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Middle East Futures: Defiance and Dissent

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Mideast Security and Policy Studies No. 192

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ISSN 0793-1042
June 2021

Cover image: Protest in Amman, Jordan, in response to the proposed revision of the income tax law and resulting price hikes, June 2018, photo by Ali Saadi via Wikipedia

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

If the 2010s were a decade of defiance and dissent, the 2020s promise to make mass anti-government protests a fixture of the greater Middle East's political landscape. Protests in the coming decade are likely to be fueled by the challenges Middle Eastern states face in enacting economic and social reforms as well as reducing their dependence on energy exports against the backdrop of a global economic crisis and depressed oil prices and energy markets. Complicating the challenges is the fact that youth, who often constitute a majority of the population, have lost or are losing confidence in government and religious establishments at a time when social contracts are being unilaterally rewritten by political elites.

Pressure on the Middle East's autocratic rulers is likely to increase with the departure of US President Donald J. Trump, a staunch supporter of strongman rule, and the coming to office of President Joe Biden. In contrast to Trump, Biden has said that he will emphasize democratic values and freedoms. In doing so, Biden could contribute to renewed public manifestations of widespread discontent and demands for greater transparency and accountability in the Middle East and North Africa.

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AUTOCRATS SOMETIMES GET THINGS RIGHT

The second decade of the 21st century has been book-ended by protest. It was ushered in by protest across the globe, from student rallies in Chile to Occupy Wall Street to fuel price demonstrations in Jakarta. The 2011 popular revolts that toppled four Arab autocrats grabbed the headlines and provided drama.

The 2010s ended with similar drama. Protests in Chile resulted in a vote for a new constitution. A coalition of opposition parties challenged the legitimacy of the Pakistani government. Racism and killings of people of color by police sparked massive protests in the US not seen since the 1960s. And as occurred 10 years earlier, demonstrators toppled Arab leaders in Algeria, Sudan, Lebanon, and Iraq, uncertain whether this would secure the desired change.

The 2020s promise to be no different, nowhere more so than in the Middle East. A global public opinion survey conducted by Edelman, a US public relations firm, in the US, Europe, and Asia showed a significant drop in trust in governments as a result of their handling of the coronavirus pandemic, resulting in the worst global economic downturn in decades. Saudi Arabia and Japan were the only two countries to witness just a minimal drop.¹

Global mismanagement of the pandemic hit hard in countries that are wracked by war, like Syria and Libya; nations with perennially weak economies that host large refugee populations, such as Lebanon and Jordan; and Gulf States that saw energy prices tumble with dim prospects for a quick recovery of oil and gas markets. Shifts toward greater autocracy in Saudi Arabia and elsewhere bode ill at a time

when populations with a youth majority are not necessarily clamoring for greater freedoms but are increasingly gloomy about governments' ability to deliver jobs and other public goods.

Delivery was already a daunting task prior to the pandemic. The World Bank reported that the number of people living below a poverty line of US\$1.90 a day in a region with the world's highest youth unemployment had more than tripled, from eight million in 2011 to 28 million in 2018, and that the extreme poverty rate had doubled from 3.8% in 2015 to 7.2% in 2018.²

Facing significantly dimmed economic prospects, the region's autocrats, including Saudi Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman and his UAE counterpart, Muhammad bin Zayed, have nonetheless managed, relatively successfully, the political and social environments in which they operate, judging from the responses to recent public opinion polling.³

Both men have, to varying degrees, replaced religion with nationalism as the ideology legitimizing their rule and sought to ensure that countries in the region broadly adhere to their worldview. David Pollock, a Middle East scholar who oversees the Washington Institute for Near East Policy's polling in the region, said this in an interview with the author:

I know that the Saudi government under MbS (Prince Muhammad) has put in a lot of effort to actually do its own public opinion polls... They pay attention to it... They are very well aware of which way the winds are blowing on the street. They take that pretty much to heart on what to do and what not to do... On some issues, they are going to make a kind of executive decision... On this one, we're going to ignore it; on the other one we're going to...try to curry favor with the public in some unexpected way.⁴

The two crown princes' similar worldviews constitute in part a response to changing youth attitudes toward religiosity evident in the polls and expressed in mass anti-government protests in countries like Lebanon and Iraq. The changes attach greater importance to adherence to individual morals and values and less to the formal observance of

religious practice, as well as a rejection of the sectarianism that is a fixture of governance in Lebanon and Iraq as well as Saudi religious ultra-conservatism.

