some see as an Arab Spring 2.0—is precisely why the state has taken a harsher stance, reinforcing old red lines and creating new ones. But the regional protests are also why many activists are just as determined to cross those red lines. ■

Endnotes

1 Much of this analysis is based on interviews conducted by the author during 12 research trips to Jordan between December 2010 and September 2019.

2 For details on the various forms of opposition, see Curtis R. Ryan, *Jordan and the Arab Uprisings: Regime Security and Politics Beyond the State* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018).

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4 See Sara Ababneh, "Troubling the Political: Women and the Jordanian Day-Waged Labor Movement," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 48 (2016); Sean L. Yom and Wael al-Khatib, "Jordan's new politics of tribal dissent," *Foreign Policy, Middle East Channel*. August 7, 2012; and Sean L. Yom, "Tribal Politics in Contemporary Jordan: The Case of the Hirak Movement," *The Middle East Journal* 68/2, (2014).

5 Curtis R. Ryan, "Not Running on Empty: Democratic Activism Against Israeli Gas in Jordan," *Middle East Report Online*, April 16, 2015; and Ryan, Reviving Activism in Jordan: The Movement Against Israeli Gas," *Middle East Report*, no. 281(Winter 2016).

6 The movement also staged mock public tribunals and periodic "black outs" in which citizens turned off their lights and power at specific times across the country. The movement drew on a host of opposition groups and insisted on inclusive and democratic governance within its own proceedings. Other single-issue movements mobilized at the same time, for example, to oppose nuclear power near Mafraq and to prevent deforestation in Ajlun. See Nicholas Seeley, "The Battle Over Nuclear Jordan," *Middle East Report*, 273 (Summer 2014).

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11 Osama al-Sharif, "After Amman gives in to striking teachers, more protests could come," *al-Monitor*, October 16, 2019.

12 On the activism of the military veterans in Jordan, see Tariq Tell, "Early Spring in Jordan: Revolt of the Military Veterans," Carnegie Middle East Center. November 4, 2015; and Assaf David, "The Revolt of Jordan's Military Veterans," *Foreign Policy, The Middle East Channel*, June 16, 2010.

Regional Uprisings Confront Gulf-Backed Counterrevolution

Jonathan Fenton-Harvey

Wealthy, ambitious and emboldened by US acquiescence, Saudi Arabia and the UAE have emerged as key protagonists in thwarting popular movements.

In April 2019, a wave of popular uprisings in Sudan against rising costs of living and a lack of political freedoms ended the 30-year rule of President Omar al-Bashir. Demonstrators also took to the streets this year in Lebanon, Iraq, Algeria, Jordan and Egypt to demand systemic change, while Tunisia made uneven strides toward democracy and stability throughout 2018 and 2019.

As happened in the 2011 Arab uprisings, however, external political actors have sought to sabotage some of these movements, notably in Sudan, but also elsewhere in the region. Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), in particular, have attempted to shape Sudan's political transition to halt progress toward the civilian and democratic polity protesters demand. This interference seeks to secure their regional dominance and crush any positive democratic transition that could inspire reformers within their own or other states. Saudi Arabia and the UAE also seek to undercut the potential emergence of a stronger Islamist presence in regional governments, particularly of the Muslim Brotherhood.

Watching the events of 2011 with growing alarm, the rulers of Saudi Arabia and the UAE embarked upon a regional counterrevolution. They helped stamp out an uprising in Bahrain, intervened in Yemen's post-uprising transition and undercut Egypt's revolution in 2013 by backing the military coup that led to the ascent of Abd al-Fattah al-Sisi as Egypt's newest president for life. Not only did their intervention in Egypt help overthrow an elected Muslim Brotherhood government supported by regional rivals Qatar and Turkey, but it also ensured the failure of Egypt's democratic transition. Saudi Arabia and the UAE have showered Egypt's military regime with billions of dollars of aid in order to secure their desired

vision of regional order that places severe limits on political opposition. Although small protests in September 2019 challenged Egypt's military rule, the "Sisi model" effectively serves as the template that Saudi Arabia and the UAE have sought to impose across the region.

Wealthy, ambitious and emboldened by US acquiescence (which has only increased with the election of President Donald Trump), Saudi Arabia and the UAE have emerged as key protagonists in both thwarting popular movements and in shaping the political and economic policies of regional states in favor of liberalizing economies, hardening authoritarianism and repressing social protest.[1] They have adopted closely aligned foreign policies, often backing the same counterrevolutionary actors while sharing regional ambitions. Although they have important differences regarding the forces they support in their ongoing military intervention in Yemen—with the UAE increasingly supporting southern Yemeni secessionists against the Saudi-backed government—their mutual counterrevolutionary alliance has remained strong elsewhere in the region, as can be seen in those they support in Sudan, Egypt, Bahrain, Libya and Tunisia.

At the same time, however, the expansive efforts of Saudi Arabia and the UAE to shape the regional order in their image, along with their ongoing confrontation with Iran and the unresolved Yemen crisis, may be stretching their capacities for regional intervention to its limits. For example, they have yet to take a directly interventionist stance in Algeria, despite the popular uprising's success in deposing its president and the possibility for a democratic transition. Moreover, while their efforts have been relatively successful in certain cases, they have not always succeeded in imposing their will. Even where they have succeeded in Egypt and Libya, there remain major

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Abu Dhabi's Crown Prince Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed al-Nahyan meets with Sudan's head of the transitional council, Lt. Gen. Abdel Fattah Al-Burhan Abdelrahman, May 2019.

challenges to their long-term visions. Despite their seemingly unlimited reservoir of financial and military support for regional counterrevolution, it is unclear whether they will ultimately be able to impose their vision on a region where poverty, corruption, authoritarianism and sectarianism continue to inspire widespread protest—and for which neither Saudi Arabia nor the UAE are offering any real long-term solutions.

Mixed Results in Sudan

Similar to events in Egypt in 2011, the military in Sudan immediately stepped in to manage the transition after ousting al-Bashir in 2019. Protesters, who learned from Egypt's experience, raised alarms about the military's control over the revolution and the possibility that the transitional agreement would not reflect the people's wishes. As was the case in Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the UAE took major steps to shore up the Transitional Military Council (TMC) in an effort to replicate the Sisi model of restoring order on terms favorable to their interests. Under al-Bashir, Sudan had taken part in the Saudi-led coalition's war in Yemen, providing troops and fighter jets for use against the Houthi rebels. While Sudan's participation in the Yemen war was not uniformly supported

by Sudanese citizens, Riyadh and Abu Dhabi saw Sudan as a useful ally and hoped to retain its support. The two Gulf states vied to keep Sudan within their sphere of influence and also to prevent it from aligning further with Qatar and Turkey—who became involved in Sudan's transition after al-Bashir was removed. Saudi and Emirati support for the military increased during the protests, which enabled Khartoum to move away from Qatar, reportedly to improve its political and economic security, but also under pressure to join the anti-Qatar camp.

Prior to al-Bashir's ousting, Riyadh and Abu Dhabi assessed potential alternative leaders. Salah Gosh, who was appointed Sudan's intelligence chief in 2018, had favorable ties with the UAE, Saudi Arabia and Egypt. Gosh had even met with a Mossad official in Berlin in an effort to plan how to elevate him to power on behalf of Saudi Arabia and the UAE, according to a Sudanese military source cited in *Middle East Eye*.[2] Yet as Gosh was forced to resign along with the rest of al-Bashir's government, both Gulf states looked elsewhere.

Soon after the revolution, the military arrested several Muslim Brotherhood figures tied to the Sudanese regime, a move welcomed by the UAE and Saudi Arabia. Backing Sudan's military was also a means to prevent Islamist politicians from gaining power. Despite their behind the scenes maneuvering,

Saudi Arabia and the UAE sparked controversy after promising to donate $3 billion to the TMC, which protesters soundly rejected. While Riyadh and Abu Dhabi presented this support as a stabilizing measure, many viewed it as an attempt to shore up military rule against protesters. Furthermore, both states had supported General Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo (also known as Hemedti)—commander of the Rapid Special Forces and former deputy head of the TMC. Not only were Hemedti's forces responsible for the bloody conflict in Darfur in the early 2000s, but they had viciously cracked down on protesters in 2019. (Hemedti has since served as a useful tool for Saudi and Emirati interests in Sudan.)

By August 2019, in the face of continuing protests, the TMC was forced to support a more representative arrangement that led to shared civilian rule. While the terms are still not secure, civilians have gained more influence. Despite Saudi and Emirati efforts to shore up the TMC, the will of the protesters has so far outmatched their counterrevolutionary machinations.

Libya's Sisi

Libya has become another important arena for the efforts of Saudi Arabia and the UAE to undermine potentially democratic transitions and to ensure the dominance of anti-Islamist, authoritarian rulers. In the midst of an ongoing civil war and United Nations-led negotiations, they have thrown their support behind the military general Khalifa Haftar, who opposes any democratic transition and the involvement of Islamist factions, thus jeopardizing the UN-backed peace process.

On March 27, 2019, Haftar visited King Salman and received Riyadh's support "for the security and stability of Libya."[3] Just days later, Haftar launched an offensive on the Libyan capital of Tripoli, which he sought to seize from the UN-backed Government of National Accord (GNA). Previously, Saudi Arabia and the UAE had played a covert role in supporting Haftar's self-styled Libyan National Army and in this meeting the Saudi rulers promised tens of millions of dollars for his forces.[4] Saudi Arabia, along with Egypt, had also lobbied the United States to support Haftar,[5] leading to Trump's eventual support for his campaign despite earlier condemnations of Haftar's attacks. While Saudi Arabia has focused on financial support, the UAE has provided essential military technology to Haftar before and after his Tripoli offensive.[6] The UAE also drained around $10 billion worth of Libyan frozen funds and delivered them to Haftar.

Such external support has enabled Haftar to become a significant player in Libya, with whom the international community must now contend in any future peace settlement. Furthermore, Saudi Arabia's influence with the Trump administration has secured Washington's support for Haftar. Though GNA forces repelled Haftar's offensive on Tripoli, his war has disrupted Libya's UN-led peace process seeking to unify rival factions and create the framework for a stable, democratic transition.

Soft Power in Tunisia

Despite being the 2011 uprisings' major democratic success story, Tunisia has also at times been vulnerable to Riyadh and Abu Dhabi's attempts to empower reactionary and pre-revolutionary political forces in Tunis. Their interventions have aimed to not only weaken the coalition-governing Islamist Ennahda party—widely seen as a pragmatic Tunisian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood—but also to upset the country's transition towards democracy.

While the UAE has played a more proactive role in countering Ennahda, which following its electoral victory in September 2011 initially drifted closer to Qatar and Turkey, Saudi Arabia has also adopted a similar goal. Both sought to shore up the Nidaa Tounes political party, which ran on a secular, nationalist and anti-Islamist agenda. They helped finance Nidaa Tounes and gifted vehicles to leading party figures before the 2014 presidential elections. Nidaa Tounes' electoral success in 2014, forming a coalition government with Ennahda, was seen as a small victory in Saudi Arabia and the UAE and a somewhat successful attempt at undermining of their Tunisian opponents. The UAE has also reportedly tried unsuccessfully to persuade subsequent Nidaa Tounes president Beji Caid Essebsi to undertake a Sisi-style coup and seize power from Ennahda.[7]

The potential for Saudi and UAE-backed counterrevolutionary activity in Tunisia is more limited than in Egypt or Sudan primarily because the military does not play a major role in dominating government affairs and there are fewer post-Arab-uprising reactionary forces to support. Saudi Arabia and the UAE have resorted to influencing Tunisia by financing parties that represent the ancien regime from the pre-2011 era of President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali. Nevertheless, they have increasingly attempted to use media operations to undermine Tunisia's democratic transition. In 2012, Saudi Arabia attempted to secure a deal to establish more media outlets in Tunisia, suggesting it was looking for a platform for further influence. More recently,

a week before the 2019 presidential election, a broadcast by the Saudi state-owned Al Arabiya channel blamed the killing of two Tunisian politicians on Ennahda.[8]

Despite efforts to hinder Tunisia's progress as an emerging independent democracy, the recent presidential elections of 2019 highlight that the country has largely withstood such counter-revolutionary activities. The victory of the populist independent former professor Kais Saied, not beholden to Gulf interests, illustrates the limits of their influence operations.

A Lost Cause in Bahrain

Although the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries generally remained untouched by the Arab uprisings of 2011, the greatest threat to the Gulf's status quo came on February 14, 2011 when popular protests erupted across Bahrain. Protesters from the country's Shi'i majority demanded reforms and redress for their poverty and disenfranchisement caused by the Sunni royal family's discriminatory policies. Many protesters sought significant reform, while others pushed for regime change. Bahrain's ruling elite tightened their grip on society during and especially after the uprisings when the state security apparatus struggled to contain the protests and resisted making concessions. The regime and its Saudi and Emirati allies were particularly wary of giving any ground to the protesters that would invite Iranian interference. Regardless of Iran's role in Bahrain's society, Saudi Arabia feared that any drastic trans-formation in their backyard could threaten its own regional influence as the GCC's kingpin.

Riyadh and Abu Dhabi therefore quickly moved to shore up the Bahraini government, providing essential security support and sending in a large number of troops.[9] Their intervention effectively silenced Bahrain's Arab Spring when thousands were arrested.[10] Rather than address some of the protester's demands, Bahrain forcefully crushed the uprisings. It has continuously repressed sporadic calls for reforms ever since, and in July 2016 the government outlawed the main opposition party Wafeq.[11] Since 2016, according to Amnesty International, Bahrain has increased its repression of civil society in an effort to stop any form of dissent.[12]

Where is the Counterrevolution Now?

The new round of popular uprisings across the region in 2019 once again seeks to combat authoritarianism, poverty and corruption—indicating the great need for major regional reforms. While these uprisings face numerous obstacles within their respective countries, as in 2011 they will also likely confront powerful external actors such as Saudi Arabia and the UAE, among others, that seek to contain and even roll back progress.

Saudi Arabia and the UAE were successful in their efforts to disrupt democratic transitions when they were united in their goals and could find willing partners among local leaders or

the region's military elites. In 2012, when Mohammad Morsi of the Muslim Brotherhood was democratically elected president of Egypt, Riyadh and Abu Dhabi stepped in to undermine it. Their success in supporting the military coup and later election of Abd al-Fattah al-Sisi to the presidency came early in the counterrevolution. The Sisi model has provided a template for interventions to follow. Though current Saudi and UAE efforts to support Khalifa Haftar in Libya have not led to a full regime change, they have still empowered their preferred candidate as a significant political player in the divided country.

