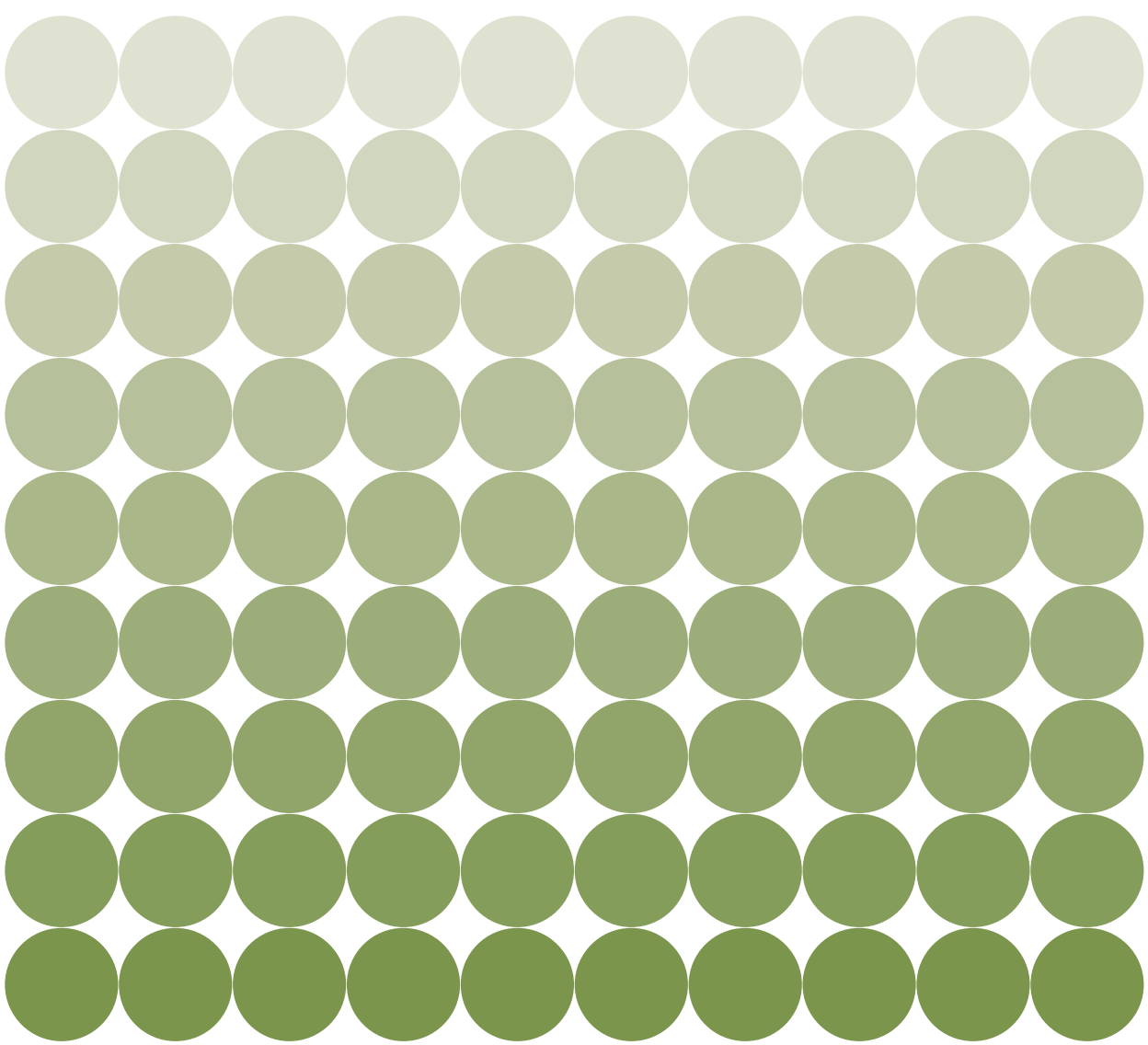


PROTEST AND STATE- SOCIETY RELATIONS IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA

**DYLAN O'DRISCOLL, AMAL BOURHROUS,
MERAY MADDAH AND SHIVAN FAZIL**



STOCKHOLM INTERNATIONAL PEACE RESEARCH INSTITUTE

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Protest and State– Society Relations in the Middle East and North Africa

SIPRI Policy Paper No. 56

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**STOCKHOLM INTERNATIONAL
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October 2020

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Contents

<i>Preface</i>	v
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	vi
<i>Summary</i>	vii
<i>Abbreviations</i>	ix
1. Introduction	1
Figure 1.1. Classification of countries in the Middle East and North Africa by protest intensity	2
2. State–society relations in the Middle East and North Africa	5
Mass protests	5
Sporadic protests	16
Scarce protests	31
Highly suppressed protests	37
Figure 2.1. Number of protests in countries with mass protests, June 2019–June 2020	8
Figure 2.2. Number of protests in countries with sporadic protests, June 2019–June 2020	18
Figure 2.3. Number of protests in countries with scarce protests, June 2019–June 2020	32
Figure 2.4. Number of protests in countries with highly suppressed protests, June 2019–June 2020	40
3. Trends and patterns	42
Key reasons for protests	42
Key reasons for lack of protests	45
State responses to protests	47
Figure 3.1. Unemployment and youth unemployment in the Middle East and North Africa, 2019	43
Figure 3.2. Youth population in 2019 and projected change 2030 in the Middle East and North Africa	43
Figure 3.3. Perceptions of corruption in state institutions in select countries in the Middle East and North Africa, 2019	44
4. The role and impact of external actors	50
The role of external actors	50
The impact of external actors' actions	58
Table 4.1. The 10 largest importers of major arms and their main suppliers, 2015–19	56
5. Conclusions	60

Preface

The change that many expected from the Arab Spring wave of popular mobilizations in 2011 did not arrive. The societal problems that led to those movements emerging have not gone away. People across the Middle East and North Africa still face many of the same issues. However, using both minor concessions and force, elites across the region have largely preserved the social contract and their own positions.

Now, with a new wave of large, sustained protest movements in Algeria, Iraq and Lebanon and protests across many other Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) countries, we witness another round of calls for a renegotiation of the social contract. The economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the historically low oil prices will make conditions worse in many of these countries and may lead more people to join the demonstrations and protests. Events after this paper was written, such as those in Lebanon, continue to demonstrate the poor condition of the relationship between states and the societies they govern.

The impact of these mobilisations, the societal problems that underlie them and the consequences that unfold in their wake is not confined to the MENA region. It is also felt in neighbouring regions, including Europe, and given global scope by the region's geo-strategic significance. External actors are therefore understandably interested and often engaged by these events but need to be sure that any steps they take are not counter-productive.