The problem for rulers is that the moorings of their rule could be weakened by a failure to deliver public goods and services that offer economic prospects. At the same time, social reforms needed to bolster development go hand in hand with the undermining of the authority of religious establishments. Increased autocracy, which turns clerics and scholars into regime parrots, has fueled youth skepticism toward not only political elites but also religious institutions.

For rulers like the Saudi crown prince, the loosening of social restrictions—including the disempowerment of the kingdom’s religious police, the lifting of a ban on women’s driving, less strict implementation of gender segregation, the introduction of Western-style entertainment, and greater professional opportunities for women, and in the UAE, a degree of genuine religious pluralism—are only first steps in responding to youth aspirations.

“Youth have...witnessed how religious figures, who still remain influential in many Arab societies, can sometimes give in to change even if they have resisted it initially. This not only feeds into Arab youth’s scepticism towards religious institutions but also further highlights the inconsistency of the religious discourse and its inability to provide timely explanations or justifications to the changing reality of today,” said Gulf scholar Eman Alhusein in a commentary on the latest Arab Youth Survey.⁵

YOUTH PUT A PREMIUM ON REFORM

Middle Eastern youth attitudes toward religion, religiosity, and religious leadership mirror their approach toward material concerns. Their world focuses on the individual rather than the collective, on *what’s in it for me?* instead of *what’s in it for us?* It is a world not defined by ideology or politics, and it does not see itself reflected in the values and objectives espoused by elites and governments. In the world of Middle Eastern youth, the *lingua franca* differs substantially from the language in which they were raised.

Two-thirds of those polled by the Arab Youth Survey believe religious institutions need to be overhauled. They question fundamental religious concepts even if they define religion as the most important constituent element of their identity. “The way some Arab countries consume religion in the political discourse, which is further amplified on social media, is no longer deceptive to the youth, who can now see through it,” Alhusein said.⁶

“Arabs know what they want and what they do not want. They want their basic needs for jobs, education, and health care to be attended to, and they want good governance and protection of their personal rights,” concluded James Zogby, an Arab-American pollster with a decades-long track record of polling in the Middle East and North Africa.⁷

Michael Robbins, another pollster and director of the Arab Barometer, and international affairs scholar Lawrence Rubin concluded that youth in post-revolt Sudan had soured on the idea of religion-based governance because of widespread corruption during the region of toppled president Omar Bashir, who had professed his adherence to religious principles. Robbins and Rubin cautioned, however, that religion could return as the catalyst for protest if the government fails to cater to youth aspirations.

“If the transitional government can deliver on providing basic services to the country’s citizens and tackling corruption, the formal shift away from *sharia* is likely to be acceptable in the eyes of the public. However, if these problems remain, a new set of religious leaders may be able to galvanize a movement aimed at reinstating *sharia* as a means to achieve these objectives,” Robbins and Rubin warned.⁸ It is a warning that is as valid for Sudan as it is for much of the Arab and Muslim world.

SAUDIS EMPATHETIC TO PROTESTS

Asked in a recent poll conducted by The Washington Institute whether “it’s a good thing we aren’t having big street demonstrations here now the way they do in some other countries,” a reference to the past decade of popular revolts in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Algeria, Lebanon, Iraq, and Sudan, Saudi public opinion was split down the middle, with

48% of respondents agreeing and 48% disagreeing.⁹ Saudis, like most Gulf Arabs, appear less inclined to take their grievances to the streets. Nonetheless, the poll indicates that they may prove empathetic to protests should they occur.

Saudi attitudes toward protest take on added significance in an environment in which governments in the energy-rich Gulf have seen an erosion of their ability to invest in infrastructure and cradle-to-grave welfare states. The need to diversify economies away from dependence on oil and gas exports to create jobs against the backdrop of depressed energy prices and markets as a result of the global economic downturn means changing expectations and rewriting of social contracts that offered economic security and well-being in exchange for the surrender of political and social rights.

In May 2020, the Dubai Chamber of Commerce provided a foretaste of problems to come. Based on a survey of 1,228 CEOs, the chamber warned that a staggering 70% of businesses in the emirate expected to close their doors within the next six months.¹⁰ Analysts added to the gloomy prospects by reporting that non-oil growth in the UAE pointed toward a contraction of the economy.¹¹

The challenges Gulf and other Middle Eastern states face were compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic and a painful, protracted, and complex road toward economic recovery, coupled with the toll of debilitating regional conflicts. They were also complicated by an apparent conditional willingness to accept belt-tightening and a unilateral rewriting of social contracts.

