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# **Comprehensive, Contentious, Convulsive, and Continuing**

## Some Observations on the 2010–2020 Arab Uprisings

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**Rami G. Khouri**

The grievances that exploded all over the Arab region between 2010 and 2020 are historic in so many ways that it is hard to know where to start understanding them. Scholars should avoid a single-focus analysis and instead grasp why the protests across nearly a dozen countries have addressed almost every dimension of material, political, and psychological life. Four key factors that converge, though, should take priority in any assessment of what this decade means for the Arab region: (1) the expanding range of rights, denials, and grievances that citizens raise; (2) the fact that Arabs have unsuccessfully tried to redress these grievances since the 1970s without receiving any serious responses from their states; (3) the demands today to go well beyond reforms in individual policies and instead totally overhaul the governance systems and throw out the ruling elites; and, (4) the simultaneous uprisings across much of the Arab region, revealing the common suffering of citizens and the incompetence of governments in about a dozen states at least. In short, the deterioration of the quality of citizenship and the dilapidated state of public services and governance have reached such a severe condition that they have caused mass eruptions by citizens in multiple lands to redress these stressful and often dehumanizing realities.

The strength and depth of this decade's protests reflect the fact that their

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core issues have been raised by Arab activism, demonstrations, and other means for at least four decades, without eliciting any serious policy responses from the political elites or the foreign powers that support them. This is far from just a seasonal “Arab Spring,” as it is often referred to in the West. It is the second half of a century of Arab statehood in which ordinary citizens have struggled unsuccessfully for their rights.

The very wide range of criticisms and demands the protests raise across the region indicate how ordinary citizens have suffered in virtually every dimension of their lives. The issues raised include corruption, household income, poverty, inequality, opportunity, jobs, education, health care, water, electricity, accountability, police brutality, abuse of power, the rule of law, environmental justice, gender equality, and the lack of citizen voice, to mention only the most significant.

This range of issues that keeps growing with time and their painful impact on ordinary citizens due to decades of governmental mismanagement ultimately generates more serious new threats. The latest examples include Lebanon and Iraq. In Lebanon, a banking crisis prevents citizens from drawing their deposits beyond a few hundred dollars a week and cripples many small and medium businesses that need dollars to import essential goods. In Iraq, the worsening electricity shortages and the new threat of a possible cut in power imports from Iran due to US sanctions both highlight the inability of Iraqi governments to manage their people’s welfare or even the integrity of their state (given the Kurdish autonomous region, the short-lived Islamic State, and some calls among southern residents around Basra to run their own affairs).

The accumulation of so many problems since the 1980s contrasts with the pre-2000 period, in which protests were occasional and tended to focus on singular issues, such as gas, bread, or milk prices, cost-of-living increases

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due to new taxes and fees, elite abuse of power, lack of equal rights among citizens, normalization of the relationship with Israel, and others. This decade's complaints and demands, however, cover simultaneously almost every sector of life, and protests go on for months or years at a time.

These growing multi-sectoral stresses over decades help explain another critical factor in the current uprisings: the fearlessness of citizens who challenge powerful state and sectarian leaders by name and demand their departure. Protestors stopped being scared off by rough treatment from security agencies or sectarian thugs. This lack of fear results from nearly half a century of neglect during which citizens have felt that their governments pay no serious attention to their needs and rights, and governments appear to lack the technical capabilities to respond effectively. Citizen anger becomes amplified from older people's memories of past decades when their governments in their state-building developmental eras had provided their citizens with basic services equitably and efficiently, like collecting garbage, operating decent schools, and providing clean water and electricity, while younger Arabs under the age of 40 have only known deteriorating social services and security conditions and widespread political exclusion. The combination of uncaring, corrupt, and incompetent governance proved to be too much for citizens of all ages to take without fighting back.

To make matters worse, citizens who rise up to protest in anger and frustration are usually met with police and security responses that are increasingly militarized and brutal. This only exacerbates people's feelings of being ignored and abused by their own power elite that treats them with disdain. Citizens eventually move beyond anger, and if like so many today they are unable to feed or educate their children or secure a decent job for themselves, they often feel dehumanized by the actions of their own state. They rise up to no longer accept being treated with contempt by the officials

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who should serve them.

These developments are evident across the Arab region, where the persistent protests have generated a historic new demand by large segments of Arab citizenries for a total change of their governing system, which would both remove the individuals who have been in power for decades and institute new governance mechanisms based on participation, pluralism, and accountability, under the rule of law. This contrasts sharply with the many previous, smaller, protests from the 1970s through the 1990s, when demonstrators usually just sought one or two policy changes or to replace a few officials with others. The problems that have accumulated reflect the fact that policy changes were minimal and that the “new” officials who assumed power came from the same pool of the failed ruling power elite. The protesters now call their actions “revolutions” because they aim to both eradicate the old power structures and to rehumanize and revitalize the role and rights of citizens.

