



## Protesters Push Arab Militaries Off Their Pedestal

by Dr. James M. Dorsey

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** A decade of anti-government protests in the Arab world have thrown popular trust in the military into the garbage bin and undermined the military's position as one of the most trusted institutions.

Long gone are the days when protesters on Cairo's Tahrir Square chanted "[the military and the people are one.](#)"

In 2011 the protesters managed to break the [barriers of fear](#) created by autocratic rulers—fear that had long kept the disgruntled from taking their grievances to the street.

In 2019 and 2020 those barriers have been further reduced, with protesters refusing to back down despite the use of brutal force by law enforcement and security forces in Lebanon and Iraq and occasional violence elsewhere in the Arab world.

These tactics have caused popular perceptions of the military to change. Increasingly, the military is seen at best as positioning itself to salvage what it can of an *ancien regime* and at worst as the enforcer of a hated regime.

["Iraqis broke the shackles of fear](#) and reached the point of no return. The movement will not stop, and the Iraqi people will never be silenced," said Ali Hashim, a protester in Baghdad, speaking a week after a night of mass killings in December 2019.

In [increasingly violent clashes in Beirut](#), protesters unsuccessfully sought to persuade the security forces they were attacking that their demands for a complete break with Lebanon's political elite was also in the interest of men in uniform.

"Among the most important lessons cited by Sudanese and Algerian protesters so far are...(that) [transition plans designed by the military—particularly](#)

[proposals for quick elections – can be a trap](#),” said Middle East scholar Michele Dunne.

Algeria’s newly elected president [Abdelmadjid Tebboun is struggling to garner legitimacy](#) with mass protests continuing nine months after the toppling of Abdelaziz Bouteflika. Citizens voted with their feet in the recent presidential poll, with 60% abstaining.

Algeria was railroaded into the election by its powerful military in a bid to outflank protesters by holding the poll before they had an opportunity to prepare for it.

A crucial nail was driven into the coffin of the notion of a unity of purpose between protesters and armed forces with the 2013 military coup in Egypt, which produced one of the Arab world’s most repressive regimes under general-turned-president Abdul Fattah Sisi.

Protesters realize almost a decade after the 2011 protests, in which demonstrators declared victory once leaders like Egypt’s Hosni Mubarak and Tunisia’s Zine El Abidine Ben Ali had resigned, that their only chance of success is to retain their street power until the elites, including the military, agree – [as appears to be the case in Sudan](#) – to a truly transformational process.

In Sudan, unlike in Egypt in 2011, this meant protesters and/or civil society groups ensuring that they had a seat at the table before they surrendered the street.

In Lebanon, protests escalated as a result of the elite’s attempt to address the crisis with the appointment as PM of Hassan Diab, [widely seen as beholden to Hezbollah](#), the Iranian-backed militia and political group.

Mounting violence on the streets of Lebanon and Iraq in which hundreds of protesters have been killed or wounded will do little to rebuild confidence in the military and allied security forces.

If Lebanon and Iraq are anything to go by, clashes are likely to escalate and leave deep scars.

“Our backs are against the wall. We have nothing more to lose. We are fighting a regime with a history of 40 years of corruption and their armed defenders,” said a masked protester on the streets of Beirut.

According to journalist and scholar Rami Khouri’s [analysis](#) of revolution and resistance, militaries become outposts of political systems that have produced brutal autocracies and/or economic and environmental mismanagement. “Arab and Iranian ruling elites and their own citizens now openly fight and resist each other, seeking to define their countries’ identities and policies. This

is probably the most consequential ideological battle in the Middle East since its state system was established a century ago,” Khouri said.

It’s an epic battle that has turned the once revered military into yet another institution that finds itself on the wrong side of history.

While Arab protesters have made that clear on the streets of Khartoum, Algiers, Beirut and Baghdad, Iranian students [demanded the departure and demise of the Revolutionary Guards in anti-government demonstrations](#) both prior to and after the recent killing of Iranian general Qassem Soleimani.

“The only way out of our current predicament is the [simultaneous rejection of both domestic despotism and imperial arrogance](#). We need a politics that doesn’t merely claim security, freedom, and equality for a select group or class, but that understands these rights as inalienable and for all people,” Iranian students said in a statement demanding an end to all foreign interference in the affairs of the region, be it by the US, Iran, or the conservative Gulf states.

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