Yet growing awareness of their counterrevolutionary interfer-ence has triggered increasing opposition to their efforts, even in countries where they had successfully prevented progress. Sudan is arguably moving in a more positive direction toward a post-authoritarian transition and Tunisia's second free presi-dential election idicates that it has been able to withstand Saudi and Emirati interference. Such a trend is likely to continue, as Tunisia further progresses in its democratic transition. Even in Egypt, a brief renewal of protests might spark the beginning of new efforts to push for some reforms or transformation within the system.

It remains to be seen whether counterrevolutionary actors will mobilize their forces to push back in Algeria, Jordan, Lebanon or Iraq. They may be tempted to intervene if protestors are able to make inroads toward major democratic transitions or if new political actors arise that challenge regional regimes. Meanwhile, both Saudi Arabia and the UAE are currently focused on extracting themselves from the quagmire of their intervention in Yemen, where they are increasingly at odds over whom to support and how to proceed, and from ongoing tensions with Iran, which pose a threat to their regional influence and the stability of Gulf states. The severity of both these challenges may be temporarily diverting Saudi and Emirati attention away from developing a comprehensive counterrevolutionary approach to the new uprisings and hindering their ability to forge a unified program to exert their leverage in the way they succeeded in doing after 2011. ∎

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Trump's Enabling Role in Rising Regional Repression

Adria Lawrence

US President Donald Trump's public embrace of autocrats and his virtual silence on their repressive behavior appears to have made them less constrained than they were in the past. This shift in US foreign policy has important implications for how the new wave of protests will play out.

As 2019 draws to a close, analysts who predicted a new wave of anti-regime protest in the Middle East early in the year proved remarkably prescient.[1] Mass street protests have taken place in Algeria, Sudan, Egypt, Iraq and Lebanon. Anti-government protests also erupted in other parts of the world—in Ethiopia, Guinea, Chile, Colombia and Hong Kong to name a few—making 2019, as one journalist noted, the "year of the street protester."[2] This new wave of protest in the Middle East is the first to reach the scale of the 2011 Arab uprisings: It forced out Algerian President Abdelaziz Bouteflika, Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir and Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri. Yet 2019 is not 2011 redux. The context for these protests is different, and both regime opponents and regimes themselves have adapted their strategies since 2011.

Protesters have clearly learned from the failures of the 2011 uprisings. While toppling four autocratic leaders in 2011 seemed to herald a new era for the region, today's protesters recognize that leadership change is only a first step. Their 2019 goals are explicitly broader as they seek to completely change their respective political systems. In Algeria, for example, Bouteflika's departure did not dampen popular demands for dismantling what Algerians call "*le pouvoir*": the army chiefs, business elites and politicians from the ruling National Liberation Front (FLN) party that have dominated politics since independence. Rallies in Sudan in early November 2019 centered on the lingering influence of the former president's ruling political party. In Iraq and Lebanon, protests have challenged the ruling sectarian power-sharing arrangements— Lebanese protestors chanting "all of them means all of them" have stressed that the entire political system has to change.

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Across the region, protesters share a deep skepticism of promises made by existing leaders. They seek solutions to widespread corruption and persistent economic problems such as high unemployment. Aging leaders are no longer the targets; regime opponents want deep changes to existing political structures. Yet protesters are not the only actors who have learned from prior experience—authoritarian regimes also drew lessons from the outcomes of the 2011 protests. When renewed popular protest erupts, it can be tempting to over-emphasize the diffusion of laudable demands for justice and change, while downplaying the way authoritarian tactics also diffuse across countries.[3]

A notable development since 2011 is that the region's authoritarian rulers have increasingly relied on harsh repression to maintain their power—whether in direct response to protest, or as part of a broad crackdown on free speech and dissent aimed at deterring challenges from below. In Morocco, for example, after the 2011 protests subsided, the regime quietly began arresting activists and independent journalists.[4] In response to the 2016 protests in the Rif region, which began after a fishmonger was crushed inside a garbage truck while trying to recover fish confiscated by the police, the Moroccan regime cracked down and arrested protest leaders. During the recent protests in Algeria, police deployed tear gas, shut down the Internet and arrested journalists.[5] Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir declared a state of emergency last year in response to the growing protest movement, authorizing security forces to suppress demonstrations.[6] Iraq has responded with lethal violence to protests, killing over 250 by the end of October 2019.[7]

Further, arms sales to the region have increased, and states like Egypt, Yemen, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Saudi

Arabia have used arms against civilians at home and abroad.[8] Across the region, civil society organizations, human rights defenders and press freedoms have come under attack.[9]

What explains this uptick in repression? The roots of repressive authoritarianism could be entirely domestic, as leaders respond to local conditions using tried-and-true tactics out of the autocrat's playbook. But the ubiquity of repressive tactics across different cases in recent years suggests that there may be regional or even global conditions that favor their usage.

One of these conditions is ongoing instability in the region. Regional leaders have long justified their rule by pointing to their ability to deliver stability. With the onset of the destructive civil war in Syria, the violent fragmenting of the Libyan state and the 2013 coup in Egypt, the claim that only authoritarian regimes can provide order no longer rings quite as hollow as it did in early 2011. Syria in particular serves as a cautionary tale, providing rulers with a pretext for suppressing demonstrations, repressing free speech and denouncing opponents as agents of foreign countries.

Yet, regional instability is not the only change that has occurred between 2011 and 2019. The United States has also changed its stance toward authoritarian leaders—particularly toward allies such as Saudi Arabia and Egypt—since the 2016 election of President Donald Trump. In contrast to past administrations and presidents, Trump has publicly embraced and praised repressive regimes rather than penalize them or expressed condemnation. This change raises questions about whether the foreign policy of the global superpower has affected autocratic behavior in the contemporary Middle East. Trump's public embrace of autocrats and his virtual silence on repressive behavior, appears to have made autocrats, particularly those allied to the United States, less constrained than they were in the past. This shift in US foreign policy has important implications for how the new wave of protests will play out.

Consequences of Trump's Embrace

Prior to 2016, US presidents consistently supported democracy and human rights in the Middle East in their rhetoric, even as their willingness to act on those goals varied. President Barack Obama, unlike his predecessor President George W. Bush, did not prioritize democracy promotion in the region, but like past presidents, he denounced human rights abuses and professed support for civil society organizations.[10]

Since 2016, however, there has been a major shift in presidential rhetoric. Trump has been far more likely to laud tough autocrats than any recent president—he appears to admire autocratic tendencies and he has praised some like Russia's Putin and Egypt's Sisi for their leadership style.[11] The president's remarks rarely criticize autocrats who abuse human rights, and he devotes relatively few of his public remarks to condemning the use of repression abroad. The rhetorical shift by the United States from stressing a commitment to freedom and rights in the world to indifference toward strong-man tactics, has three potential consequences for cycles of protest and repression in autocratic states.

First, it is possible that this rhetorical shift is largely inconsequential. In this view, presidential condemnations of human rights abuses have always been relatively costless signals that, unless backed by a clear commitment that the United States will act to enforce tolerance toward peaceful demonstrators, are ineffective at shaping political behavior. Realist scholars of international relations, for instance, see power and interests as the primary drivers of behavior, not rhetorical commitments. If presidential statements, such as Obama's "red line" speech that failed to deter Bashar al-Assad from using chemical weapons in April 2013, carry little weight with Middle East dictators, a shift in rhetoric will make little difference to cycles of protest and repression.

Indeed, purely rhetorical statements condemning authoritarian actions can (and do) provoke accusations of hypocrisy. Proponents of human rights have often pointed to the tendency of presidents to call out abuses when carried out by US rivals while giving a pass to US allies. Trump may be less likely to face such accusations given his tendency to prioritize explicitly US interests over protecting vulnerable citizens in other countries.

A second possibility is that this shift in rhetoric may actually decrease repression because it may deter protest in the first place and thus reduce opportunities for regimes to repress their citizens. In a new study of the Syrian uprising, Matthew Cebul argues that Syrian protesters in 2011 were emboldened by the rhetorical support they received from

President Donald Trump meets with Egyptian President Abd al-Fattah al-Sisi at the White House, April 2019. KEVIN LAMARQUE/REUTERS

the Obama administration.[12] Syrian protesters' expectations that the United States would support them, based on diplomatic statements and US actions in Libya and Egypt, increased protesters' willingness to withstand severe repression and persist in anti-regime mobilization. Had Syrian activists known that help was not forthcoming they might not have persisted. The lesson of Cebul's work is that rhetoric supporting human rights can be dangerous to citizens who are protesting if it is not accompanied by a real commitment to those citizens. In this view, Trump's lack of expressed support for anti-authoritarian forces in the region offers clarity on what the United States will and will not do—it avoids raising false hopes.

The third possibility, however, is that Trump's rhetoric actually emboldens autocrats, particularly in states allied to the United States, by removing a constraint on their behavior.

Diplomatic statements alone cannot fully deter repressive tactics—such tactics have long been employed throughout the Middle East. But before repressing nonviolent protests, arresting political opponents or suppressing free speech, US allies had to ask themselves whether those actions were worth the price of international condemnation. They might not have expected to face punishment if they persisted in repression, but under prior administrations they could expect to incur diplomatic costs and pressure.

Autocratic rulers care about their reputations abroad not only because they depend on international support, but because they know that condemnation can encourage domestic opposition groups to keep fighting for change. Rulers might still opt for repression even when they expect a stern US response, but the likelihood of such a response might make them think twice and consider other potential

courses of action that would not anger an important ally. Trump's turn away from even rhetorical condemnation of regional allies means that rulers have less to fear from an administration that expresses little opposition to their use of brutal tactics. The shift in rhetoric is most consequential for journalists, NGOs and activists who are engaged in confrontations with repressive governments.

Repression Emboldened

In fact, recent behavior by US allies supports the view that they are now less constrained in their use of repression than they were in the past. The Saudi assassination of journalist Jamal Khashoggi, for example, illustrates this lifting of constraints. After the assassination, Trump contradicted US intelligence reports on Saudi Arabia's responsibility, stating, "[I]t could very well be that the [Saudi] Crown Prince had knowledge of this tragic event—maybe he did and maybe he didn't!"[13] To be clear, this assassination might still have occurred under prior administrations, but it is worth asking whether it would have been carried out so blatantly and whether prior administrations would have exonerated the killing publicly. The Saudi prince has reason to be less worried about the US response than ever before.

In Morocco, the arrest of journalist Hajar Raissouni on charges of abortion was part of a recent, larger crackdown on independent journalists.[14] The Moroccan state has repressed journalists in the past, but the high visibility of these arrests suggests that there is less concern about the international ramifications of restricting free speech. The same could be said for the al-Sisi regime in Egypt—prior administrations might have curtailed the worst abuses of the regime by adding a potential cost to the leadership's calculus as it considered the utility of repression. Bahrain, too, has resorted to repression more frequently since Trump's election. Unlike Obama, Trump has been reluctant to tie arms sales to Bahrain to its human rights record.[15]

While Trump's rhetorical embrace of regional authoritarians may encourage repression among US allies, it may be either inconsequential or beneficial to regime opponents in non-allied states. In places like Algeria, where protesters were unlikely to anticipate US support under any administration, the rhetorical shift may be inconsequential. In Syria, it is difficult to imagine that Bashar al-Assad would have acted differently if Trump had been president at the time—with regime survival at stake, the use of repression was overdetermined.

The Limits of Repression

Although the current environment may embolden autocrats, the recent uptick in repression has not succeeded in stifling calls for change. Remarkably, repression in places like Iraq, Algeria and Sudan has not stopped protests from growing, even when it appears that no one is coming to aid these movements. Repression no longer appears to be as effective as it was immediately after the 2011 uprisings.

Recent academic studies help explain why repression can backfire. Elizabeth Nugent has demonstrated that widespread repression increases solidarity and unity among opposition groups.[16] Protesters are also capable of learning from repression and adopting tactics to counter police action or reduce the visibility of their actions.[17] While repression may work in the short term, over the long term it can be counter-productive—for example, the repression of activists in Morocco motivated their friends and family members to join protests even years after the repression had occurred.[18]

An environment that encourages repression may thus not work to autocrats' advantage. The growth of protest in 2019 despite the use of repression suggests that regional leaders need to take calls for reform seriously.[19] The Trump administration's unconditional support for its regional allies is similarly short-sighted. Long-term regime stability, which is crucial if the United States is to have reliable regional allies, should not be built on repression but rather on confronting the root causes of popular protest such as corruption, underemployment and the monopolization of state resources by the region's increasingly repressive elite. ∎

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Regional Authoritarians Target the Twittersphere

Alexei Abrahams

Saudi Arabia's illicit infiltration of Twitter turns out to be only the tip of the iceberg of regional authoritarians' efforts to wrest control of political discourse on social media.

In early November 2019, the US Department of Justice charged two American residents, one of them a Saudi citizen, with spying on behalf of Saudi Arabia—the first allegation of its kind by the United States against the kingdom. Their target was neither secret US government documents nor military plans, nor industrial blueprints. Instead, the two former employees of the San Francisco-based social media platform Twitter are alleged to have mined the company's client database for personal information about outspoken Saudi critics of the Saudi regime, and thousands of other Saudi Twitter users.

That the Saudi monarchy would go to such lengths to infiltrate Twitter indicates the degree to which Twitter, Facebook and other social media platforms—far outgrowing their quotidian origins as casual social chat rooms—have become the de facto modern agora of the Middle East. In a region where public spaces are closely monitored and news media outlets are generally harnessed to the state, independent platforms like Twitter have become the primary public fora where regimes are criticized; where social forces cultivate support and gauge public opinion; and where citizens are ultimately mobilized and coordinated to step into the streets and participate in contentious political action. Such a politically salient space cannot but be the target of manipulation by domestic and foreign actors wishing to shape domestic and regional trajectories.

Indeed, Saudi Arabia's illicit infiltration of Twitter turns out to be only the tip of the iceberg of the regime's efforts to wrest control of political discourse on social media. As the kingdom's ambitious young ruler, Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman, insists on retaining and further consolidating monarchic control even while pursuing seismic domestic reforms and embroiling his country in foreign conflicts, he has been proactive about managing the discourse surrounding these activities, both by squelching dissent and putting a positive spin on events. Twitter, as the kingdom's only plausibly free forum for political debate, must therefore be brought to heel—by manipulating the menu of salient topics that is discussed; by deploying bot armies to disrupt opposition threads and parrot regime positions; and by intimidating, co-opting, arresting and even assassinating oppositional social media "influencers."