The political cultures and infrastructures of the region appear to be widely contested within their societies; this is not conducive to long-term political stability and human security in such a sensitive and strategically significant region. By examining how the governments in the region and external actors have responded to the protests since the Arab Spring began, the authors highlight a number of trends and patterns across the region. It is an unfortunate fact of the region's politics and conflicts that there is no easy solution to the problems it faces. External actors need a subtle awareness of regional realities if they are to chart a policy course that contributes to building more peaceful relations within and between the countries of MENA. The authors' recommendations, therefore, focus on the need for external actors, especially the European Union, to rethink engagement in the Middle East and North Africa.

This paper's overview of the situation, analysis of trends and careful recommendations will be of interest to policymakers in Europe and elsewhere, as well as scholars of the Middle East and North Africa and of the dynamics of social change everywhere.

Dan Smith
Director, SIPRI
Stockholm, October 2020

Acknowledgements

First, special thanks are owed to all the protestors, activists and political actors to whom we have spoken over the years. These conversations have informed our knowledge, which in turn has contributed to this paper.

We would like to thank Dan Smith, Luc van de Goor, Dr Irene Costantini, Dr Florian Krampe, Dr Lucie Béraud-Sudreau and Laura Bruun for their feedback on this paper. However, any errors or flaws remain our responsibility alone.

We would also like to thank the communications and editorial team at SIPRI for its help in producing and disseminating the final product, particularly Ms Joey M. Fox for all her help in guiding the publication process and Frank Esparraga for typesetting the paper. We would also like to thank Shannen Young and Frank Esparraga for their valuable work and patience in producing the final graphs. We would like to thank Stephanie Blenckner, Alexandra Manolache and Shannen Young for their work on the dissemination of the paper.

Finally, we would like to thank the Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs for its generosity in providing financial support for the project. However, the views expressed are those of the authors alone.

The authors
Stockholm, October 2020

Summary

A decade ago, a series of popular pro-democracy uprisings swept through the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), known as the Arab Spring. The events were seen by many as ushering in a wave of change in which the people of each country would force a transformation in the relationship between society and the state and in the underlying social contract. A decade later, with the fragile exception of Tunisia, both state–society relations and the conditions that sparked the popular uprisings remain much the same, if not worse. Moreover, while some of the Arab Spring protests did result in political change, not all of them brought about the positive change desired. Libya, Syria and Yemen have all descended into civil wars. In Egypt, the counter-revolution has deepened the country's malaise. Since the Arab Spring, there have been multiple waves of protests, most recently a wave of protests that peaked towards the end of 2019 and was briefly disrupted by the coronavirus 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. People across the region are protesting over many of the same issues: high unemployment, poor public services and endemic corruption among others.

A better understanding of the existing relationship between society and the state in MENA countries is needed. This must encompass, on the one hand, the impact of protests (or their absence) and, on the other hand, the likely impact of COVID-19 on the underlying conditions that have fuelled unrest and public discontent.

Based on the number, intensity and durability of protests, the countries of MENA can be divided into four categories: mass protests (Algeria, Iraq and Lebanon), sporadic protests (Egypt, Iran, Israel, Jordan, Morocco, the Palestinian territories and Tunisia), scarce protests (Kuwait, Oman, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates) and highly suppressed protests (Bahrain and Saudi Arabia). The trends and patterns that emerge from analysis of the four categories highlight the key reasons for protests. These include socioeconomic grievances, austerity and corruption as well as calls for broader political and democratic rights in most of the countries. These conditions remain unchanged in the countries with mass and sporadic protests. The key reasons for a lack of protests, even when underlying conditions and motives are present, include fear of repression or a generous welfare system that leaves few socio-economic incentives for citizens to challenge the ruling elites. This is the case in the countries with scarce or highly suppressed protests, which correspond to the monarchies of the Gulf. However, the economic fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly with historically low oil prices, has raised serious questions about the sustainability of the rentier social contract underpinning state–society relations in these countries as more and more of them are forced to introduce austerity measures.

The trends and patterns that emerge from analysis of government responses to protest movements also take many forms. The response has ranged from outright repression via such populist promises as subsidies, allowances, salary increases and developmental projects to appeasement through limited concessions by

elites. This appeasement can include the change of individual leaders or whole governments, limited constitutional reforms, or co-option of some political actors while strictly monitoring the political field. Overall, the responses over time have consisted of a combination of repression and compromise. Their unifying purpose is to preserve the status quo and avoid substantial changes to the social contract.

The policies of external actors in the region have also often contributed to preservation of the status quo. They have thus empowered elites to ignore the calls for change from the population. The external actors' concerns have often revolved around mitigating threats to regional and international security, maintaining influence in the region, and safeguarding strategic interests. However, such a heavily securitized environment affects state–society relations in the countries of MENA. The external actors' fixation on stability and security in order to preserve their strategic interests in the region ultimately contributes to insecurity and instability, as protests and mass movements become more recurrent.

External actors—this paper focuses on the European Union (EU)—must reconsider their policies in order to achieve the aim of stability and security in the long term. This necessity is reinforced by the far-reaching socio-economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. In this regard, the EU should adopt an approach to regional security and stability that takes the needs of the populations of each country as the starting point for an understanding of security and stability that is more adapted to local circumstances. This would involve a broader EU agreement on priorities in the Middle East and North Africa that emphasize aspects that answer the needs of the population.

Abbreviations

BDL	Banque du Liban (Bank of Lebanon)
BICI	Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry
COVID-19	Coronavirus disease 2019
EEAS	European External Action Service
EU	European Union
FNC	Federal National Council (of the United Arab Emirates)
GDP	Gross domestic product
GCC	Gulf Cooperation Council
IMF	International Monetary Fund
KDP	Kurdistan Democratic Party
KRG	Kurdistan Regional Government
KRI	Kurdistan Region of Iraq
MENA	Middle East and North Africa
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NGO	Non-governmental organization
PJD	Parti de la justice et du développement (Justice and Development Party, of Morocco)
PUK	Patriotic Union of Kurdistan
UAE	United Arab Emirates
UN	United Nations

1. Introduction

Traditional forms of political engagement—considered to be dominated by older political elites disconnected from everyday realities—have increasingly been abandoned by citizens in several countries of the Middle East and North Africa. Instead, street protests have become the main avenue for people to express their disenchantment with the performance of their governments, to denounce rampant corruption, and to demand social justice and better living conditions. The Arab Spring—which began at the end of 2010 in Tunisia and spread across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) in 2011—was seen by many as a wave of change whereby populations would force a reordering of the relationship between society and the state in each country.¹ Ten years on, there have been a number of civil wars in the region, but, with the exception of a few outliers, the relationship between society and the state remains much the same, if not worse. Since the initial Arab Spring, there have been other waves of protest—most recently the protests that peaked towards the end of 2019 and were disrupted by the coronavirus 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. However, there has yet to be transformative change to the social contract. Some changes—both positive and negative—to the state–society relationship have nonetheless occurred.