These key elements of the ongoing Arab revolutions reflect many driving forces that have converged in the past decade, including rampant corruption by crony capitalists within security-dominated ruling elites who also proved incompetent in addressing the challenges, in economic development, political rights, and environmental protections at least, that became evident since the 1970s. This poor quality of governance resulted in insufficient real economic growth through productive activities, reliance on rentier political economy systems, erratic economic growth that was unable to keep up with population growth, and complicity in or impotence in the face of the non-stop damage of local and regional wars, including the Arab–Israeli conflict that has now entered its second century.

Another recent development and consequence of these drivers may well explain the widespread and apparent desperation of many protesters who say they have nothing to lose because they have nothing to live for. A large and

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growing number of Arabs live in poverty and vulnerability, which leads to economic and political marginalization and ultimately alienates them from their state, from their economy, and even from some of their traditional social configurations, like tribal, religious, and community organizations that had long defined people's identities and supported them in times of need. The United Nations and credible data indicate that some two-thirds of all Arabs are poor or vulnerable.<sup>1</sup> The vulnerable are low-income families that live right on the edge of poverty and plunge into that category with a sudden increase in prices or taxes or a shock to the family's income. New analyses in light of regional turmoil that slows economic growth also indicate that families in poverty are destined to stay there for several generations. That percentage of poor and vulnerable in Arab countries is also increasing due to the impact of the armed conflicts and internal economic collapse in several states, including Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Palestine, Libya, and Yemen.

As some states seem to abandon their citizens and stop serving them, those citizens turn away from their states and assert other identities and allegiances (tribal, religious, ethnic, ideological). In extreme cases, they create their own sovereign or virtual states (South Sudan, Kurdistan, Islamic State, Somaliland, Gaza), most of which encounter difficult days for various reasons.

Across the Arab region, with only a few exceptions, pauperized citizenries are challenging their militarized states in an epic battle that has been brewing for a century and that has now exploded into the open air. Taking to the streets to topple the entire systems that brought people to this condition is the last-resort option that nevertheless seems to motivate many—probably a majority of—citizens to take charge of their own lives and future wellbeing. It remains unclear, however, whether the current revolutions will be able to depose any power structures and replace them with more democratic systems.

The transitional sovereign council in Sudan is an important precedent that

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we must watch closely to see if it fully tempers the once absolute powers of the security agencies and creates a new governance system that is pluralistic, participatory, and accountable under the rule of law. Lebanon and Iraq suggest that sustained protests and road closures that suspend business as usual for a short period of time can elicit some tangible concessions, like the resignation of a prime minister or even drafting new electoral laws. The Algerian protests similarly achieved some limited gains, like the decision of the moribund president not to seek a *fifth* term.

Yet, the Egyptian experience of 2011–2013 remains fresh in many people's minds, as well as among the ruling elites and their military allies. These elites, sometimes with external support, have pushed back against the protesters, often violently and brutally, resulting in hundreds of deaths and thousands of injuries, especially in Sudan and Iraq. The counter-revolution of conservative autocrats in Egypt, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Lebanon, the United Arab Emirates, and others has been as evident in most Arab countries as the street demonstrators trying to evict them forever. Electronic surveillance systems, shooting to kill or injure protesters, erecting massive concrete walls to protect state institutions, widespread arrests, internet shutdowns, and other responses have only seen the protests persist and expand, as best evidenced in Lebanon and Iraq.

The protesters today endure, however, partly because they have obviously learned and applied lessons from the 2010–2011 uprisings. These include the importance of cross-community solidarities, persistent challenges to the elite, innovative protest tactics that emphasize the incompetence or criminal corruption of the ruling elite, coordination among different protest groups, and sticking with a set of a few basic demands until they are met. The most important ones across the region have been the governments' resignation, new election laws, appointing efficient ministers, creating credible anti-corruption

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mechanisms, and most importantly, installing a civilian government in place of military or oligarchic-sectarian rule.

As the protests and countermoves go on, we can also see some basic social values and power control systems evolving underneath the surface. The most dramatic include the significant role of women in the protests and other dimensions of public life, the widespread open participation of all citizens in public forums to shape the new governance systems they seek, cross-sectarian solidarity among protesters from groups that more commonly used to confront each other, the pervasive demands for social justice, and accountability under the rule of law.

All signs indicate that this epic battle for the identity of the Arab region will go on for some years to come.

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## Endnotes

- 1 United Nations, *Rethinking Inequality in Arab Countries* (report no. E/ESCWA/EDID/2019/2; Beirut: United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia, Economic Research Forum, 2019) [PDF file].