From Liberation Technology to Repressive Instrument

As recently as 2012, social media was heralded as a "liberation technology" that would facilitate a wave of democratization across the Middle East.[1] Indeed, the 2011 Arab uprisings are often remembered as the "Facebook revolutions" or

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"Twitter revolutions" due to the prominent role social media platforms played as tools for coordinating and mobilizing protestors. But amidst growing political polarization fueled by online manipulation in Western democracies—in the wake of the Cambridge Analytica scandal and after various mass shootings in which social media appears to have played a nefarious role—this earlier euphoria around social media seems absurdly optimistic and sensationalist.

Yet when compared to the world before Twitter, Facebook or YouTube, the advent of social media was nevertheless a profound technological innovation that radically improved the coordination and mobilization of many social movements. Anyone who had access to a computer or smartphone could open a social media account for free. After deactivating geolocational tracking (almost all Middle Eastern users do this) and limiting personally-identifying information, one could post political commentary or calls to action with relative anonymity and impunity and those posts would be visible to all other users on the platform.

Contemporary authoritarian regimes are responding to this threatening innovation through a variety of means, but with different capacities. In China, social media platforms like Weibo are managed in-country, so the government can compel the company (Sina) to impose server-side censorship of political tweets and forward the identity of dissident users to state security.[2] Middle Eastern authoritarians, however, must contend with extra-regional platforms like Twitter, whose decisions about content moderation are, at least in theory, beyond their power to affect. On such platforms, civil society activists in the Middle East can incite anti-regime sentiment with text, photos and videos; and can call for protests, name the date and time and location of the next action and agree on an array of tactics—all without the state being able to censor or identify them. In a region where discussing politics in the workplace, coffee shop or even the home is a hazardous undertaking, social media offers a remarkably anarchic space.

But two can play at this game. Regional regimes, particularly the petro-monarchies of the Gulf, with their enormous resource advantages over civil society, have been learning to take advantage of social media for their own purposes by countering and drowning out dissent at home while shaping narratives around regional affairs. With large numbers of their own populations on Twitter (an estimated 9.9 million users in Saudi Arabia), and amidst its significant usership rates elsewhere, the Saudi regime, for example, has been targeting Twitter by using its hashtag vernacular, its borderlessness and its asymmetric landscape of influence in an effort to turn the tables. In recent years, under the direction of Saud al-Qahtani—the former royal court adviser known by activists as the "minister of flies"—the regime has marshalled thousands of social

media accounts posing as ordinary citizens, flooding the forum with propaganda and disinformation even while outlawing dissent. At the same time, they have sought to identify, surveil and pressure influential users to voice support for the regime.

Hashtag Gaming and Hijacking

Twitter famously delimits topics of conversation by the hashtag (#) symbol, and users are encouraged to reach relevant audiences by hashtagging their tweets. During the 2011 uprisings, for example, protesters cohered around several famous hashtags, such as الشعب_يريد_إسقاط_النظام# (The People Want the Downfall of the Regime) or ميدان_التحرير# (Tahrir Square). When hashtags show signs of high or rapidly increasing engagement, they are classified (algorithmically) by Twitter as "trending," where they gain greater visibility and draw greater engagement from a wider audience. Indeed, both of these famous hashtags trended once more in Egypt in September 2019, and in Iraq in October, as Iraq's 2019 uprising centered on Baghdad's own Tahrir Square. As part of the broader 2019 uprisings, between October and November, #عراق_ينتفض (Iraq Rises Up) and #لبنان_ينتفض (Lebanon Rises Up) trended in Iraq and Lebanon, respectively, drawing millions of tweets from hundreds of thousands of users.

Arguably, a country's trending hashtags constitute at first approximation the menu of topics that are "on its mind," so to speak. Citizens infer what other citizens are talking about (care about, think about) by checking what is trending. Journalists and news stations, though they retain the power to ignore social media and set the agenda themselves via their TV and radio channels and websites, often choose to scour social media trend lists to anticipate the next breaking story. In the kind of self-fulfilling cycle so quintessential to social media, notable events reliably tend to make the trending list, reinforcing our impression that they are notable.

This menu, however, can be manipulated. Given command of enough user accounts, a determined actor can post hundreds or thousands of tweets mentioning a particular hashtag, causing it to trend.

One prominent example of this type of hashtag gaming documented by the researcher Marc Owen Jones took place at the start of the diplomatic crisis between Qatar and the Gulf Cooperation Council members, led by Saudi Arabia.[3] After deploying a military blockade around Qatar, the Saudi government issued an ultimatum that included a list of demands that Qatar should satisfy, including shutting down the Doha-based Al Jazeera network. Soon thereafter, the hashtag #نطالب_بإغلاق_قناة_الخنزيرة (We Demand the Closing of the Channel of Pigs) appeared—a clever use of Arabic wordplay to denigrate the news channel. Analysis of user metadata, however, reveals statistical anomalies indicating that some 70 percent of participating users were centrally commanded accounts (either automated "bots" or human-operated

"sockpuppets") and, moreover, these users dominated the initial volleys of tweets, successfully making the hashtag trend. Many of these accounts, Jones discovered, were created in the months and weeks leading up to the crisis, as if premeditated.

Nor was this an isolated incident. Later that summer, the hashtag #إرحل_يا_تميم (Get Out, Tamim!) trended in Qatar. Ostensibly a domestic cry of discontent against their incumbent emir, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani, the hashtag turned out on closer inspection to be promoted by scores of bots and led by several major Saudi and Emirati influencers, including Saudi Arabia's notorious propaganda chief Saud Al-Qahtani. The hashtag was quickly countered by pro-Qatari hashtags #تميم_في_كل_مكان (Tamim is Everywhere) and #لا_مشاركة_في_حشتاج_مشبوهة (No Participation in a Suspicious Hashtag) led by major Qatari influencers, including Qahtani's opposite number, Abdullah Al-Athbah.[4]

At the same time, with thousands of accounts at their command, not only can Gulf regimes promote hashtags consistent with their political positions but they can also infiltrate those of the opposition. As early as 2016, Jones found that a hashtag favored by human rights defenders in Bahrain was suddenly flooded with anti-Shi'i, sectarian vitriol by hundreds of suspicious accounts.[5] This finding echoes a similar finding in Mexico, where an anti-police hashtag was flooded with tweets containing meaningless strings of symbols, repeatedly forcing protesters to migrate to other hashtags to continue their conversation. These incidents belong to a more widely observed phenomenon of hashtag hijacking, where opportunistic actors, recognizing the heightened visibility of a trending hashtag, seize the moment to convey a message that is off-topic or misrepresents the hashtag's initial character or intention.

Virtual Foreign Interventions

Twitter conversations tend to be delimited by hashtags, but little else—they have no other borders, which makes them potentially transnational. In the wake of the Gulf crisis with Qatar and as the Iran-Saudi Arabia regional rivalry has escalated, the Gulf has made its influence palpable across the region. Domestic protest hashtags in Egypt, Lebanon and Iraq in 2019, for example, have all felt the pull of Gulf influence. This September, the most retweeted account on Egypt's Tahrir Square hashtag was that of Turki Shalhoub, a notable anti-authoritarian voice prominent in Gulf hashtags (the user self-reports their location as Saudi Arabia). On the same hashtag, *Al Jazeera* reporter Husam Yahia was among the top five most retweeted accounts.

The influence of outsiders on domestic Twitter hashtags is potentially exacerbated by the differential penetration of Twitter across Middle Eastern countries. In Egypt, Lebanon and Iraq, Facebook—not Twitter—is the more popular platform. Yet Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar all favor Twitter and the international community and news media

industry tend to look to Twitter more than to Facebook for political commentary. As a result, domestic voices are under-represented on Twitter, leaving the narrative vulnerable to being shaped by outside elements.

This phenomenon is further exacerbated by Internet shutdowns. When protests broke out in Iraq in October, the Iraqi regime shut down the Internet causing Iraqi hashtags to be taken up by influencers outside of the country. Indeed, in the initial weeks, the top three influencers on #عراق_ينتفض (Iraq Rises Up) were all pro-Saudi: Amjad Taha (@amjadt25), Sattam Al-Saud (@sattam_al_saud), and Abdullah Al-Bander (@a_albander). All three expressed sympathy and solidarity for the protests, favoring the overthrow of the Iranian-aligned government in Baghdad. Taha in particular reappears as the most retweeted account on the Lebanon uprising hashtags, where pro-Saudi accounts are pleased to observe the ire of protesters directed against Iranian-backed Hezbollah. Taha is one of the most retweeted accounts on Iran's 2019 protest hashtags, which, again exacerbated by Internet shutdowns, appear dominated by anti-regime voices located abroad.
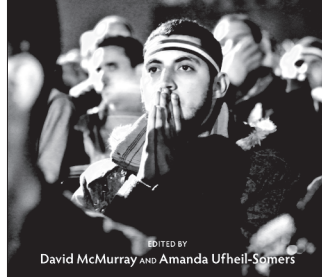
Influencing the Influencers

While marketing itself as a horizontal space where everyone has a voice, Twitter is, in reality, remarkably unequal. In the same way that some hashtags trend while (most) others do not, some users' tweets "go viral" and are engaged with to a far greater degree than others. Those users also accumulate more followers, meaning that their future tweets enjoy greater reach and engagement from the beginning. The resulting elite of Twitter influencers, like Turki Shalhoub and Amjad Taha, have an outsize effect on what conversations (hashtags) trend and what range of opinions are represented within those conversations. This is not to say that others are censored from speaking but simply that, in the wilderness of voices on social media, many speak but few are heard.

The fact that these influencers wield so much power over political discourse is concerning not only for society—which finds itself expending intellectual energy on a menu of topics effectively chosen by a narrow clique of influencers—but also for the influencers themselves, who increasingly find themselves targets of regime surveillance and repression. Indeed, the former Twitter employees accused of spying for Saudi Arabia did not abuse their privileged data access to identify every user critical of the kingdom; just the most influential ones.

Omar Abdulaziz, a Saudi political dissident influencer (on both Twitter and YouTube), was identified several years ago—in a now-infamous PowerPoint presentation delivered to Saudi officials by McKinsey consultants—as a vocal and widely followed critic of the Saudi regime.[6] In the summer of 2018, Abdulaziz, who lives in self-imposed exile in Canada, discussed over the phone with Saudi dissident journalist Jamal Khashoggi, then residing in the United States, the idea of

otherwise deny or control access. Across a region where free fora for public debate are largely shut down, platforms like Twitter constitute the last plausible outlet for open expression of political dissent—the de facto agora of the modern Middle East. "Twitter for us is like a parliament," as one Saudi citizen phrased it.[11]

But in the absence of a real parliament, or indeed any other peaceful or reliable channel by which citizens' grievances can be heard and addressed, political discontent fomented on Twitter in the Middle East simply has no outlet other than contentious political action and the violence and unrest that invariably attend it. Such a potent cauldron of discontent cannot be left to bubble and brew on its own. Gulf states, chief among them Saudi Arabia, now intervene regularly—to encourage discontent whenever it threatens to destabilize, say, an Iranian-aligned regime—while confusing and pacifying social movements that threaten authoritarians aligned with the Saudi-Emirati axis.

Whether by influencing their citizens' thought diets by shaping the menu of topics that trend, or by deploying armies of bots or sockpuppets to parrot regime positions and poison opposition narratives, or by pressuring influential users to toe the party line, the Saudi regime—among others—has meaningfully blunted the liberation potential of social media, and threatens now to turn the tool to its own advantage. And though a country like China with its top-down, server-side control of platforms will always be the Orwellian paragon of digital thought authoritarianism, one cannot help but admire the obscene, arthropodic tenacity of feebler dictatorships, such as those of the Gulf, who though lacking the means to directly control platforms nevertheless learn to adapt to their existence, manipulating, cajoling and gaming them into serving their nefarious ends. ∎

building an army of Twitter "bees" to combat Saudi Arabia's "flies."[7] Unbeknownst to them, Abdulaziz's phone had been hacked by advanced Israeli spyware deployed by the Saudi regime.[8] In a recent article, Abdulaziz claims that as many as 30 other anti-regime influencers have confided in him that they have been blackmailed—with material gained by such spyware—to tweet supportively of the regime.[9]

If the threads of conversation are monopolized by so few, regimes can meaningfully steer the discourse by targeting those few with co-optation, intimidation or even assassination. Ironically, over October and November, 2018 in the weeks following the assassination of Jamal Khashoggi, the primary Arabic hashtag concerning Khashoggi exhibited precisely the kind of hyper-concentration of influence that made Khashoggi a target in the first place: 92 percent of tweets on the hashtag were simply retweets of what others said. One pro-Saudi voice, @monther72, single-handedly garnered 8 percent of all retweets, and the top 50 users garnered 53 percent of retweets—all this on a hashtag that involved over 365,000 users.[10]

Tip of the Iceberg

Seen alongside these other documented tactics, the Saudi Twitter spying scandal appears to be merely the latest attempt, and hardly the last, by a regime determined to contest political discourse on a platform to which it cannot

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Egypt's President Abd al-Fattah al-Sisi and Russia's President Vladimir Putin attend the first plenary session of the 2019 Russia-Africa Summit at the Sirius Park of Science and Art in Sochi, Russia, October 24, 2019. SERGEI CHIRIKOV/POOL VIA REUTERS

Egypt's Post-2011 Embrace of Russian-Style Misinformation Campaigns

Nathaniel Greenberg

Since the 2013 coup, Egypt's posture vis à vis information and cyber warfare has evolved from a defensive one—geared toward domestic surveillance and blocking—to an offensive one also focused on influence operations abroad. This shift has pulled Egypt further into an open embrace of Russia.

researchers for Facebook's cybersecurity office announced in August 2019 that a massive online campaign of what it terms coordinated inauthentic behavior—when groups of pages or people work together to mislead others about who they are and what they are doing—was being directed at critical flashpoints across the Middle East and North Africa, including Libya and Sudan.[1] Although posts were disguised as online activity by local news organizations or public figures from within these target countries, Facebook traced the campaign to "individuals" in Saudi Arabia associated with the Saudi government and to two ostensibly private media groups located in Cairo and Abu Dhabi. The owner of the Egyptian company, New Waves, is a retired military officer and self-described expert on internet warfare. He denies any connection to the Egyptian government, but *The New York Times* reported that "the company operates from a military-owned housing project in eastern Cairo where employees are warned not to speak to outsiders about their work."[2]

Two months later in October 2019, it was revealed that Russia, possibly via the Kremlin-linked private mercenary Wagner group,[3] was also conducting an extensive digital interference campaign in the same regional flashpoints across many of the same platforms and to similar ends.[4] While those ultimately responsible remain shrouded behind layers of deniability, it is increasingly clear the two campaigns worked in concert. In both Libya and Sudan, high volumes of Arabic-language news reporting flowed from the Russian state-media behemoths *RT* and *Sputnik* before multiplying across scores of aggregator sites, blogsites and other online media outlets. Those items were amplified yet further through social media by individuals retweeting, reposting and commenting on the information *ad nauseam.*

According to researchers at Stanford's Internet Observatory, all 15 of the Facebook and Instagram accounts used in Russia's Libya operation, which began as early as May 2014, were administered from Egypt.[5] The $10,000 worth of advertising on the pages was paid for in Egyptian pounds, US dollars and Euros. Together the Facebook and Instagram pages used in the campaign amassed over 240,000 followers.[6] The New Waves operation included over 300 Facebook accounts, pages, groups and events and targeted at least nine countries including Libya, Sudan, Comoros, Qatar, Turkey, Lebanon, Syria, Jordan and Morocco, amassing over 13.7 million followers.[7]

Both of the Libya operations aimed to bolster the campaign of the Egyptian and Russian-backed Field

Marshall Khalifa Haftar and the Libyan National Army, which—in the midst of Libya's ongoing civil war—is in a military standoff with Libya's United Nations-backed Government of National Accord in Tripoli, which has links to the Muslim Brotherhood. Similarly, in Sudan following the 2019 uprising against the government, the two operations were antagonistic toward the Muslim Brotherhood while supporting the transitional military council that assumed power in April 2019.