Peace and security in MENA are closely connected to state–society relations, as over the past decade conflict in the region has been mainly caused by a breakdown in the relationship between the state and at least some factions of society. This paper aims to better understand the current relationship between society and the state in each of the countries of MENA, the impact—or lack of impact—of protests since 2011, and the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic has had and is likely to have. Taking a regional approach, it highlights trends across countries experiencing different levels of protest in order to understand the long-term impact of different responses to calls to redesign the social contract. Finally, it examines the role that external actors play or can play in either maintaining the status quo or gradually helping to foster positive change in the state–society relationship.

State–society relations are understood here in relation to the social contract in a country. They thus include not only the relationship between society and the state, but also the obligations that they have to each other, which in turn leads to the recognition of whether or not the state has a right to govern.² Protest, and the freedom to protest, is a good entry point to further this understanding, as it relates to the acceptance or rejection of the social contract as it stands. As the

¹ Dabashi, H., *The Arab Spring: The End of Postcolonialism* (Zed Books: London, 2012); Noueihed, L. and Warren, A., *The Battle for the Arab Spring: Revolution, Counter-revolution and the Making of a New Era* (Yale University Press: New Haven, CT, 2012); and Goodwin, J., ‘Why we were surprised (again) by the Arab Spring’, *Swiss Political Science Review*, vol. 17, no. 4 (Dec. 2011), pp. 452–56.

² El-Haddad, A., ‘Redefining the social contract in the wake of the Arab Spring: The experiences of Egypt, Morocco and Tunisia’, *World Development*, vol. 127 (Mar. 2020), 104774; and Loewe, M., Trautner, B. and Zintl, T., ‘The social contract: An analytical tool for countries in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) and beyond’, German Development Institute (DIE) Briefing Paper no. 17/2019, 2019.

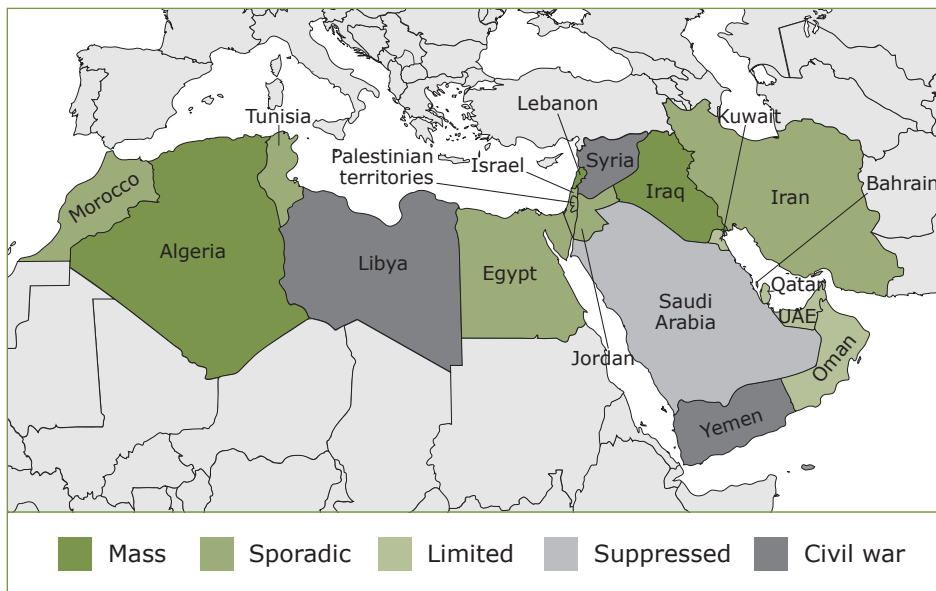


Figure 1.1. Classification of countries in the Middle East and North Africa by protest intensity

Notes: The categorization of countries is based on protests since 2019. In addition to data on the number of protests from ACLED, it also takes into account the scale (in terms of number of people and longevity) of the protests and the spread across the country.

Source: Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) database, <<https://acleddata.com/dashboard/>>.

social contract is not the same across the groups that make up a society, rejection or acceptance is not necessarily uniform across that society. Moreover, as state–society relations vary over time, this paper examines them over the past decade, with a particular focus on the impact of responses to protests on the current state–society relations.³

Understanding state–society relations and protests across MENA is of particular importance given the recurrence of violence over the same issues in the region. A number of questions arise in relation to the impact that protests and the types of response to protests have on long-term changes to state–society relations. Such questions include the following: Does a change of the government lead to the demands or needs of protestors being met in the long term? What impact does the suppression of protests have on the state–society relationship in the long term? What impact do temporary appeasement measures (mainly financial concessions) have in the long term? How can engagement with the protestors lead to positive change?

Addressing such questions can help to better understand regional trends in terms of the impact of different responses to protest. This understanding in turn offers guidance to external actors—that is, international organizations and other

³ Loewe et al. (note 2).

states from within and outside the region—on how to formulate responses to such dynamics. The social contract is highly influenced by actions of external actors.⁴ External support for a state can reduce its obligations in fulfilling the social contract, while also preventing the natural evolution of the social contract.⁵ External actors play a role, even by not engaging, and if key actors choose to limit their engagement then other actors will take their place.⁶ The policies of external actors have tended to focus on security in the Middle East and North Africa and less on what causes insecurity; states from outside the region have tended to focus on maintaining their financial interests in the region, rather than building diversified economies.⁷ As MENA is undergoing a change in external power dynamics—partly due to the disengagement of the United States—pathways for engagement are opening up for other actors. Among these are the European Union (EU) and its member states, to which the recommendations of this paper are directed. The EU and its member states can adopt the usual role of maintaining the status quo for the purposes of stability, they can examine ways to engage without having a negative influence on potential development of the social contract, or they can help to facilitate (not force) this development. This raises a further question as to whether the changing external power dynamics offer pathways to rethink the EU's role, particularly given the cyclical nature of violence and protests in the region.

From a policy perspective, rethinking this engagement is of importance as protests continue across the region based on many of the same issues. Moreover, the current low price of oil and the monumental economic impact of COVID-19 are likely to further exacerbate many of the problems that have resulted in protests across the Middle East and North Africa. Although this creates many problems connected to the lack of investment in human resources, it also creates an opportunity for external actors to rethink their approaches to the region.⁸

For the analysis of individual countries, MENA is divided into four categories according to the intensity—in terms of the number of events, participation and spread across the country—of protests since 2019: mass protests, sporadic protests, scarce protests and highly suppressed protests (see figure 1.1). The first category includes three countries that witnessed mass protests until they were disrupted by COVID-19—Algeria, Iraq and Lebanon—as well as the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI). Although the KRI is part of Iraq, it is considered separately here since constitutionally many powers are devolved to it and so, for most of the region's population, the social contract is with the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), rather than with the Government of Iraq. The second category includes seven countries where protests emerged sporadically but did not last long or did not include large sections of the population—Egypt, Iran, Israel, Jordan, Morocco,

⁴ Loewe et al. (note 2).