“If it’s temporary, one or two years, I can adapt. My concern is that more taxes will be permanent—and that will be an issue,” said Saudi government worker Muhammad according to a report by Bloomberg after his \$266/month cost-of-living allowance was canceled and sales taxes tripled as part of painful austerity measures announced by finance minister Muhammad Jadaan.¹²

Muhammad’s words were echoed in a rare pushback against the government by columnist Khalid Sulaiman, writing in the *Okaz* daily newspaper, one of the kingdom’s tightly controlled media outlets. He

wrote: “Citizens worry that the pressure on their living standards will outlast the current crisis. Increasing VAT from 5% to 15% will have a big effect on society’s purchasing power and will reflect negatively on the economy in the long term.”¹³

The surveys leave no doubt that even before the economic crisis sparked by the 2020 pandemic, Middle Eastern youth was first and foremost concerned about its economic future. Asked what had prompted the wave of protests in 2011, 2019, and 2020, respondents pointed to unemployment, personal debt, and corruption. Thirty-five percent of those polled in the latest Arab Youth Survey reported that they were mired in debt compared with 15% in 2015.¹⁴ A whopping 80% said they believed Arab regimes were corrupt. As Middle East scholar Michael Milstein observed,

This evinces a realization that the past decade of revolutions has borne rather bitter fruit: civil war, humanitarian distress, the rise of powerful extremist elements, and the collapse of governing restraints... Today, rather than seeking to change the world, most Arabs (especially the younger generation) demonstrate that mere improvements in their material condition would suffice.¹⁵

VOTING WITH THEIR FEET

If the surveys suggest one thing, the streets of Algerian, Sudanese, Lebanese and Iraqi cities suggest something else.¹⁶ Protesters in those countries appeared to have learned lessons from the failed 2011 revolts in Egypt, Libya, and Yemen. In contrast to 2011, protesters in 2019 and 2020 refused to surrender the street once a leader was forced to resign. Instead, they maintained their protests, demanding a total overhaul of the political system,¹⁷ which led to the formation of a governing transitional council in Sudan and a referendum on a new Algerian constitution.

Feeling outmaneuvered by the military and political elites, Algerians voted with their feet. While the new constitution won in the referendum with a two-thirds majority, fewer than a quarter of eligible voters cast their vote.¹⁸ “Algerian youths do not see the ‘New Algeria’ that lives

in the president's speeches. Activists are jailed for social media posts and memes, and the entire nation feels abandoned by both the political establishment and the traditional opposition," said Algerian scholar Zine Labidine Ghebouli.¹⁹ In Sudan, the jury is still out on whether the council will satisfy popular demand.

In Lebanon and Iraq, the protesters insisted on the removal of the sect- and ethnic-based political structures that underpin the two countries' political systems.²⁰ As in Algeria, protesters in Lebanon and Iraq confronting police violence and the impact of the pandemic was at an inflection point. That was graphically visualized in late October 2020 with the reopening of a key bridge in Baghdad and the clearing out of tents from a sit-in in Tahrir Square, the epicenter of the anti-establishment protest movement that erupted a year ago to demand basic services, employment opportunities, and an end to corruption.²¹

Few doubt that the combination of repressive law enforcement, politics rather than engagement, and a public health crisis buys elites a reprieve at best. The writing is on the wall, with intermittent protests erupting in Egypt, Morocco, Jordan, Iran, and war-ravaged Syria. "For political transformation to happen, you need a generation," noted Lina Khatib, head of London-based think tank Chatham House's Middle East and North Africa program.²²

The question is not whether another wave of protest will occur but when and where.

Former CIA acting director Michael Morell said,

When you look at the poor economic growth, when you look at the very high demographic growth, what you see is a region that has a lot of challenges ahead of it. There are very few things that are true for every country in the world. But one of those is that the most dangerous people in any society are young men. Testosterone is a hell of a drug. There are lots of young men in this part of the world that don't have avenues to channel their innate aggression into productive, constructive forms. They are attracted to destructive avenues.²³

“The essential situation is that this mass of citizens has reached the point of discontent but [of] desperation and therefore has done the only thing it sees as available to it other than immigrate, which is challenging their state openly in street protests. Something has to give between these two forces,” added veteran journalist and Middle East scholar Rami Khouri.²⁴

Give and take seems a long way off, however, at least for the time being. The immediate reality is a stalemate. Protesters have demonstrated their ability to topple heads of government but have so far failed to force elites, determined to protect their perks at whatever cost, to address their fundamental concerns, let alone surrender power. Aggravating the stalemate is the breakdown in trust between significant segments of youth populations and governments as well as traditional opposition forces fueling demands for reforms that replace existing elites rather than exploring ways of finding common ground.