The participation of Arab governments in Russia's Africa campaigns is not surprising. But Egypt's close involvement with these external disinformation operations reveals a major irony of the so-called Arab Spring. Egypt's current military rulers went to great lengths to frame the 2011 uprising against Mubarak as part of an external US-born social media campaign—what it called "fourth generation warfare" (information-based warfare characterized by a blurring of the lines between war and politics, combatants and civilians)—that it alleged aimed to destabilize Egypt, divide the Middle East and advance the interests of the Muslim Brotherhood. With very different political aims and allies, Egypt's military rulers now wield many of the same tactics of information warfare and external digital interference they once denounced.

Since the 2013 coup that restored military rule under the command of President Abd al-Fattah al-Sisi, Egypt's posture vis à vis information and cyber warfare has evolved from a defensive one—geared toward domestic surveillance and blocking—to an offensive one also focused on influence operations abroad. This shift has entailed a high level of coordination with Russia and an increasingly shared media eco-system, pulling Egypt further into an open embrace of Russia and marking a new era in the politics of the Arab world's information ecosphere.

Egypt on the Cyber-Defensive

The Egyptian regime's new cyber-offensive posture is the latest turn in an ongoing series of government responses to the well-documented surge in popular access to and use of information and communication technology (ICT) that occurred in Egypt and elsewhere in the Middle East during the second half of the last decade. Between 2008 and 2011 mobile phone subscriptions in Egypt doubled from 50 percent to 100 percent of the population. Internet use expanded to include a quarter of the population by 2011, up 10 percent from three years prior.[8]

In response to the explosion of citizen journalism that occurred at the time, the government began formulating a defensive containment strategy against the spread of social media. As early as 2007, citing the fight against terrorism, the

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Mubarak regime created a "special department" within the Ministry of Interior to monitor Internet traffic.[9] In 2005 the government had also purchased a controversial Internet surveillance technology known as Deep Packet Inspection (DPI), giving it license to not only monitor online traffic through keyword searches but also to outsource the technology.[10]

Yet similar to experiences in Tunisia, such defensive techniques—which also included password phishing and the wholesale blocking of websites—only magnified the struggle of online activists. The once oppositional paper *Al-Shorouk* reported that Egyptian cyber-dissidents had been "battling" online with government censors as a kind of "rehearsal" of the coming revolution only hours before taking to the streets on the morning of January 25, 2011. The strategic coordination between online activists and oppositional figures like Mohamed El Baradei would continue over the first week of the Egyptian uprising.

In the months following Mubarak's ouster on February 11, 2011, Egypt's surveillance state appeared to be waning. Competing factions capitalized on the ostensible vacuum of authority to flood airwaves, news columns and blogsites with a deluge of free expression. State security clearances previously licensed by the General Authority for Investment, an arm of Mubarak's innermost circle, were no longer required.[11] The Ministry of Information was briefly abolished,[12] and 16 new satellite channels appeared[13]—a surge that represented about a 30 percent increase in Egyptian broadcasting.[14]

But the opening was short-lived. Unlike Tunisia, where legislators famously moved to neuter the Tunisian Telecommunications Agency—the country's principal organ of Internet surveillance—the Egyptian government retained much of its pre-uprising footing.[15] In the spring of 2014, a cache of documents ostensibly leaked from the Ministry of Interior suggested that DPI technology was still in use. Published in the staunchly pro-Sisi newspaper *al-Watan*, the leak, which emphasized the ministry's use of an "iron grip" technology for combating the security risks posed by social networks,[16] was as much a piece of propaganda for the government's populist rhetoric of law and order as it was a notice for the public good. Still, the leak served as a reminder of just how entrenched Egypt's defensive posture had become.

By late 2016, the government passed legislation allowing, among other things, the revocation of media licenses by a new, all-powerful regulatory body: the Supreme Council for the Administration of the Media.[17] Several months later the government blocked access to scores of international websites and news organizations, including *Al-Jazeera*, *The Huffington Post* in Arabic and *Mada Masr*.[18] The takedown of oppositional political platforms, NGO websites, private media groups and contentious blogsites has continued at a steady pace.[19]

Arab Spring as Fourth Generation Warfare

The official narrative that justifies Egypt's draconian post-revolutionary crackdown on the digital sphere since 2011 asserts that social media and the Internet constitute a major threat to national security. Since assuming power after the 2013 coup, President Sisi has claimed that Egypt is a victim of a powerful and clandestine misinformation campaign of what he calls fourth generation warfare backed by shadowy foreign conspirators, including the United States. In late November 2013, the state satellite channel *Al-Oula 1* produced a documentary mini-series on the alleged threat of fourth generation warfare to Egypt. Examples of this alleged warfare included President Barack Obama's speech in Cairo to the Arab and Muslim world (including his mention of US Congressman Keith Ellison's swearing in with Thomas Jefferson's Quran), the pro-Zionist historian Bernard Lewis's "plot" to divide the Middle East, secret US funding for online Egyptian activists and, of course, the January 25 uprising and 2012 election of the Muslim Brotherhood's Muhammad Mursi as president.

Sisi's narrative of alleged fourth generation warfare intersected in official discourse with the perceived Islamist threat to Egypt or *ikhwanat al-dawla* (Brotherization of the state) and encompassed a host of new and old enemies—from the Qataris and *Al-Jazeera* to social activist groups like the April 6 Movement and, of course, Israeli and American spy agencies—in a broader conspiracy against Egypt.

The origins of Sisi's fourth generation warfare rhetoric can be traced directly to the early days after the January 25 uprising and to a powerful covert influence operation that—as has since become clear—bore the hallmark of Russian coordination. By January 29, 2011, in fact, state media such as the newspaper *Al-Ahram* were promoting a powerful counter-narrative at odds with the nascent story of the Arab uprisings. Instead of ordinary citizens fed up with poverty, corruption and nepotism rising up against oppressive regimes on their own volition, the counter-narrative described a coordinated plot to destabilize the establishment and undermine the law. An article translated from Norway's *Aftenposten* featuring a WikiLeaks story alleging US funding for pro-democracy groups in Egypt was produced as evidence of this plot. The article singled out three cables, including a 2009 telegraph sent by the US ambassador to Egypt in which she describes pressure put on her office by then Minister of International Cooperation Fayza Abu al-Naga to cut funding for ten organizations "on the grounds that they were not registered NGOs."[20]

In addition to the leak to *Aftenposten*, WikiLeaks released memos to *CNN*, *The New York Times* and *The Daily Telegraph* in London. *The Daily Telegraph*, which had recently signed a partnership with Julian Assange, went to press on January 28 with the headline, "America's secret backing for rebel leaders behind uprising."[21] The evidence used to support the claim included a series of initiatives from 2008 administered by the office of the Undersecretary of State known generally as Public Diplomacy 2.0. As the US Ambassador to Egypt Margaret Scobey told me in 2016, the program represented a drop in the bucket of the State Department's well-known support for pro-democracy movements around the globe.

The strategic timing of the WikiLeaks dumps, coupled with the willing dissemination by editors at major news outlets, appeared to be little more than a happy coincidence for the Egyptian regime and a minor detail amidst the revolutionary events of the day. But as has become apparent, the WikiLeaks dump on the eve of the January 29 Friday of Rage reflected a now recognizable tactic in the Kremlin's global strategy of animating the margins of digital media to shape the core of public discourse.

Accompanying the *Telegraph* article—which the lead journalist on the piece later told me went viral on the right-wing American aggregator site *The Drudge Report*—were some 1,382 comments, many of which expressed hostility toward the Egyptian protestors. "Here is the truth about Wael Ghoneim and his partners claiming that what happened in Egypt is a spontaneous youth revolution," writes one commentator in Arabic and English. Another writes in Arabic, "Look what these writers are talking about… the documents from Wikileaks confirm the role of the CIA in everything that happens." A user identified as "Tropicgirl" is even more specific: "OBanana," "The New World Order," "globalists," and "thieving world bankers" were seeking to create in the Middle East a "Stone-Age Caliphate" while throwing ostensible allies (Israel and "quasi-democratic" Arab states) "under the bus."

As with the later hacking of the American elections in 2016 by Kremlin-linked cyberespionage agencies, the opening of the Arab uprisings set in motion a complex interchange of counter-communications. The "wolves," as it were, "were everywhere."[22] "Tropicgirl," who would become active across a broad if peculiar range of media including *The Daily Telegraph*, *The Hill* in Washington DC, *Breitbart News* and *Investment Watch Blog*, was responsible for 57,400 comments as of March 2017, far more than a single person could produce. Imbued with the kind of racially tinged conspiracy jargon used to influence the US election in 2016, the reliably ardent Trumpist (as the user later declared) gave casual evidence to a near fully-formed counter-revolutionary messaging strategy that, by January 28, 2011, was deftly poised to descend onto Egypt's emerging field of public discourse.

The mythology of foreign fingers burst onto the airwaves of Egyptian state radio and TV stations at this time. As the former editor-in-chief of *Al-Shorouk* Hani Shukrallah recalled, one program featured "a young woman with her face blurred or darkened… like a prostitute…. [they] got her to confess on TV that she had been taken by the Americans, along with other members of 6 April movement… to a seminar on how to make a revolution… [it was] Jewish intelligence officers who gave the lecture."[23] Rumors about Kentucky Fried Chicken and Euros being distributed to protesters ran wild. Videos of foreigners "infiltrating" protests went viral. As Naila Hamdy and Ehab H. Gomaa noted in their survey of the press from this time, 420 of 800 articles sampled from semi-official news outlets, including *Al-Ahram,* defined events through reference to a conspiracy.[24]

Egypt's counter-communications offense was underway. On January 29, with police disbanded and the city on edge, citizens armed with sticks and machetes descended into the streets, barricading neighborhoods and breaking street lamps to detour outsiders from entering.[25] Underpinning the story of the uprising was now the very real prospect of chaos. Meanwhile, reports of looting and armed assaults from across the city live-streamed on the state-run Nile TV and over the radio. News of looting, prison breaks and clashes between police and protestors filled the papers.

By Sunday, January 30, the original narrative of the revolution as it appeared in the opposition press five days earlier was altered beyond recognition. Gone were the characters of the "online rehearsal" including the April 6 movement and Mohamed ElBaradei. Nor did that original narrative reappear in the headlines for the remainder of the 18 days. In its place was the heroic image of a uniformed officer hoisted onto the shoulders of a jubilant crowd. Echoing

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headlines from across the country, the caption to *al-Masri al-Youm*'s cover photo read: "*al-sha'b wa al-jaysh: eid wahda*" (the army and the people are one hand),[26] a foreshadowing of the rhetorical populism of the anti-Morsi Tamarrod campaign and the July 3, 2013 military coup.

Misinformation Machine

Egypt's shift to offensive cyber-influence campaigns such as those in Libya, Sudan and elsewhere has entailed a concerted level of coordination with Russia in the form of "black propaganda"—as evidenced by the Facebook campaigns in Sudan and Libya—and "white propaganda": In 2015, *Bawaba al-Ahram*, the online site of Egypt's largest state-run newspaper *Al-Ahram* signed an agreement with the Russian news behemoth Rossiya Segodnya to turn over a percentage of the paper's platform to *Sputnik*, one of Rossiya Segodnya's principal news outlets.[27] And many of Egypt's most-visited online news sites, including *Al-Balad*, *Al-Watan* and *Youm 7*, function in the gray zone of Russian influence operations as each site—presumably by their own volition—regularly serves viewers a heavy diet of reporting from *Sputnik* and *RT*.

The efficacy of media influence—social or otherwise—is difficult to measure. As the stars align in the new Russian-Arab alliance, however, the tactical dimensions of the communications assault on North Africa and the Middle East extend well beyond the conflicts that it targets. In addition to creating its own Russian-language alternative to the Internet, RuNet, the Kremlin launched *RT* in 2005 as an English-language alternative to the "Anglo-Saxon" hegemony in global communications.[28] *RT-Arabic*, begun in 2007, was the country's first foreign language platform beyond English. Countering the Arab uprisings, which *RT-Arabic* at first referred to casually as a Facebook revolution, was arguably its first major test.

The Kremlin has since spent up to $1.1 billion per annum on mass media,[29] and its mission is to undermine Facebook from the inside-out.[30] Julien Assange, who would become a host on *RT*, described the social networking site as an "appalling spy machine."[31] Russian manipulation of the digital platform turned it into just that.