⁵ Loewe et al. (note 2).

⁶ Hamid, S., 'Islamism, the Arab Spring, and the failure of America's do-nothing policy in the Middle East', *The Atlantic*, 9 Oct. 2015.

⁷ O'Driscoll, D., 'US policy in Iraq: Searching for the reverse gear?', *Middle East Policy*, vol. 23, no. 1 (Spring 2016), pp. 34–41.

⁸ Stark, A., 'Putting people first: COVID-19 reveals shortcomings of US approach to security in the Middle East', *Just Security*, 8 Apr. 2020.

the Palestinian territories and Tunisia. The third category, ‘scarce protests’, include four countries where the majority of the population has not questioned the social contract and where there were limited or no protests—Kuwait, Oman, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The fourth category includes two countries—Bahrain and Saudi Arabia—where protest is particularly difficult due to the state’s response and where, although issues of protest exist, protests have been extremely limited. This does not mean that protests are not suppressed in other countries, but rather that suppression is not the key factor of categorization. This classification allows for an easier understanding of patterns in the impact of responses. Although the categorization focuses on the wave of protests since 2019, the analysis of each country covers the past decade in order to better understand the social contract in each country. This paper does not cover Libya, Syria or Yemen due to the civil wars in these countries, which have resulted in ruptures in the social contracts.

Chapter 2 of this paper profiles state–society relations in each country in the Middle East and North Africa by category. These profiles include an examination of protests, or lack thereof, and the impact of COVID-19. Chapter 3 then examines trends and patterns in the region, focusing on the reasons for protests or their absence and, more importantly, the impact of the various state responses to calls to change the social contract. Chapter 4 then moves on to developing an understanding of the role played by external actors in state–society relations in MENA and the impact that this has. Finally, chapter 5 draws conclusions and gives policy recommendations for the EU and its member states on how to rethink their approach to the Middle East and North Africa.

2. State–society relations in the Middle East and North Africa

Mass protests

Algeria

Algeria has been controlled by the military since the start of the civil war in 1992, and until 2011 it was under a state of emergency. An opaque network of senior generals, the secret services and revolutionary figures of the ruling party, the Front de Libération Nationale (FLN, National Liberation Front), constitutes a system of entrenched elites. From the start of his first term as president, in 1999, Abdelaziz Bouteflika was largely a civilian figurehead of a government in which the military holds the real power over security and economic policy. However, Bouteflika managed to garner some autonomy in foreign policy and national reconciliation.⁹

Algeria's multiparty system provides a veneer of openness and pluralism. It allows larger parties loyal to the power brokers to dominate the Algerian Parliament, effectively putting the legislature under the influence of the executive and casting doubts over the separation of powers. The parliament is largely reduced to ratifying bills and the government's policy proposals.¹⁰ Interest in traditional party politics has waned—it is estimated that only 9 per cent of those aged 20–29 and 16 per cent of those aged 30–39 voted in the 2017 parliamentary elections.¹¹ The large youth population does not perceive traditional forms of political participation as avenues for change. Instead, it has embraced new forms of activism.¹²

For Algerians, the state's performance in providing public services is a source of frustration, and poor economic management and corruption are significant challenges. Only 10 per cent of Algerians are satisfied with the government's handling of job creation, price control and fighting inequality.¹³ Satisfaction with the education and healthcare systems is also low (36 per cent and 32 per cent, respectively). In contrast, 53 per cent find the state's performance in maintaining security satisfactory. These figures reflect the securitization of society and the use of terrorism as a pretext to enhance policing at the expense of the social and economic sectors. Algeria has the highest military spending in North Africa, accounting for 6 per cent of its gross domestic product (GDP) in 2019.¹⁴

⁹ Willis, M., *Politics and Power in the Maghreb: Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco from Independence to the Arab Spring* (Hurst: London, 2012), p. 111.

¹⁰ Willis (note 9).

¹¹ Robbins, M., *The 2019 Algerian Protests* (Arab Barometer: Princeton, NJ, Aug. 2019), p. 7.

¹² Hadj-Moussa, R., 'Youth and activism in Algeria: The question of political generations', *Journal of North African Studies*, published online 12 Sep. 2019.

¹³ Robbins (note 11).

¹⁴ SIPRI Military Expenditure Database, Apr. 2020.

Algeria's abundant hydrocarbon resources have cemented the resilience of the country's power brokers. Through selective liberalization, a small section of the elites has benefited from the capture and exploitation of national resources, turning national industries and companies into sources of economic and political power.¹⁵ During the Arab Spring, Algeria witnessed protests demanding social justice, transparency and accountability. But the protests failed to gain impetus and were placated by subsidies, tax reductions and allowances for the poor.¹⁶ However, in February 2019, following President Bouteflika's decision to seek a fifth term in office despite his absence since 2013 due to poor health, a more vigorous protest movement emerged. In biweekly gatherings, Algerians of all ages and backgrounds expressed their discontent and called for an overhaul of the political system.¹⁷

These protests—known as the Hirak (movement)—represented an unprecedented challenge to the ruling elites. Key demands included democratic reforms and constitutional checks to prevent the military from interfering in politics. Calling for complete political change, the protests reflected the desire of Algerians to renegotiate the social contract that has governed the country's state–society relations for decades. The protests were also driven by socio-economic grievances related to high unemployment, poverty, inequality and dismal public services. While several activists have gained prominence, the Hirak has largely been spontaneous and leaderless.¹⁸

As protests intensified, the military was forced to turn its back on the president and his close allies to appease the Hirak. Bouteflika's resignation in April 2019 was the movement's most significant impact. To appease protesters, the government initiated a wave of arrests on corruption charges of businessmen and senior officials close to Bouteflika. Yet, under the interim government of Abdelkader Bensalah, the military sought a transition that preserves the prevailing power architecture.¹⁹

Despite opposition and two postponements, a presidential election was held on December 2019.²⁰ Abdelmadjid Tebboune was elected in an election marred by a low turnout of 40 per cent. President Tebboune called for national unity and promised constitutional reforms, democracy and human rights, economic growth, and anti-corruption measures.²¹ Widely seen as yet another regime figure, his

¹⁵ Ghanem-Yazbeck, D., *Limiting Change through Change: The Key to the Algerian Regime's Longevity* (Carnegie Middle East Center: Beirut, Apr. 2018), pp. 17–21.

¹⁶ Achy, L., 'Why did protests in Algeria fail to gain momentum?', *Foreign Policy*, 31 Mar. 2011.