“Arab governments’ long suppression of the development of inclusive, democratic, and effective institutions has left a vacuum of leadership among regime and opposition forces alike. That vacuum is acutely felt today... With no trusted institution in the region who could carry out people’s rightful demands for more effective management of their countries, the endgame is unclear,” said Marwan Muasher, Vice President for Studies at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and former Deputy Prime Minister of Jordan.²⁵

In a swath of land that stretches from the Atlantic coast of Africa into Central Asia, trends and developments are no longer sub-regional. They reverberate across what increasingly looks like the Middle East’s expanding borderlands, as was evident in the 2020 Caucasus war between Armenia and Turkey—in which Azerbaijan was backed by Israel and Iran walked a fine line, despite its sympathy for the Armenians. Russian security forces and analysts predict that the fallout of the war is likely to compound a combustible mix that will spark social unrest in the North Caucasus.

Aslan Bakov, a prominent political analyst from the Kabardino-Balkaria region, warned that Muslim civil society groups were likely to lead anti-Russian protests, taking local authorities as well as the

government in Moscow to task for mismanaging the pandemic and reducing financial support of the North Caucasus. As a result of those missteps, the region suffered a higher COVID-19-related death rate per capita and has seen employment rates soar as high as 40%. Muslim non-governmental organizations have stepped in where increasingly authoritarian local governments have failed to deliver, fueling widespread lack of confidence in state authority. Describing the situation as “ideal conditions for a social explosion,” Baskov cautioned that the unrest could escalate into ethnic and border conflicts in a region in which frontiers have yet to be definitively demarcated.²⁶

A CATALYST FOR REINVIGORATED PROTEST?

Much the way US president Jimmy Carter’s support for human rights in the 1970s boosted popular resistance to the Shah of Iran and helped pave the way for the Islamic revolution,²⁷ President Joe Biden, with his emphasis on democratic values and freedoms,²⁸ could contribute to renewed public manifestations of widespread discontent and demands for greater transparency and accountability in the Middle East and North Africa.

Supporters of a human rights-driven foreign policy juxtapose the emergence of an anti-American regime in Iran with the rise of post-revolt democratic leaders in Chile, the Philippines, and South Korea. US president Barack Obama and VP Biden struggled almost a decade ago with how to handle the 2011 popular revolts.

Critics accuse Obama of enabling the Muslim Brotherhood to gain executive power in the aftermath of the revolts. The rise of the Brotherhood sparked a counter-revolution that led to a military coup in Egypt and civil wars in Libya, Syria, and Yemen.

“The cases of Chile, South Korea, and the Philippines, along with a few others, are often cited...by foreign policy elites arguing that American human rights advocacy needn’t come at the expense of American interests. And yet, as we can see in...harsh Monday-morning quarterbacking of Obama’s policy toward the Egyptian uprising against Mubarak, for example, this argument still faces a steep uphill climb,” said Tamara Cofman Wittes, a Middle East scholar

who coordinated US democracy and human rights policy as the State Department's deputy assistant secretary of state for Near Eastern affairs. Cofman Wittes was referring to Hosni Mubarak, the Egyptian leader who was forced to resign in 2011 after 30 years in office.

Biden has pledged to “defend the rights of activists, political dissidents, and journalists around the world to speak their minds freely without fear of persecution and violence. Jamal’s death will not be in vain.” Biden was referring to Khashoggi, the murdered Saudi journalist.²⁹ Biden has also said he would convene a global Summit for Democracy in his first year in office as part of an effort to confront authoritarian regimes and promote elections and human rights. The summit would be attended not only by political leaders but also including civil rights groups fighting for democracy.³⁰

Campaign promises are one thing; enacting policies once in office is another. The jury is out on how the Biden administration will handle potentially sustained protest in the Middle East and North Africa. To be sure, the most recent surveys of public opinion taken together paint a picture of a youth that has shifted in much of the region from optimism at the time of the 2011 revolts to deep-seated pessimism if not despair about its future prospects and a lack of confidence in the ability and/or willingness of most governments and elites to cater to its social and economic needs. That makes predictions of civil unrest all the more real.

The lesson of the last decade for the coming one is that political transition sparked by waves of protest is not a matter of days, months, or even a year. It is a long, drawn-out process that often plays out over decades. 2011 ushered in a global era of defiance and dissent, with the Arab uprisings as its most dramatic centerpiece.

The 2020s is likely to be a decade in which protests may produce uncertain and fragile outcomes, irrespective of whether protesters or vested interests gain an immediate upper hand. Fragility at best and instability at worst is likely to be the norm. To change that, protesters and governments would have to agree on economic, political, and social systems that are truly inclusive and ensure that all have a stake. That is a tall order.

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