Egyptian state involvement in Russian-style influence operations appears driven by an equally cynical tact insofar as the operations capitalize on the same social media platforms their censors simultaneously work to limit at home. If one accepts the theory, however, that in 2011 Egypt fell victim to a covert wave of fourth generation warfare—or, as Putin's "vizier" Surkov claimed, that world powers had embarked on the "first non-linear war of all against all"[32]—Egypt's cyber-offensive appears understandable. In the midst of mass upheaval and with the region spiraling into violence,

the urgency with which civic leaders and public intellectuals sought explanations for the unfolding events amplified the power of theories like fourth-generation warfare. Ironically, such theories also pulled the country yet further into the embrace of Russia, whose iron-grip on the Arab world's information ecosphere was only beginning. ∎

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Trauma as a Counterrevolutionary Strategy

An Interview with Vivienne Matthies-Boon

Participation in mass social and political uprisings can create new identities, social bonds and liberating forms of collectivity—while the defeat of such uprisings can cause disappointment, betrayal and powerlessness. Vivienne Matthies-Boon—an assistant professor of international relations of the Middle East at the University of Amsterdam—has been researching and writing about the lived aftermath of Egypt's 2011 uprising. Many who actively participated in that movement now often experience depression, anxiety and withdrawal. In Matthies-Boon's forthcoming book **Breaking Intersubjectivity: Counter-Revolutionary Trauma in Egypt (Rowman and Littlefield),** *she develops a notion of political trauma that is more a product of broken and damaged societal relations than a problem in a person's mind. She shows how trauma can be (and has been) weaponized as a counterrevolutionary strategy by military and political elites who seek to maintain and strengthen their economic and political power. MERIP editor* **Steve Niva** *and editorial committee member* **Atef Said** *interviewed her by email in November 2019. The interview has been edited and condensed for publication.*

Why did you start to research political trauma in Egypt and what was the context?

Between 2011 and 2013, I was able to spend a considerable amount of time in Cairo as Egypt grappled with post-revolutionary developments. I was not there for research purposes: I was mostly just being there with friends. I think the lack of any pre-determined research focus helped me open up to what I saw happening around me. At the time, activists were often blamed in public commentary or analyses for the lack of revolutionary progress. They were deemed too leaderless, aimless, always reactionary. And while analytically some of that may have been true to a certain extent, these judgments did not take seriously the lived experience of post-revolutionary turmoil. It was a deeply tumultuous time, where often one woke up in the morning thinking "ok this is the political landscape and how things are going to go" and then by the afternoon it would have turned 90 degrees only to turn a full 360 degrees by the evening. The level and intensity of social and personal anxiety involved in this turmoil was extreme.

There were two friends in particular who motivated me to look into the existential effects of the post-revolutionary aftermath. One of them was suffering serious bouts of depression and anxiety, pacing up and down in his living room, chain-smoking cigarettes only to collapse for weeks and sometimes even months in utter apathy. Another—a younger person—was in an emotional state of turmoil as the revolution had brought him into a collision course with his parents, interrupted his education, and all for utter nothingness. He was left in a state of depression that impacted his daily life to such an extent that he could not function anymore. I believe that many suffered the same fate. My interest in political trauma, therefore, was foremost a response as a friend to them in which I wanted to make sense of what was going on. It only later turned into a full academic project. It then became even more outspokenly academic when opportunities for civil engagement in Egypt increasingly closed, leaving few other options.

It sounds like Egyptian activists had symptoms similar to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) experienced by soldiers in war, yet you don't use that terminology.

I have come to understand political trauma in a very different way from the common understanding of trauma through the lens of PTSD. The problem with PTSD is that it arose out of a particular positivist "revolution" within the American Psychological Association (APA) whereby the APA wanted therapy to become cost-effective by yielding quick and quantifiable clinical results (more beneficial for insurance companies). It particularly sought to get rid of long intersubjective (shared by more than one conscious mind) therapeutic processes such as psychoanalysis where results were not necessarily measurable and certainly not universalizable. The trouble with this direction is that the understanding of trauma was transformed

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from an intersubjective issue of meaning-making to a reified, conception of the trauma "object," which was now located in the pathological structures of the individual's mind.

Trauma would also now no longer be grasped through communicative clinical practice, but through detached and universalist "evidence-based research." Out of this arose the understanding that trauma is basically an (abnormal) event that is so overwhelming that your mind or brain cannot process it, resulting in intrusions (dreams, flashbacks) and dissociation (numbing). Yet, not only is the notion of a sovereign autonomous subject (which is now temporarily distraught by an external event) problematic, on closer examination it also turns out that the neuroscience behind this analysis is not as solid as is commonly presumed. Moreover, it prioritizes the traumatic event over and above continuous structural trauma.

In most parts of the world (and certainly Egypt), however, trauma is not necessarily only an event (such as killing, beatings or torture) that happens to an individual but may also be structural, continuous forms of political repression and socio-economic marginalization. In fact, it is often the combination of both. Furthermore, the dominant idea of trauma as PTSD ends up resulting in a possible *double injury*: The person who suffered a gross injustice to begin with is now also told that there is something wrong with his or her head. In doing so, the individualization of trauma has a depoliticizing effect: It encourages the victim to focus on bettering him or herself rather than fight for social justice. The problem is deemed to be within the self and not social and political institutions. The sad thing is that this individualization may end up directly contributing to the original aim and purpose of human-induced trauma: namely, the silencing and atomization of the other.

And so, in order to avoid these conceptual problems, I develop a new understanding of trauma in my book, based in the philosophy of Jurgen Habermas and Nancy Fraser. I argue that what happens in trauma is actually that our fundamental (counterfactual) presupposition of intersubjective equality in relation to each other (rather than a relation of domination) is betrayed. The perpetrator violently subordinates the victim, either an individual or a group, which results in the crumbling down of our intersubjectively constituted lifeworld (the given experience and understanding of a shared world). And since the lifeworld functions as the realm from which we derive meaning, we lose our grip on the world. We lose our sense of orientation as we become atomized, isolated and estranged. We tumble down a hole of incapacitating anxiety and disorientation. We become alienated and feel unable to shape the world around us, which comes to stand over and above us.

Thus, rather than being a purely psychological affair, trauma is an instrumental tool that is employed for its incapacitating, depoliticizing effects. It is inflicted in pursuit of power: power directly over the victim but also—precisely through this incapacitation of the victim—over economic and political resources. I argue that trauma in any form is always already political: Its point is to rob agency through the violent breakdown of the lifeworld, through

the instrumental pursuit of power. Hence, I see trauma through Nancy Fraser's concept of status subordination, which may be constituted by both traumatic events and structural conditions of traumatic marginalization. The benefit of regarding trauma not as impaired subjectivity but as impaired intersubjectivity is that trauma is no longer reified into an object of the mind, but rather becomes an issue of social and political justice. And whilst the traumatic breakdown of the lifeworld will have excruciating effects on the individual, we make it a social and political issue.

You argue that trauma at a variety of levels was deployed strategically, intentionally, by counterrevolutionary forces in Egypt to maintain their political and social power. What were the methods and means by which they did this, and how coordinated was this strategy?

When we look at trauma as traumatic status subordination, it becomes clear that the counter-revolutionary actors did not sit down and think through the concept of trauma as such. In this sense, they probably did not know what they were doing. What is clear, however, is that they are very well-versed and trained in inflicting counterrevolutionary violence, which started as soon as President Husni Mubarak stepped down in February 2011. And more than that, they engaged in such violence because they understood its incapacitating effects. This violence, I argue, is the pinnacle of traumatic status subordination—the violent betrayal of the equality of the Other, in the attempt to crush him or her, to take away their agency so that they are no longer a threat to their desired political and economic order. So, while they might not have employed the language of trauma as such, they were well-trained in its effects.

The methods through which they inflicted traumatic status subordination were twofold: extremely violent events as well as the structural marginalization and exclusion of what Joshua Stacher refers to as the anti-systematic opposition (who seek fundamental transformation rather than reform).[1] On the one hand, the military engaged in a brutal and violent crackdown on protestors, from torture outside the Egyptian museum, sexual torture of men in detention and women on the square to beatings, killings, you name it. They engaged in all of it. At the same time, they also engaged in a structural marginalization of the anti-systematic opposition from the political public sphere—and made sure that these voices were not only not even heard but had less of a chance to speak or utter so much as a breath. So, they engaged in a strategy of delegitimization and dehumanization of the opposition they felt they could not work with—namely those horizontally organized crowds that occupied the streets. The military delegitimized their claims not only through their calls for a return to orderliness and stability (the same kind of discourse we had previously heard under Mubarak) but also by purposefully sidelining them from any meaningful political process. One of the ways in which they did so was pushing for quick elections, which resulted in the Muslim Brotherhood's victory.

Then, in 2012, after the disintegration of the Brotherhood-majority parliament by the military council, and the presidential elections that saw Mohammad Mursi's victory, we also see the betrayal of equal intersubjectivity. During Mursi's rule as president, oppositional protestors were marginalized, excluded, sidelined and dehumanized—as well as tortured, beaten and killed. Furthermore, Mursi's economic program—neoliberal in orientation—also did nothing to redress the socio-economic inequality and distress through which the majority of the population were struggling evermore.

All this reached an unprecedented peak after Mursi's removal by then Gen. Abd al-Fattah al-Sisi a year later, where the state pursued total domination and control over all aspects of life. Forget putting forward political claims: If you so much as breath in the wrong direction, you will be detained and end up in Egypt's judicial circus of hell. At the same time, while Sisi and the military pursued their economic interests and invested in megaprojects, the ordinary population not only suffered from increased austerity measures but also a devaluation of the Egyptian pound and further precariousness. The point here is that these patterns of systematic exclusion, dehumanization and impoverishment are part of a grave form of status subordination, which is traumatic in the sense that it destroys one's ability to engage in the world as equal peers. They rob people of their agency in the world.

Here we see the social nature of trauma—or rather how the political intersects with the social as it ends up destroying the social fabric that used to provide a network of support. Hence, one might end up feeling even more alienated from the surrounding world: It is not just the formal political sphere that one becomes estranged from but also those family, friends and loved ones (as well as neighbors) that one used to be close to. One tends to become increasingly alienated, atomized and withdrawn. All this, of course, not only shows how the relationship between perpetrator and victim is not Manichean but rather complex, but this process itself also plays into the hand of the counterrevolutionary forces. So long as people beat each other up, they won't act in creative, collective self-becoming that challenges the authorities of the state.

Your work also analyzes how different coping strategies among activists play into the hands of counterrevolutionary trauma. Can you elaborate on this?

In order to understand how the alienating cycles of traumatization work, we need to understand not only how the person feels and experiences the traumatic betrayal of intersubjective equality but also how these are produced and reproduced through social institutions. We need to look at the personal, social and political realms simultaneously because only then can we see not only the real purpose behind traumatization (namely the instrumental pursuit of power) but also how personal coping mechanisms and reactions may end up directly playing into the hands of the counterrevolutionary perpetrator's wishes.

So, for example, social withdrawal and increased atomization and depoliticization are precisely what counterrevolutionary violence strives after. It seeks to break the creative becoming of

the collectivity so that the radical challenge posed to its unjust political system is contained. But looking at these perspectives simultaneously helps us understand why counterrevolutionary violence is so effective. In its violent crushing of the counterfactual presupposition of intersubjective parity—the belief that we are all worth something in relation to another—it destroys our lifeworld, our framework for orientation. We literally become lost in the world. If there is enough of a collective presence, the counterrevolutionary violence is in a sense buffered—the physical pain and death are more real than ever, but there is a collectivity to fall back on and to share the pain with. Through the simultaneous infliction of violence and systematic exclusion and marginalization, however, this collectivity broke down, people became (re)atomized and the buffer disappeared, leaving us alone, bewildered and estranged—as well as frustrated, angry and extremely depressed.

What are some lessons that activists could draw from your analysis of political trauma?

I am hesitant to prescribe any lessons for anyone. People should decide for themselves if there are any lessons in there for them. My hope is that my work will offer a sense of recognition for them. A sense of yes, this is what has been happening to me or those around me. And then I hope that this recognition may help them to articulate where the origin of the problem lies, namely not within the mind or the psyche but in the injustice of the system which is then manifested in the social and personal realms. This is *not* to say the existential individual impacts of counterrevolutionary violence is not real. Rather it is precisely to recognize these deep personal impacts and to say: This is normal. What you are going through is normal and a direct result of gross social, political and economic injustice. This is what the counterrevolutionary forces were after.

And perhaps this recognition might also help to stop cycles of social aggression and revenge: If people recognize where the real injury lies, then perhaps it will help decrease the venting of anger and frustration on others who were not the original perpetrators. This is an immense task, especially as the regime is so bent on victim-blaming and the politics of revenge as a way of (propagandistic) distraction. But one can only hope that it might help a little because the injury needs to be redirected away from the social realm towards the political realm, the Egyptian military and state—the original perpetrators of counterrevolutionary violence. One can also only hope that once the regime explodes or implodes (which it will as it is inherently unstable), then in the unleashing of violence people will be prepared and stand better ground as collectivities in the face of such counterrevolutionary atomization.

One can only hope that activists understand what is happening and perhaps help raise awareness of this amongst others who do not read or are not academically engaged. Because to be honest, this awareness does not come from my book and any other academic scholarship, but much more from collective and communal relations on the ground. We need to rebuild collectivities. In a sense, the Egyptian regime might itself have already started paving the way for that by not only arresting and detaining those who are politically active but anyone at all. This means grievances become more widely shared. But the problem is, of course, that they will not allow such collectivities to form, flourish and prosper. But still, the protests in September 2019 show that in the face of so much death and destruction, the will for life (or rather a dignified life wherein one has a say as an equal peer) persists.

Protests are escalating once again in the region. While the so-called January 2011 revolution generation has been dealing with intense and contradictory notions of defeat, exile and powerlessness, many in the younger generations have not experienced what it is like to be part of a revolution. How should those with more experience help new participants to better cope with the experiences of activism and possible traumas of defeat?

In a way the generational gap might be a good thing. I believe that while we older people often look down on the inexperience of the younger generation, we also have to recognize that youth have a zest for life that might be lost as we become older, and often more cynical and downbeat. So, I would say it is important not to crush their zest for life with our pessimism.

There is sometimes a tendency, in Egypt anyway, to belittle the younger generation or say that they have to listen to the older person in charge, but we need to be careful here that we do not impose our vision, our disappointments, our despair and experiences on them. What we may do of course is merely explain to them—as equal partners in debate—what the regime has done, the kind of things it is capable of and the deep existential impacts that this might have so that they may be prepared for this.