¹⁷ Boubekeur, A., 'Demonstration effects: How the Hirak protest movement is reshaping Algerian politics', European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR) Policy Brief no. 315, Feb. 2020, p. 12.

¹⁸ Boubekeur (note 17).

¹⁹ Ghanem, D., 'How Algeria's military is shaping the country's political transition', *Middle East Eye*, 16 Sep. 2019.

²⁰ Algérie Presse Service, 'Présentation des projets de loi relatifs à l'Autorité indépendante des élections et au régime électoral' [Presentation of the Independent Electoral Authority and electoral regime bills], 11 Sep. 2019.

²¹ Mehenni, M., 'Tebboune prête serment et promet un changement radical' [Tebboune takes the oath and promises radical change], 19 Dec. 2019.

legitimacy and credibility remain questionable.²² While the government has been careful not to brutally and visibly repress the HIRAK, it has targeted the movement's prominent figures.

The HIRAK's biggest achievement has been its ability to successfully carve out an independent political space and to develop alternative forms of political participation.²³ Yet, COVID-19 presented the HIRAK with a dilemma of whether to suspend or continue the protests. While some protestors were determined to continue on-street protests, others contended that the movement was strong enough to withstand a temporary halt in order to prevent a public health catastrophe.²⁴ In March 2020 Algeria prohibited all types of gathering and march and introduced selective lockdown measures.²⁵ Some activists have seen COVID-19 as an opportunity to highlight the state's lack of preparedness, its failure in handling the outbreak and the poor healthcare system.²⁶ Ultimately, COVID-19 appears to have benefited the government, which has taken advantage of the hiatus in mobilization to punish opponents.²⁷ As restrictions have been gradually lifted, HIRAK activists have attempted to rekindle the mobilization (see figure 2.1), despite the risks associated with not only COVID-19 but also the government's increasingly tough response.²⁸

Iraq

Despite the territorial defeat of the Islamic State in 2017, Iraq continues to struggle to resolve political and military conflicts, its crippled economy, endemic corruption, climate vulnerability, and entanglement in the tensions between Iran and the USA.²⁹ Following the 2018 parliamentary elections, the political scene has been marked by two competing forces.³⁰ The first is a top-down political system that reinforces the post-2003 political order and its *Muhasasa Ta'afia* ethno-sectarian power-sharing system. The second is a bottom-up social force demanding the complete overhaul of the political system. This force manifests itself through low voter turnout and frequent mass protests. The strength and political demands of the protestors have increased since 2011.³¹ Protests have

²² Ghanem, D. and Benaidi, R., 'In search of legitimacy', Diwan, Carnegie Middle East Center, 22 Jan. 2020.

²³ Boubekeur (note 17).

²⁴ Moula, H., 'La menace du Covid-19 partage le HIRAK : Front politique et discorde sanitaire!' [The Covid-19 threat divides the HIRAK: Political unity and health discord!], *Reporters* (Algiers), 15 Mar. 2020.

²⁵ Alilat, F., 'Algeria: HIRAK at the time of coronavirus', *Africa Report*, 24 Mar. 2020.

²⁶ Sakthivel, V., 'Algeria's HIRAK: A political opportunity in COVID-19?', Middle East Institute, 1 Apr. 2020.

²⁷ Amnesty International, 'Algeria: End repression against HIRAK activists and journalists amid COVID-19', 27 Apr. 2020.

²⁸ 'Algeria's protest movement considers how and when to come back', *The Economist*, 4 June 2020.

²⁹ Ibish, H., 'The U.S. and Iran inch toward confrontation in Iraq', *Bloomberg*, 7 Apr. 2020; and Hassan, K., Born, C. and Nordqvist, P., *Iraq: Climate-related Security Risk Assessment* (Expert Working Group on Climate-related Security Risks: Stockholm, Aug. 2018).

³⁰ Mansour, R., *Iraq's 2018 Government Formation: Unpacking the Friction Between Reform and the Status Quo* (London School of Economics Middle East Centre: London, Feb. 2019).

³¹ Costantini, I., 'The Iraqi protest movement: Social mobilization amidst violence and instability', *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, published online 29 Jan. 2020.

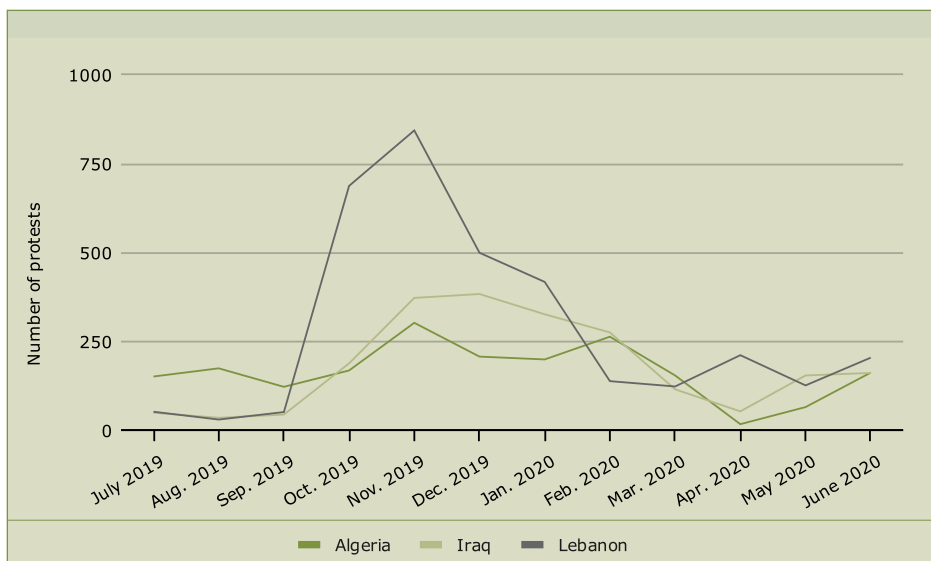


Figure 2.1. Number of protests in countries with mass protests, June 2019–June 2020

Note: Figures are numbers of protest events and do not relate to the scale of the protest.

Source: Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) database, <<https://acleddata.com/dashboard/>>.

called for better employment opportunities, better public services and the eradication of the endemic corruption that has beleaguered the country since 2003.³² These protests demonstrate the extent of frustration over corruption and the identity-based politics and highlight the need for a more issue-based political system.³³

Due to widespread dissatisfaction with the political class, the turnout for the 2018 elections was a record low of 44 per cent, 18 percentage points lower than in 2014.³⁴ Disillusionment with the political system and ruling class has grown, and interest in politics has faded: only 26 per cent of Iraqis indicated an interest in politics in 2018, down from 52 per cent in 2011.³⁵ Trust in state institutions had also fallen: only 13 per cent trusted the parliament, 38 per cent trusted the judiciary and 25 per cent trusted the civil service. In sum, an overwhelming majority of Iraqis no longer view conventional forms of participation, including elections and political parties, as avenues for change.