We may also offer them a shoulder of understanding, that we recognize their grievances are real, that these are social, political and economic injustices—and thus that we understand their desire to rise up. We may also advise them on how to try and avoid detention (as well as inform them of what happens when one is detained in Egypt). We may also warn them of the deep existential impact of all of this, so that they are prepared and will know where such feelings (should they arise within them) come from.

But I believe it is extremely important that we avoid speaking from a place of authority simply based on our previous experiences of counterrevolutionary defeat. The younger generation should be addressed as equal peers. Their grievances are real. Their desire is real. Let's recognize this. Also, because it is precisely this equality that the current military regime seeks to break, let's start practicing this in our own circles to begin with. ∎

Endnote

1 See Joshua Stacher's forthcoming book *Watermelon Democracy: Egypt's Turbulent Transition* (Syracuse University Press) on this distinction between systematic and anti-systematic opposition.

Kurdish and Arab protesters chant slogans against Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan during a march to the United Nations headquarters in the town of Qamishli, Syria, October 2019.
MUHAMMAD HAMED/REUTERS

The Political Economy of Erdoğan's Syria Gamble

Şahan Savaş Karataşlı

The Turkish invasion of northern Syria, with President Trump's acquiescence, illustrates Turkish President Erdoğan's authoritarian populist penchant for treating foreign policy as an extension of domestic crisis management.

The Turkish invasion of northeastern Syria in October 2019 alongside its Syrian allies, code-named Operation Peace Spring, has been portrayed by President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan as a defensive and humanitarian campaign. Its official goal is to create a "safe zone" along the Turkey-Syria border by expelling those that Turkey considers terrorist organizations in order to allow Turkey's Syrian refugee population to move back to their own country. Erdoğan further claimed that the campaign will bring stability, peace and democracy to northeastern Syria. Far from defensive or humanitarian, however, Turkish Armed Forces and its Syrian proxies are attacking what is arguably one of the most stable, tolerant and democratic regions in the entire Middle East—the Kurdish enclave of Rojava—which had been experimenting with a new form of radical democracy with a feminist, ecological, secular and ethnic-pluralist worldview.
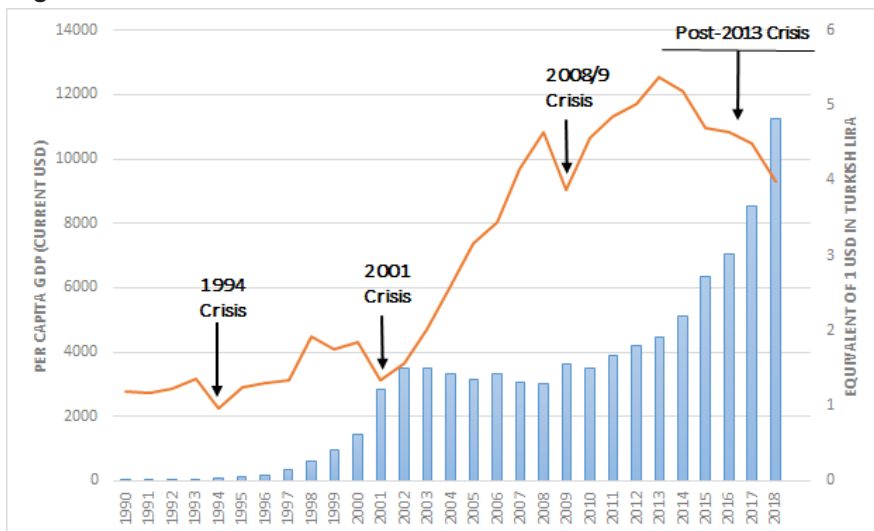
Erdoğan's Syria offensive is not the first time he has rallied the public around the Turkish flag against so-called Kurdish terrorists as a response to emergent domestic crises of his own making, but it may be the most consequential thus far in his 17-year reign. Turkey's severe structural economic problems of debt, inflation and monetary crisis have burst the bubble of Erdogan's neoliberal populist economic strategy and damaged his ruling Justice and Development party's (AKP) electoral clout. The harm has been amplified by the momentous loss of Istanbul and other metropolitan cities in the July 2019 municipal elections. Erdoğan has gambled that Turkish chauvinism can provide the glue to piece back together his hegemony and allow him to avoid, for the moment, confronting the economic crisis.

Operation Peace Spring, while illustrating Erdoğan's authoritarian populist penchant for treating foreign policy as an extension of domestic crisis management, will only further aggravate the interlinked economic and political problems facing the AKP-led government—regardless of whether Erdoğan wins his war on the Kurds of Rojava.

The Economic Crisis That Never Was

Despite Erdoğan's repeated insistence that "there is no crisis [in Turkey], but only international manipulations," Turkey is currently experiencing one of the most serious economic crises in its modern history. The origins of this crisis have less to do with alleged foreign manipulations and more to

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Figure 1

do with the structural contradictions of the AKP's neoliberal populism, which may have now reached its limit.

Both Erdoğan and President Donald Trump maintain that Turkey's economic difficulties emerged in August 2018 after Trump doubled US tariffs on steel and aluminum to pressure Erdoğan into releasing the evangelical pastor Andrew Brunson, which put downward pressure on the Turkish lira. But the Turkish lira had been losing its value against the US dollar since 2008, and even more rapidly since 2013 (see Figure 1). Hence, the causal relationship is the other way around: Because the Turkish economy had been confronting deep structural problems since 2013, it has become extremely vulnerable to external "manipulations."

Basic macroeconomic indicators reveal the severity of the crisis unfolding since 2013. Per capita Gross Domestic Product (GDP), which was above $12,000 in 2013, has fallen below $10,000 in less than five years. From 2013 to 2018, inflation in consumer prices rose from 7.4 percent to 16.4 percent—food prices in particular have been skyrocketing and threaten the livelihoods of millions of people. Turkey's unemployment rate is also at a record level—14 percent of the total population and close to 30 percent of youth—unseen since the 2008 global financial crash. Moreover, real wages are at a record low because the AKP government dismantled organized labor by bringing trade union density from approximately 30 percent to single digits within the first decade of their rule. In addition to all these economic difficulties, the rapid influx of approximately 3.6 million Syrian refugees and their super-exploitation by local Turkish firms is driving the wages of the working classes down to unprecedented low levels.

Under such financial strain, millions of Turkish people now depend on direct monetary or in-kind aid by the government as well as on the availability of consumer loans

and credit cards for their livelihood. For over a decade, the AKP has distributed such aid and free services to their low-income followers through local governments and municipalities under their control. In addition, since the AKP came to power in 2002, Turkey experienced a rapid accumulation of household debt, which made up almost 20 percent of GDP in 2013 (see Figure 2).

Figure 2
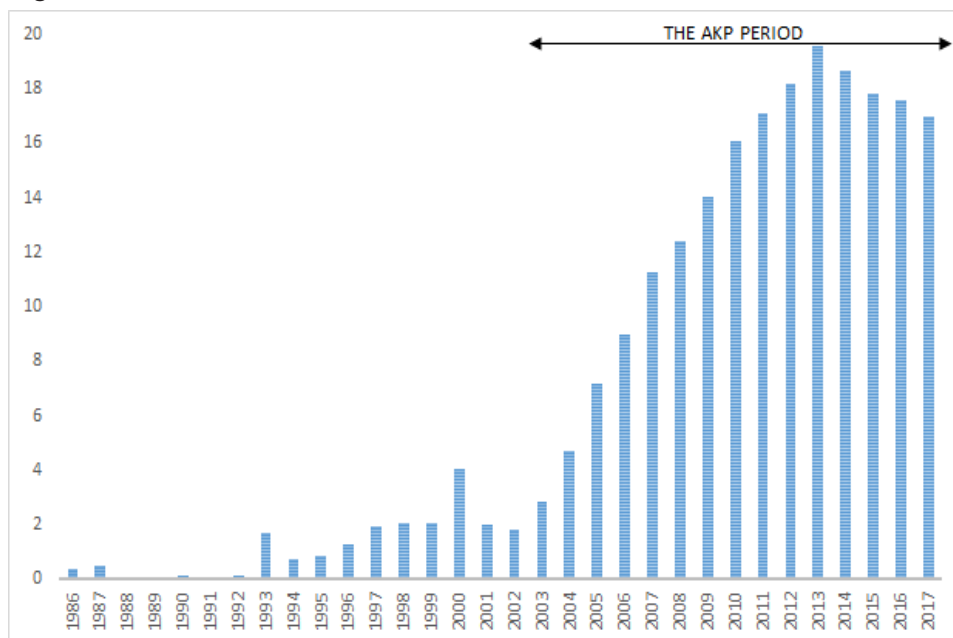
The provision of clientelist aid, consumer credit and loan options to low-income groups is one of the key pillars of the AKP's neoliberal populist strategy.[1] The Achilles heel of this strategy, however, is that the availability of cheap consumer credit depends on low interest rates, and low interest rates in a semi-peripheral economy such as Turkey depend upon favorable global economic conditions. Luckily for the AKP, such conditions were very favorable from 2002 to 2009. Post-2001 financial reforms under the International Monetary Fund's stand-by program attracted huge capital flows, which helped produce the golden era of AKP rule. While the 2008 financial crisis generated rapid capital outflows from Turkey and produced stagnation in the Turkish economy, the quantitative easing policies followed by the US Federal Reserve helped reverse capital flows back to Turkey. That's why from 2009 to 2013 the Turkish economy appeared as if it quickly recovered and continued to grow.

But after 2013, as interest rates in the United States started to rise following the Federal Reserve's tapering announcement, the foreign capital aiding the AKP's economic miracle went back to the United States. Consequently, interest rates went up in Turkey and many low- and middle-income

groups lost access to consumer credit and had to deal with the enormous debt they had accumulated over the years.

Fluctuations in the global economy also deeply affected the AKP's neoliberal regime of capital accumulation, which was excessively dependent on foreign capital inflows and access to cheap credit.[2] Because foreign loans and credit were not primarily used as investments that would facilitate material expansion of production and trade in the long-run (such as factories or industrial plants) but in activities that produce profits in the short-run (such as construction), the end of cheap credit also struck a blow to the AKP's ruling strategy.

Under AKP policies, for example, many new companies closely linked to Erdoğan's family or their political circle quickly became giant conglomerates through overpriced construction projects—including massive airports among the world's largest (such as the new Istanbul Airport), extravagant bridges (such as Osman Gazi and Yavuz Sultan Selim Bridges), gigantic mosques, expensive roads, mega housing complexes, humongous shopping malls and new luxury hospitals. The overwhelming majority of these lucrative public procurement tenders were obtained in a non-competitive bidding environment, which favored AKP-affiliated firms.[3] Such projects were paid for through cheap foreign credit and government investments in which the AKP government offered prices well above the actual market values, as well as various investment incentives such as tax and custom exemptions and direct monetary subsidies and guaranteed payments in US dollars or Euros. These tenders were one of the ways through which the AKP helped produce a new rival faction of the Turkish bourgeoisie that is politically loyal to the party.

But when cheap credit options disappeared after 2013, followed by the exchange rate crisis, the government could not pay its debt to these private firms, eroding its support and leading to more desperate measures. The crisis was further aggravated by the fact that after generating super-profits through massive privatization schemes from 2002 to 2013, there was nothing left to privatize and those revenues began to rapidly decline (Figure 3).

As a result of these shortages, the AKP government started to rely more and more on predatory forms of accumulation.[4]

Figure 3
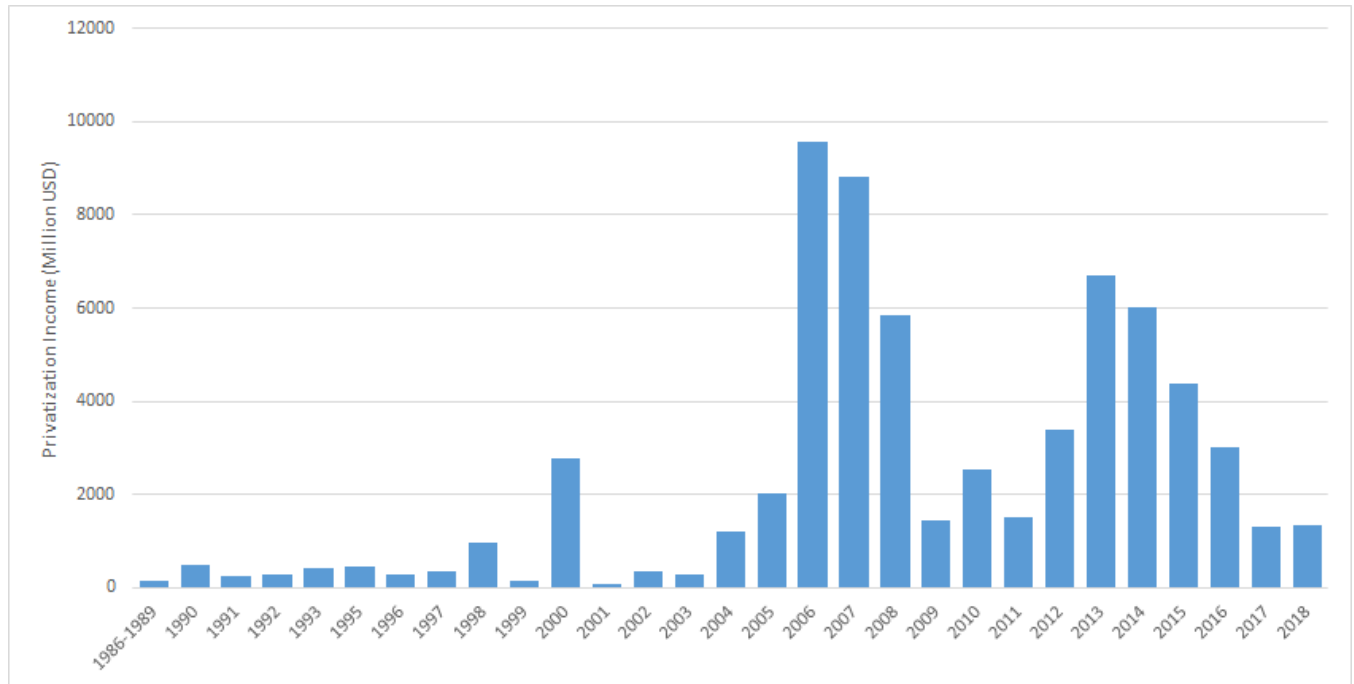
These included a number of strategies, such as the expropriation of hundreds of major firms and funds that belonged to its political rivals (like the Gülen group). Another strategy was to transfer the funds of municipalities in the Kurdish region to the AKP-affiliated firms by displacing elected mayors via presidential decrees, appointing trustees (*kayyum*) and establishing lucrative business contracts. A third strategy was to fan the flames of the chaos in Syria with the expectation of gaining control over land and oil resources as well as leadership in reconstruction and development after the civil war.