A significant demographic transition is partly to blame.³⁶ About 60 per cent of the population is less than 25 years old, including 40 per cent under 14 years. Youth unemployment is 25 per cent (and more than double that for women), exacerbated

³² 'What's behind the protests in Iraq', *Deutsche Welle*, 5 Oct. 2019.

³³ Jabar, F. A., *The Iraqi Protest Movement: From Identity Politics to Issue Politics*, London School of Economics (LSE) Middle East Centre Papers Series no. 25 (LSE Middle East Centre: London, June 2018).

³⁴ Al Jazeera, 'Iraq: Election results within two days, turnout at record low', 13 May 2018.

³⁵ Arab Barometer V, *Iraq Country Report* (Arab Barometer: Princeton, NJ, 2019), pp. 7–9.

³⁶ Mahmod, J., 'Iraq's demographic time bomb', *Monde diplomatique*, 17 Oct. 2019.

by 1 million new entrants into the job market each year.³⁷ Youth satisfaction with the government's performance in creating job opportunities is 6 per cent, and 95 per cent of young Iraqis believe employment requires having strong connections.³⁸ With high unemployment and increasing inequality, the widespread feeling of injustice among the youth has fuelled social and economic polarization, which in turn generates impoverishment and exclusion.³⁹

In October 2019 Iraq was rocked by another wave of protests, which started in Baghdad's Tahrir Square, but soon spread to the Shia-dominated provinces in the centre and south of the country (see figure 2.1). The protests were sparked by the violent dispersal of a peaceful rally of unemployed graduates outside the prime minister's office on 27 September.⁴⁰ Protestors called for the resignation of the government and an end to the distribution of government positions along ethno-sectarian lines.⁴¹ Iraqis of all backgrounds joined the movement, with an unprecedented inclusivity across sect, gender and class.⁴² The protests were the biggest challenge to a government that owed its survival to a fragile compromise between two rival blocs—Bina and Islah—that emerged from the inconclusive 2018 elections.⁴³ In demanding the overhaul of the Muhasasa Ta'ifia system, protestors sought to renegotiate the social contract that has underpinned state–society relations since the toppling of the regime of Saddam Hussein, in 2003. They also called for more transparency, more accountability and electoral reforms to allow for genuine political representation away from the big party lists.⁴⁴ Despite a forceful response from the official and non-official security forces, the protests prevailed.⁴⁵ The government tried but failed to appease the unrest through a combination of populist promises, including increasing welfare, re-distribution of land ownership and unemployment benefits.

The resignation of Abdul Mahdi as prime minister on 30 November 2019 represented the first significant achievement for the protest movement.⁴⁶ In December the Iraqi Parliament passed a new election law that moved away from party lists and instead allows voters to elect individual legislators and allows for the formation of new constituencies. However, the new law was soon widely criticized for maintaining the status quo rather than making elections fairer, as demanded by the protestors.⁴⁷ Iraq was left without a functioning government for over five months as successive prime ministers-designate struggled to satisfy

³⁷ World Bank Data, 21 June 2020.

³⁸ Raz, D., *Youth in Middle East and North Africa* (Arab Barometer: Princeton, NJ, Aug. 2019), pp. 8–10.

³⁹ United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), *Iraq Human Development Report: Iraqi Youth Challenges and Opportunities* (UNDP: Baghdad, 2014), p. 55.

⁴⁰ Alani, F., 'Mobilising for a new political system in Iraq', *Monde diplomatique*, Jan. 2020.

⁴¹ Ibrahim, A., 'Muhasasa, the political system reviled by Iraqi protesters', *Al Jazeera*, 4 Dec. 2019.

⁴² Ali, Z., 'Iraqis demand a country', *Middle East Report*, vol. 292, no. 3 (Fall/Winter 2019).

⁴³ *Al Jazeera*, 'Iraq: Adil Abdul Mahdi named prime minister', 3 Oct. 2018.

⁴⁴ Ibrahim (note 41).

⁴⁵ Human Rights Watch (HRW), 'Iraq: lethal force used against protestors', 10 Oct. 2019.

⁴⁶ O'Driscoll, D., 'Tensions on Iraqi soil likely to overshadow anti-government protest demands', SIPRI WritePeace blog, 9 Jan. 2020.

⁴⁷ Hassan, F. and Rubin, A. J., 'Iraq's new election law draws much criticism and few cheers', *New York Times*, 24 Dec. 2019.

the protestors and failed to form a government. Finally, Mustafa al-Khadimi was inaugurated as prime minister on 7 May 2020. He began his mandate with overtures including the release of detained protestors and pledges of justice and compensation for relatives of those killed during the protests.⁴⁸

The protestors managed to create a new space and form for civic engagement and political participation that broke through the widespread sentiments of apathy and disillusionment. Their mass mobilization enabled them to force a small and gradual but noticeable change despite the country's entrenched status quo. Their biggest success was to prevent the business-as-usual approach in dividing up the country's political and financial spoils.⁴⁹

The COVID-19 outbreak presented a challenge for protestors by restricting their ability for mass mobilization, which temporarily stalled the movement.⁵⁰ However, protestors have begun to regroup. Moreover, the pandemic has worsened the underlying grievances that drove people into the streets. The country is already facing its worst financial crisis in years and was dealt a double blow by plummeting oil prices and the COVID-19 lockdown. Oil exports were expected to fund 90 per cent of Iraq's 2020 budget, calculated on an oil price of US\$56 per barrel. However, oil revenue dropped from \$6.2 billion in January to \$2.9 billion in March, which left the government with a \$2 billion deficit just to pay public sector salaries and pensions, and well below the monthly expenditure of \$9 billion outlined in the 2020 budget.⁵¹ Iraq's economic outlook has deteriorated significantly and GDP growth is projected to contract by 9.7 per cent in 2020.⁵² The socio-economic deterioration that in recent years drove people to the streets is thus set to get worse.

Kurdistan Region of Iraq

The KRI, which is comprised of four provinces, is defined as a federal region by the 2015 Iraqi Constitution.⁵³ In the wake of the 1991 First Gulf War, the region's two main parties, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), engaged in a bloody civil war that split the region between two administrations. The KDP's stronghold includes the provinces of Erbil and Duhok, while the PUK controls Sulaymaniya and Halabja. Despite unification in 2006, the two parties maintain separate security apparatuses and military forces, known as the peshmerga. After a fraught referendum on independence in 2017, KRI President Masoud Barzani stepped down as part of a power transfer within the KDP (and within his family). He was replaced as president in 2019 by his nephew, Nechirvan Barzani, who had been prime minister. The former

⁴⁸ Ibrahim, A., 'Mustafa al-Kadhimi ends Iraq deadlock but new PM faces hurdles', Al Jazeera, 11 May 2020.

⁴⁹ Ibrahim, A., 'Iraq: Basra protesters call for resignation of local governor', Al Jazeera, 11 May 2020.

⁵⁰ Murdock, H., 'Coronavirus is "break, not defeat", Iraqi activists say', Voice of America, 17 Apr. 2020.

⁵¹ Van Heuvelen, B. and Lando, B., 'Oil revenues crash, dragging Iraq deeper into crisis', *Iraq Oil Report*, 2 May 2020.

⁵² World Bank, 'Iraq: Structural reforms critically needed to manage a multi-faceted crisis', 4 May 2020.

⁵³ Constitution of Iraq, adopted 15 Oct. 2005, Article 117.

president's son, Masrour Barzani, the chief of the security apparatus, became the new prime minister.⁵⁴

In addition to representatives in the Iraqi Parliament in Baghdad, the KRI has had its own parliament since 1991. In the 2018 elections, the representation of the two ruling parties increased amid allegations of fraud and vote rigging.⁵⁵ The number of voters has shrunk in recent elections as the stagnant politics, unpaid salaries and corruption have undermined faith in politics.⁵⁶ Developments since the election suggest that the KDP and the PUK are both making concerted efforts to undermine the parliament by weakening its oversight role and turning it into an institution that formalizes decisions already taken by party leaders behind closed doors.⁵⁷

The KRG is heavily reliant on direct oil sales and on a budget transfer from the Iraqi Government—revenue sharing has been an issue of contestation between the central and regional governments in recent years.⁵⁸ Public employment in the already bloated KRG bureaucracy is the main redistribution mechanism within the KRI, which has helped to create a patronage system.⁵⁹ Public sector salaries account for almost 70 per cent of the total budget, which is adding strain to the already struggling economy.⁶⁰ The KRI has failed to diversify its economy: almost two-thirds of households are on the public payroll and only 30 per cent of individuals work in the private sector, while less than 6 per cent are employed in agriculture.⁶¹ The patronage system and minimal levying of taxes have rendered the government independent of society and unaccountable to any calls for genuine political participation and representation.⁶²

While anti-government protests gripped much of the rest of Iraq in early October 2019, streets in the KRI remained calm despite sharing similar problems to the rest of the country. The ongoing revenue-sharing dispute with the central Iraqi Government and the fallout from the 2017 independence referendum have made KRI officials anxious about a further reduction of the region's autonomy. Such fears have also spread among the general public and affect the way in which Kurdish people viewed the protest movement elsewhere in Iraq.⁶³

⁵⁴ O'Driscoll, D. and Baser, B., 'Independence referendums and nationalist rhetoric: The Kurdistan Region of Iraq', *Third World Quarterly*, vol. 40, no. 11 (2019), pp. 2016–34.

⁵⁵ Petkova, M., 'Opposition parties reject vote results in Iraq's Kurdish region', Al Jazeera, 21 Oct. 2018.

⁵⁶ Bogos, K., *Analysis: Looking Back on the 2018 Kurdish Elections* (American University of Iraq, Sulaimani, Institute of Regional and International Studies: Sulaimani, Mar. 2019).

⁵⁷ International Crisis Group (ICG), *After Kurdistan's Thwarted Independence Bid*, Middle East Report no. 199 (ICG: Brussels, 27 Mar. 2019), p. 10.

⁵⁸ *New York Times*, 'Kurdistan and the battle over oil', 8 Oct. 2018.

⁵⁹ Hassan, K., *Kurdistan's Politicized Society Confronts a Sultanistic System* (Carnegie Middle East Center: Beirut, Aug. 2015).

⁶⁰ World Bank, *Kurdistan Region of Iraq: Reforming the Economy for Shared Prosperity and Protecting the Vulnerable* (World Bank: Washington, DC, 30 May 2016).

⁶¹ International Organization for Migration (IOM), United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and Kurdistan Regional Statistics Office (KRSO), *Demographic Survey: Kurdistan Region of Iraq* (IOM: Baghdad, July 2018).

⁶² International Crisis Group (note 57).

⁶³ Petkova, M., 'Why are Iraqi Kurds not taking part in protests?' Al Jazeera, 11 Nov. 2019.

Nonetheless, the popular protests that shook the Middle East and North Africa in 2011 had a Kurdish counterpart.⁶⁴ The protestors expressed common themes against corruption and poor governance but remained largely confined to Sulaymaniya province. This was due in part to the deep territorial and political divisions within the KRI and in part to the particular challenges to mobilization in KDP-controlled areas, where permission to protest was refused.⁶⁵ Additionally, the political elites have been able to constrain protests by encouraging unity in relation to both the fight against Islamic State and in the run-up to the support for the independence referendum.⁶⁶

However, there have been waves of protests, the most recent of which was a KRI-wide protest in 2018 against austerity measures and delays in payment and cuts to the salaries of public sector employees.⁶⁷ These protests also involved repeated calls for more transparency and accountability, an end to party control of and monopoly over state institutions, and more merit-based public employment and allocation of contracts and other resources. However, the KRG has consistently crushed protests and silenced dissent through a combination of violence and promises. In 2018 many activists, journalists and public sector employees were arrested and assaulted in a violent crackdown by the security forces and armed men in civilian clothes affiliated to the ruling parties.⁶⁸ The heavy-handed response of the security apparatus to dissent combined with the territorial and political divide have restricted KRI-wide mobilization and made protests difficult.⁶⁹

In response to COVID-19 the KRG adopted a range of measures early on to contain the spread, including the imposition of curfews and shutting the border with Iran.⁷⁰ The lockdown together with the plummeting oil prices has sharply contracted the region's economy. The KRG is in arrears and was unable to pay the salaries of its 1.2 million employees after the Iraqi Government halted budget transfers, thus reigniting the oil-for-budget dispute between the two governments.⁷¹ Some observers have argued that the KRI authorities have used the pandemic to further restrict freedom of expression and freedom of the press.⁷² In sum, the impact of COVID-19 and the KRG's response to it, paired with budgetary problems related to oil prices, will only act to exacerbate problems that

⁶⁴ Fantappie, M., 'Iraq: In country's north, a youth-led "Kurdish spring" blooms', Carnegie Middle East Center, 4 May 2011.

⁶⁵ Watts, N. F., 'The spring in Sulaimani: Kurdish protest and political identities', eds S. J. Holliday and P. Leech, *Political Identities and Popular Uprisings in the Middle East* (Rowman & Littlefield: London, 2016), pp. 37–57.

⁶⁶ O'Driscoll and Baser (note 54).

⁶⁷ van den Toorn, C. McC., 'Kurdistan politics at crossroads', Carnegie Middle East Center, 26 Apr. 2018.