By 2019, it became clear to many policymakers and economists that the Turkish Treasury was running out of money and that the AKP's neoliberal populist strategy had reached its limits. With few options to generate or borrow money in order to save AKP-related businesses from the rising tide of bankruptcy, which had already drowned hundreds of firms, the government finally turned to the Central Bank in 2019 to take a number of extraordinary measures. First, it transferred liquidity from the Central Bank to the Turkish Treasury including the transfer of 40 billion lira worth of legal reserves, which the Central Bank had set aside for use in extraordinary circumstances. Second, in July 2019, Erdoğan fired Central Bank governor Murat Çetinkaya from his post.

While this move was widely interpreted as a result of Çetinkaya's refusal to cut interest rates in line with Erdoğan's heterodox view (shared by most of his populist counterparts) that the way to lower inflation is to lower interest rates, the real reason may lie elsewhere. The Central Bank under

Çetinkaya was hardly independent—an AKP loyalist until he was fired, Çetinkaya was repeatedly criticized by liberal economic circles for doing its bidding. And when he was fired, the Monetary Policy Committee of the Central Bank was already planning further interest rate cuts. Çetinkaya probably refused to print more money and to be the leading actor of what would have been a suicide plan triggering hyperinflation and the devaluation of the Turkish lira in another effort to help Erdoğan and the AKP government save AKP-affiliated firms.
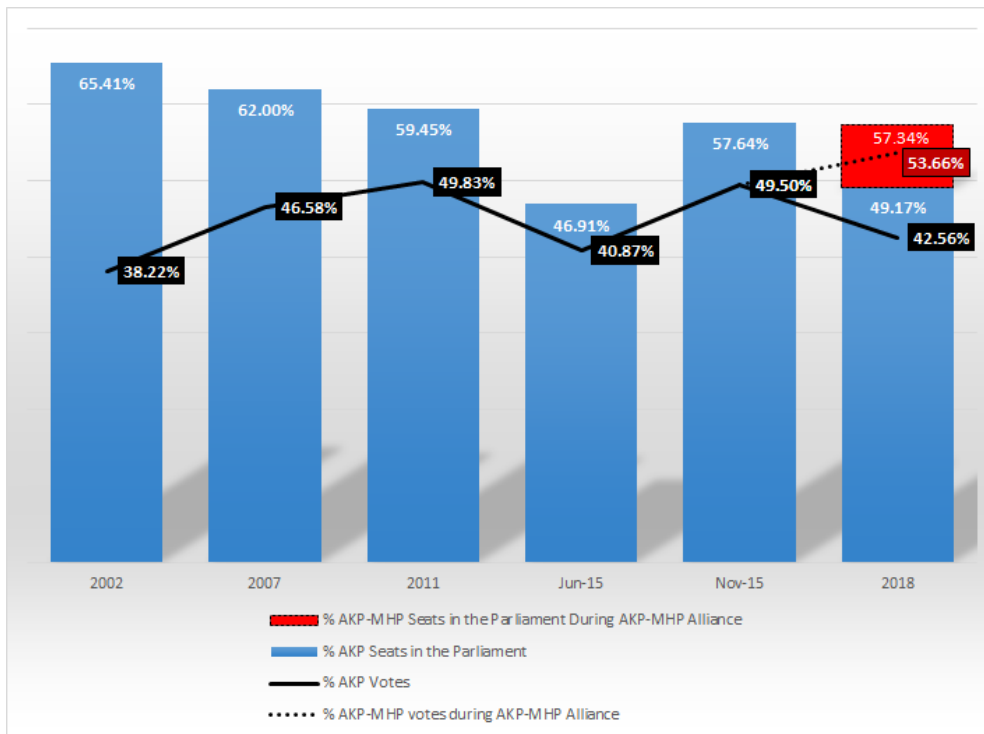
The AKP's Rising Authoritarianism

The AKP's economic decline after 2013 has been intimately related to a growing political crisis during the same period—one of the most tumultuous in recent Turkish history. When the global economic environment was favorable, the AKP was the undisputed winner in nearly all general and local elections. From 2002 to 2011, the AKP increased its votes from 38 percent to 50 percent and secured an absolute majority in the Turkish parliament by occupying at least 60 percent of all seats. During this golden decade, the AKP could count on the support of a wide range of political groups, including pro-European Union liberals, center-right conservatives and different factions of political Islam as well as various secular and Islamist nationalist groups. The AKP was also supported by the United States and the European Union as a champion of democracy and a potential model of Islamic democracy for the Middle East.[5]

In its second decade, however, and especially since the

Figure 4

The AKP did its best to rally the Turkish nationalist electorate around the flag. In the November elections it managed to increase its votes to 49.5 percent. Capitalizing on the nationalist fervor and violence, the AKP gained back its majority in parliament by securing over 57 percent of the seats and entered an alliance with the ultranationalist Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) against all other parties.

Despite the partial restoration of the AKP's electoral strength, however, there was no return to normalcy from the war-like state-of-emergency conditions, full-fledged oppression of political opposition and growing authoritarianism. The AKP never fully recovered its electoral strength either. It managed to gain an absolute majority of votes and seats in the parliament only with the help of its ultranationalist ally, thus becoming partially dependent on the MHP.

Losing Istanbul

The final blow in the AKP and Erdoğan's political decline was struck in the local elections of March 31, 2019 when the AKP-MHP alliance lost control of major cities such as Istanbul, Ankara, Antalya, Adana and Mersin to opposition parties. The most consequential of these losses, however, was that of Istanbul, which the AKP lost twice to the opposition's "Nation Alliance" candidate Ekrem Imamoğlu despite Erdoğan's major participation in the second election.

By showing that Erdoğan could be defeated in elections, the Istanbul defeat not only helped the opposition overcome their learned helplessness, but it also showed many AKP leaders that the tables had already turned, triggering the first serious wave of resignations within the AKP. Erdoğan's authoritarian tendencies had already alienated many liberal and Islamic conservative co-founders (such as the former president Abdullah Gül) who were ready to support an alternative party. After the AKP losses in the 2019 local elections, however, many AKP members across the country—including the former prime minister Ahmet

end of the favorable global economic environment in 2013, the AKP lost its capacity to mobilize this wide spectrum of political groups and to garner international support. Since 2013, the AKP government has repeatedly been challenged by diverse forms of political contention including social movements from below (the 2013 Gezi uprising), inter-elite feuds (the 2013 corruption scandal), military coup attempts (the failed 2016 military coup) and electoral setbacks. In the June 2015 general elections, the AKP received one of the most serious defeats in its entire history: It lost its majority in parliament and could not establish a coalition government. The AKP lost many seats to the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) which won 80 seats in parliament with 13 percent of the vote, thus becoming the first pro-Kurdish party to pass the 10 percent threshold in the history of Turkish democracy. As a result, Erdoğan called for a snap election in November and publicly announced that if the AKP did not rule the country after this snap election, only chaos would remain.

Indeed, the period between June and November 2015 ended up being one of the most violent and chaotic periods in modern Turkish history. Turkey experienced deadly suicide bomb attacks (often targeting the Kurds and socialist activists), the government re-launched military operations against the Kurdish Workers Party (PKK) and the military launched destructive operations in several Kurdish districts including Sur, Cizre and Nusaybin in the name of fighting terrorism.

Davutoğlu and an influential co-founder of the party, Ali Babacan—resigned from the party in an attempt to form an alternative center-right political party to challenge the AKP.

The economic loss of control over metropolitan centers—and Istanbul in particular—was catastrophic for the AKP. With a population of 16 million residents (approximately 20 percent of the country's population), Istanbul is the largest city and the economic capital of Turkey. As of 2018, the mayor of Istanbul had a consolidated budget of approximately 42 billion Turkish lira. For more than a decade, the Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality (IMM) under the AKP government was run almost like a family company whereby it used its resources to provide social services and aid to its political clients and also help an AKP-linked faction of the Turkish bourgeoisie to accumulate capital at an unprecedented pace and scale.

When the IMM was involved in social projects, for example, it often did so by providing various in-kind or monetary aid to charitable Islamic *waqf*s and associations that were affiliated with the AKP. It is estimated that as of 2018 the IMM transferred over 800 million Turkish lira ($145 million) to such organizations, which have become dominant actors in Turkish civil society. The AKP used Istanbul's massive revenue—together with the revenue of other municipalities and local governments—as a patronage fund to distribute cash to its business partners, to the *waqf*s and NGOs under their influence, to media outlets and to its followers in order to maintain and preserve its power.

Control over the municipalities was a key component of the AKP's hegemonic strategy, and thus their loss played an important role in the weakening of the party. It is not 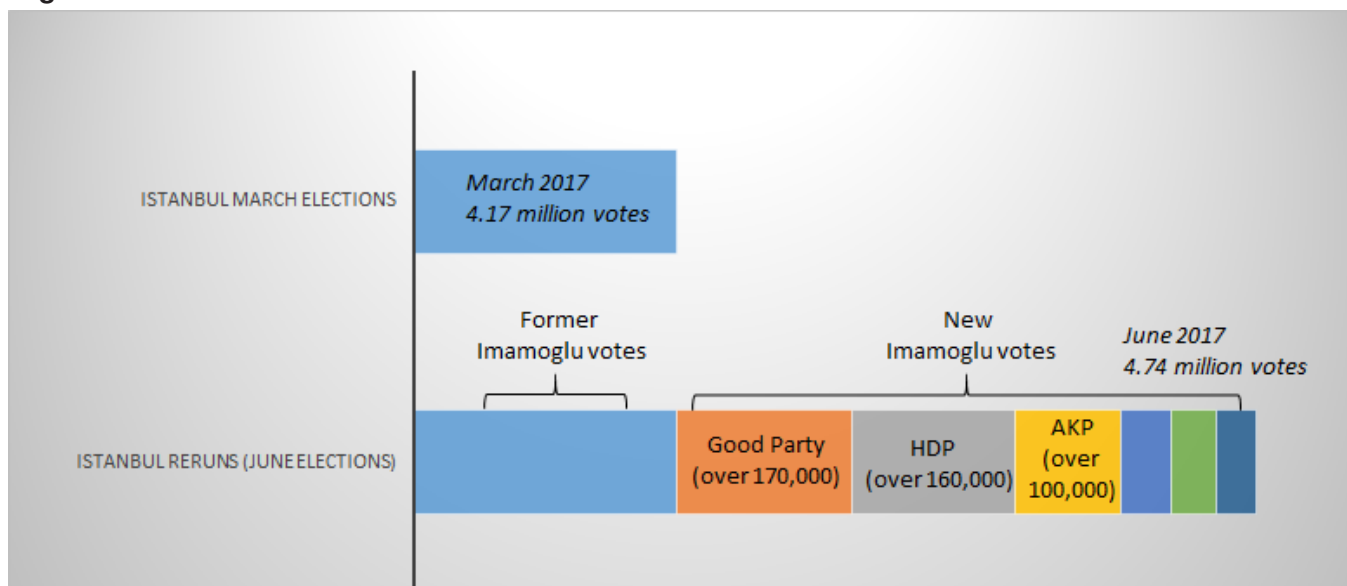a coincidence that Erdoğan repeatedly stated that "who controls Istanbul, controls Turkey" and, "if we lose Istanbul, we lose Turkey." They were also ready to take extraordinary measures to prevent such an outcome.

Riding the Tide of Chauvinism

Losing the 2019 local elections taught Erdoğan and the AKP government two important lessons that became the basis for the political rationale of Operation Peace Spring. First, the AKP government realized that the overwhelming majority of Turkish society viewed the AKP's Syrian refugee policy negatively. One of Ekrem Imamoğlu's election promises was that as an Istanbul major, he would do anything in his power to help the Syrian population residing in Istanbul to go back to Syria. Such a promise meshed well with the rising chauvinism in Turkish society in general and among followers of the AKP-MHP bloc in particular, which helped Imamoğlu to win significant votes from their supporters. Erdoğan and the AKP leaders learned that to win the support of the voters they lost, they needed to come up with a viable solution to the Syrian refugee problem. Many AKP leaders also believed that the reconstruction of cities and towns in Syria could help the AKP-affiliated construction firms to accumulate capital.

Second, the loss of the 2019 local elections reinforced the electoral threat of the Kurds and the pro-Kurdish parties (HDP) in deepening the crisis of the AKP regime. In both the June 2015 general elections and the 2019 local elections, the strategic alignment of pro-Kurdish parties and voters with those of the non-Kurdish anti-AKP opposition proved to be the decisive factor in defeating the AKP. In the June 2015 general elections and the November 2015 snap elections that

Figure 5

ISTANBUL MARCH ELECTIONS — March 2017 4.17 million votes

Former Imamoglu votes

New Imamoglu votes

June 2017 4.74 million votes

ISTANBUL RERUNS (JUNE ELECTIONS) — Good Party (over 170,000) — HDP (over 160,000) — AKP (over 100,000)

followed, many Kemalist Republican People's Party (CHP) followers voted for the HDP knowing that helping the pro-Kurdish party enter the parliament was the most effective way to weaken the AKP. Similarly, in the 2019 local elections and both rounds of Istanbul elections, the pro-Kurdish party followers strategically supported the CHP-İyi Party alliance—two of their historical arch enemies—against Erdoğan's AKP.

They did so despite the fact that Erdoğan and the AKP managed to get and publicize a letter from the imprisoned PKK leader, Abdullah Öcalan, stating that the Kurds should stay neutral in this election. They also broadcast an interview with Abdullah Öcalan's brother Osman Öcalan (officially viewed as a terrorist by the Turkish state) on state television who announced that the Kurds should not vote for Imamoğlu. Yet none of these efforts prevailed. On the contrary, not only did Imamoğlu preserve his support amongst Kurdish voters from March 2017 (estimated to be over 700,000), but over 160,000 new HDP followers who had remained undecided in the March elections decided to vote for him in June. The returns make clear that Imamoğlu could not have won either election without the Kurdish votes.

This lesson is precisely why Erdoğan and the leading AKP cadres made several moves to end the strategic rapprochement between the Kurds and the opposition parties. In order to alienate the Kurds they pursued a strategy of realigning the political parties along the axis of, as they say, "those who defend the interests of the Turkish state" and "those who do not." Before launching Operation Peace Spring, they had already tested the potential success of this strategy through the purchase of the anti-aircraft S-400 missile system from Russia. Except for the HDP, all political parties supported Erdoğan's weapons purchase. Simultaneously, the AKP government launched a number of social and political campaigns framing the HDP as an extension of those considered terrorists. In August, the AKP government replaced the newly elected HDP mayors of Diyarbakir, Mardin and Van with their trustees (kayyum) on the grounds that these HDP mayors were aiding the PKK financially and logistically.

All of these political campaigns put the HDP in the spotlight and prepared the broader public to accept Operation Peace Spring. Erdoğan and the AKP government attempted to ease their own political problems by rallying the nation around the Turkish flag against the "Kurdish terrorists," by pressuring all opposition parties to alienate the HDP and by signaling to the nationalist electorate that the AKP is the only party that can find a credible solution to the Syrian refugee "problem." Moreover, the AKP government also thought that it could mobilize their allies in the construction sector for the reconstruction of northeast Syria as it had already done in northern Iraq and more recently in Afrin (northwest Syria, which is still under Turkish occupation), as well as confiscate Syrian oil as a temporary solution to their economic woes. And even if the campaign is not successful, Erdoğan could use the pretext of ongoing wars against terrorism to explain how and

why the state ran out of money and the economy was in such terrible shape.

Nevertheless, it is important to remember that Erdoğan has been waging two wars in Syria: one against the Kurds in northeast Syria that started in October 2019 and one against the Bashar al-Assad regime in general since 2011. Unfortunately for Erdoğan, he cannot win both. Even if he wins the war against the Kurds in Syria, this would probably be at the cost of strengthening Assad and Russian influence in the region, and thus losing the Syrian War. In that case, Russia and Syria will be the beneficiaries of this campaign, not Turkey. Erdoğan's crises will be waiting for him at the end. Excessive military spending will very likely contribute to the current economic difficulties. Although the ongoing global economic slowdown and the controversial decision by Turkey's Central Bank to cut interest rates provide Erdoğan some additional room for maneuver, he misses this opportunity by insisting on saving the AKP-affiliated firms first and writing checks that cannot be cashed.

In the political sphere, the rising tide of chauvinism can help Erdoğan attract nationalist votes in the short run, but such a victory will not be sufficient to stop the structural weakening of the AKP. The AKP's ultranationalist allies, as well as nationalist parties in the opposition, are in a better position to capitalize on Turkish chauvinism. The deepening of the world hegemonic crisis faced by the United States has been providing Erdoğan some leverage in geopolitical negotiations. After all, it was Trump's decision to pull out from Syria, which is nothing but a confession that the United States can no longer even pretend to be a world hegemonic power, that paved the way for Operation Peace Spring. Yet, Erdoğan mistakes the weakening of US power for the strengthening of his own. Erdoğan believes that he can play one great power (Russia) off another (the United States) in the region. But without a far-sighted and well-crafted diplomatic strategy, his short-term efforts will eventually trap Turkey between these two great powers.

It is almost certain that the Syrian adventure will further alienate Erdoğan and the AKP from the international community and intensify the conflict between the AKP and Kurds in Turkey. Turkey will not be able to provide a solution to the Syrian refugee problem but will experience an additional influx of the jihadist forces from Syrian territories after the Assad regime and Russia gain control over the region. In short, instead of solving Erdoğan's problems, Operation Peace Spring will probably prepare the conditions of even deeper economic, social and (geo)political crises. ■

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Agrarian Politics and the Slow Revolution Yet to Come
Max Ajl

A review of Habib Ayeb and Ray Bush, *Food Insecurity and Revolution in the Middle East and North Africa: Agrarian Questions in Egypt and Tunisia* (**London: Anthem Press, 2019**), 250 pp.

The years 2010 and 2011 were initially heralded as a new age of urban activism as ebullient crowds filled the squares and boulevards of Egyptian and Tunisian cities. Building on large strike waves in manufacturing and extractive centers, the language used to describe these events emphasized their mass urban character, with phrases like "the right to the city," and the names of major city squares as shorthand for the protests themselves such as Cairo's Tahrir Square. Initial histories of those years understandably, if myopically, focused on industrial unionism and mass urban mobilizations.

In the peripheries of the world-system, agrarian questions are central to development and democracy. This is as true of Arab countries like Egypt and Tunisia, wracked with poverty in their rural hinterlands, as anywhere else in the former Third World. Cultural workers have only slowly returned to these cases of nation-wide rebellion and re-written such histories to center the experience of agrarian dislocation. In so doing, they have painted a fuller portrait of the class struggles waged by the victims of relentless primitive accumulation that both preceded and followed the highly mediatized events of 2010-2011.

Almost a decade after the 2011 uprisings, we now have an excellent synthetic text by Habib Ayeb and Ray Bush, long-time activists and researchers of (North) African agrarian questions as they relate to food sovereignty, social equality and the ecology. Their book, *Food Insecurity and Revolution in the Middle East and North Africa*, covers the longue durée of rural and peasant life in the two countries, beginning with pre-colonial proto-*dirigiste* agrarian change and accumulation from above, colonial dislocation and destruction and the brief interim of post-colonial modernization and state support of social reproduction. The authors bring us finally to the contemporary neoliberal period marked by the reversal of national programs implemented to protect rural smallholders. The authors then describe the dynamics of peasant resistance to these reversals, as well as possible anti-systemic horizons for smallholders and the countries alike: the slow revolution yet to come.

The book's theoretical toolkit includes Samir Amin's theories of unequal exchange and accumulation on a world scale, South-North (or more formally, periphery-core)

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value flows and notions of food sovereignty as they have manifested in local southern theory and practice, forming part of the international movement for food sovereignty and rural dignity.

Analytically, the book's central novelty is to trace the agrarian question, or the social and political consequences of agrarian change and the role of the countryside, in achieving social liberation, across space and time, and to re-read Tunisian and Egyptian agrarian history in an integrated and comparative frame. Such a juxtaposition brings out the stark difference between economic transformations under President Gamal Abdel Nasser in Egypt and Prime Minister Habib Bourguiba in Tunisia. The former enhanced the livelihoods of the fellahin as a social class through agrarian reform and weaving strong social safety nets. In contrast, Bourguiba and Ahmed Ben Salah (then-Minister of Planning) did not challenge existing distributions of land—dramatically limiting the scope of rural incorporation. (This was the case at least until 1969, when Ben Salah attempted to expand the cooperative program countrywide, and was deposed amidst discontent from small and large farmers alongside broad labor unrest). Smallholders often experienced the coop program as primitive accumulation, as they were "dispossessed of their land and their means of production to become poorly paid agricultural labourers" (106).

Ayeb and Bush's account of the wrenching of rural life to fit into Ben Salah's technocratic models shows how distant the state remained from everyday peasant life. Here we would have benefited from more description of the rural alternatives which briefly germinated in the soil of developmentalist ideology: For example, the ambiguous economic nationalism of Neo-Destour party leader Salah Ben Youssef, short-lived Minister of Agriculture's Mustapha Filali's call for a more radical 'Land-to-the-Tiller'-style land redistribution schemes and similar calls from the UGTT, all ultimately jettisoned in favor of the Neo-Destour's World Bank-funded modernization/cooperative program.

Ayeb and Bush clearly and effectively describe the slow move from agrarian capitalism with some pro-peasant features to the savage retreat of the state in the late 1980s and early 1990s under pressure from the major international financial institutions (IFI's) in Tunisia. They detail the aggressive conversion of the country's agricultural lands into an enclave for fruit and vegetable exports to Europe achieved through major domestic and foreign investment in irrigation fed by the country's underground aquifers—draining Tunisia's limited natural resources to ensure

Europeans' access to year-round produce. By highlighting the relationship between Tunisian production and export and the economic model the international financial institutions have encouraged, the authors bring southern questions of development—what to produce, how to feed your population good food and how to provide decent rural and urban livelihoods—into the same frame with northern questions of agricultural consumption and trade.

IFI discourses of food security emphasize global trade and exchange of agricultural goods, which means poor countries finance the import of basic staples by exporting out of season commodities (berries, tomatoes) or uniquely southern ones (dates, pomegranates), to consumers in the global north. Such frameworks rely on the concept of comparative advantage to provide a patina of theoretical legitimacy to imperially-determined terms of trade that disadvantage Tunisian and Egyptian national accounts and prevent both countries from feeding themselves.

The idea that North Africans should rely on "more efficiently produced" EU and US cereals ignores the massive financial and ecological subsidies these core countries provide to their producers. In reality, comparative advantage, which may explain some North-North trading patterns, does not here apply, since the southern products cannot be grown in the north. The network of producer subsidies in the global north and IFI programs have led to a baffling situation: Tunisia and Egypt, with large rural populations, perpetually import more food in value terms than they export. Such asymmetric value flows are the calling card of a classic dependency relationship. A reference here to the works of Prabhat and Utsa Patnaik on price suppression for crops that cannot be grown in Europe would have strengthened their case, especially given the careful ethnographic-geographic detail with which they describe irrigated export agriculture.[1] But the basic relationship is nicely outlined.

Ayeb and Bush are strongest when situating internal economic and social disarticulation and underdevelopment across space, as a prelude to their discussion of pre-uprising social struggles that swept through each country. Scholars of Tunisia will find a welcome update to existing cartographies of dispossession. We see how the "useless" Tunisia of the South, the Center-West and the North-West remain socially but not economically excluded. Large sums of agricultural value flow out from the irrigated fields of Sidi Bouzid, but little value flows back. Parallel segments on Egypt show the brutality of the state's US-backed neoliberal counter-revolution in the countryside, shredding the remaining legislation that protected the Egyptian fellahin. The authors show the sharp edge accompanying the dull compulsion of neoliberal market forces, as they depict state agents and landlords meting out violence to protect property and profit.

Alongside the account of class struggle, we find another vital contribution in their contextualizing treatment of Mohammed Bouazizi, who was in fact a dispossessed farmer unable to keep up with the loans to operate his family's tiny parcel of land. Before the self-immolation and death that would make him a symbol of the uprisings, Bouazizi took part in a broader movement in 2010 involving "tens of local small farmers and peasants" (70) experiencing similar threats to their livelihood. Their dispossession was the prelude to semi-proletarianization, humiliation and finally the spark that burnt down a political dictatorship. Rewriting that story is part of dismantling an ideological architecture which continues to relegate agrarian questions to oubliettes and dark corners rather than making them central to the story of capital accumulation in Tunisia, Egypt and globally.

The reader would have benefited from tighter threads weaving together the theory of core-periphery development-underdevelopment to agrarian questions, not merely those of food, ecology and land, but also of labor. It would have been useful to tie stories like Bouazizi's more closely to the structural theories of Amin upon which they draw. In this case, permanent contingency drives down wages and therefore the size of the internal market in the periphery and is a feature of disarticulated accumulation, or accumulation in which internal sectors do not beneficially interact with one another. Disempowered local labor, in turn, reduces the power of labor on a global scale through maintaining permanent super reserve armies of labor in the periphery.

The role of a disarticulated periphery for accumulation on a world scale is also the missing link that enables us to understand the centrality of imperial warfare in the region. This is the topic of Chapter Two, which details the relationship between regional war and agrarian questions and the role played by regional structural adjustment programs. Ongoing war reduces the power of regional labor, prevents pro-peasant and pro-labor planning at the national level and maintains or aggravates internal disarticulation. This ensures the maintenance of the regional status quo, including the petrodollar system that buttresses the core capitalist economies of the United States and Europe as well as the financialized economies of the Gulf States.

Ayeb and Bush give us an account of specific histories as well as emancipatory possibilities. They diagnose the problem, then prescribe solutions. Their conclusion is a proposal—long-present in North African developmental thought—for a national project based on empowering rural labor and smallholders, valorizing peasant knowledge and practices, redistributing land, protecting nature, promoting genuine food sovereignty and achieving a "partial delinking" from imperialism (162). The book is a sterling intellectual contribution to an urgent political mission. ∎

Endnote

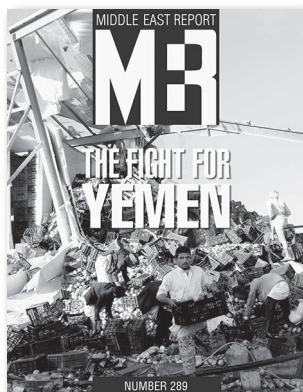**1** Utsa Patnaik and Prabhat Patnaik, *A Theory of Imperialism* (Columbia University Press, 2016).

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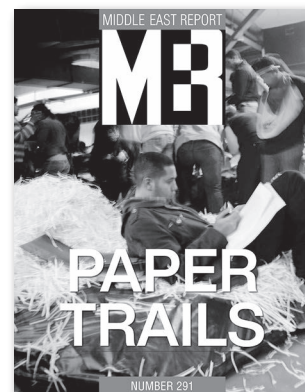
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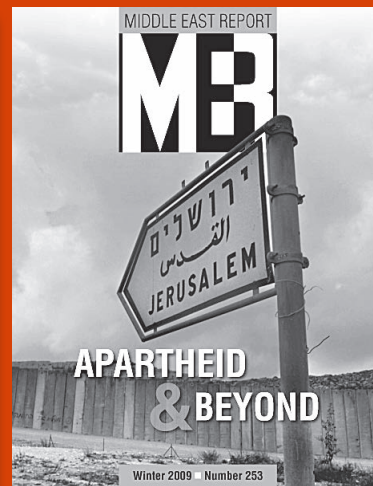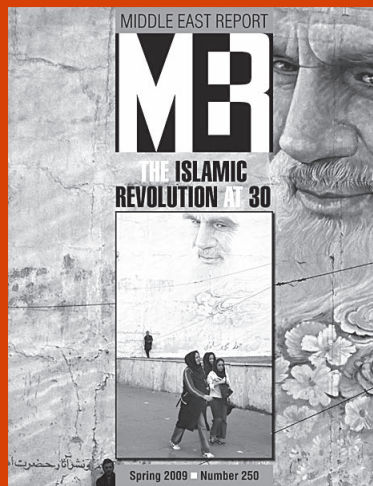Signature   Date

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