⁶⁸ Human Rights Watch (HRW), 'Kurdistan Region of Iraq: Protesters beaten, journalists detained', 15 Apr. 2018.

⁶⁹ Watts (note 65).

⁷⁰ Aziz, B., 'Kurdistan Region of Iraq and the coronavirus response—Lessons learned', Fikra Forum, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 3 Apr. 2020.

⁷¹ *The National*, 'Iraq: Oil dispute reignites between Baghdad and Kurdistan', (Abu Dhabi), 26 Apr. 2020.

⁷² Reporters Without Borders (RSF), 'Iraqi Kurdistan: Wave of arrests of journalists since Covid-19's arrival', 17 Apr. 2020.

have strained state–society relations. Protests are thus likely to re-emerge over the same issues that have sparked them over the past decade.

Lebanon

Due to ethno-sectarian and political diversity, Lebanon's confessional system remains a distinct characteristic of the state. Lebanon's political confessionalism aims at ensuring coexistence in political representation. It is based on allotting parliamentary, governmental and civil service positions largely according to the demographic weight of each religious group at the time of the most recent census, in 1932.⁷³ The 1989 Taif Agreement marked the beginning of the end of the 1975–90 Lebanese Civil War and provided for a political transition after a long cycle of violent conflict and sectarian tensions.⁷⁴

Owing to multiple problems, the current economic situation is one of the main concerns for the population: 45 per cent of Lebanese people considering it to be a key challenge, followed by the quality of public service (15 per cent) and corruption (13 per cent).⁷⁵ Lebanon's liberal, service-based economy has been badly affected by recent crises. This has included depreciation of the Lebanese pound and an inflated exchange rate with the US dollar in a dollarized economy; a crisis in the banking sector; and defaulting on debt.⁷⁶ Overall, Lebanon is facing one of the worst financial crises since independence.

In addition, corruption has been a persistent problem that only worsened after end of the civil war. The 2019 Corruption Perception Index (CPI) ranked Lebanon among the world's most corrupt countries and territories—137th of 180.⁷⁷ An overwhelming 87 per cent of Lebanese people think that the government is failing in its fight against corruption and 67 per cent believe that most or all government officials are involved in some form of corruption.⁷⁸

The 2018 parliamentary elections took place five years after they were due. This delay, which further damaged state–society relations, had many causes, including multiple governmental collapses; a two-year stalemate in the appointment of a president; two extensions of its own mandate by the Lebanese Parliament; spillover from the Syrian civil war; disquiet about a new electoral system based on proportional representation rather than winner-takes-all; and environmental and health concerns due to a waste management crisis.⁷⁹

During the Arab Spring in 2011, there were a number of protests in Lebanon demanding the overhaul of the ethno-sectarian system.⁸⁰ Although these resulted

⁷³ Crow, R. E., 'Religious sectarianism in the Lebanese political system', *Journal of Politics*, vol. 24, no. 3 (Aug. 1962), pp. 489–520.

⁷⁴ Krayem, H., 'The Lebanese Civil War and the Taif Agreement', ed. P. Salem, *Conflict Resolution in the Arab World: Selected Essays* (American University of Beirut: Beirut, 1997).

⁷⁵ Arab Barometer V, *Lebanon Country Report* (Arab Barometer: Princeton, NJ, 2019).

⁷⁶ Setser, B. W., 'Lebanon's imminent financial crisis', Follow the Money, Council on Foreign Relations, 18 Feb. 2020.

⁷⁷ Transparency International (TI), *Corruption Perceptions Index 2019* (TI: Berlin, 2020).

⁷⁸ Kukutschka, R. M. B. and Vrushi, J., *Global Corruption Barometer: Middle East and North Africa 2019* (Transparency International: Berlin, 2019).

⁷⁹ Smith Galer, S., 'Lebanon is drowning in its own waste', 28 Mar. 2018, BBC Future.

⁸⁰ Reuters, 'Thousands protest against Lebanon's sectarian system', 6 Mar. 2011.

in no significant response from the government, the protests brought various civil groups together over common interests and concerns. The 2015 waste management crisis and inadequate rubbish disposal also led to a number of protests.⁸¹ However, the government adopted no sustainable policy to curb the crisis, whose repercussions affected all Lebanese people. In 2017 protests erupted in response to proposed tax increases to support public sector expenses.⁸²

In October 2019, days after criticisms of the government's response to wildfires, mass protests were sparked by a controversial charge on calls made via internet applications (see figure 2.1).⁸³ This charge was regarded as the culminating factor in disputes over the cost of telecommunications through the state-owned enterprise that monopolizes the infrastructure. Although the proposed charge was reversed, protests continued over the country's dire economic situation. A few weeks later, the World Bank warned that Lebanon faced a high risk of instability with economic and social uncertainties, and that if conditions remained unchanged then the poverty rate could increase from one-third of the population to half.⁸⁴

In response to the protests, the prime minister, Saad Hariri, gave his cabinet a 72-hour deadline to address the protesters' demands and to implement reforms without any obstruction.⁸⁵ However, one of the principle demands was the resignation of Hariri himself, which would prompt the resignation of the entire cabinet. Indeed, less than two weeks after the protests started, Hariri submitted his resignation.⁸⁶

An important characteristic of these protests was their decentralized nature: they gained momentum across Lebanon. For the first time in Lebanon's history, there were mass protests in cities such as Tripoli, Sidon, Tyre, Zouk and Nabatiyeh. Protestors from all communities were vocal about their dissent against the leaders of their respective sects. The October uprising had many key demands related to political, economic, social, environmental and governance issues. Although the resignation of Hariri's 'national unity' cabinet was a principle demand, it was seen as just one step towards wider reform.⁸⁷

A turning point in the protest's trajectory was the appointment as prime minister of Hassan Diab—who had the backing of the Hezbollah political party and militant group—to lead a proposed technocratic government after splits had

⁸¹ Al Jazeera, 'Lebanese protest against waste-disposal crisis', 26 July 2015.

⁸² Francis, E., 'Hundreds protest Lebanese parliament's proposed tax hikes', Reuters, 19 Mar. 2017.

⁸³ Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs, 'Forest fires in Lebanon: A recurring disaster', American University of Beirut, 12 Dec. 2019; and Hodali, D., 'Lebanon—Telecommunication in government hands', Deutsche Welle, 7 May 2019.

⁸⁴ World Bank, 'Lebanon is in the midst of economic, financial and social hardship, situation could get worse', Press release, 6 Nov. 2019.

⁸⁵ Chehayeb, K., 'Lebanon PM Hariri gives government 72 hours to act amid protests', Middle East Eye, 18 Oct. 2019.

⁸⁶ Al Jazeera, 'Lebanon Prime Minister Saad Hariri resigns after mass protests', 30 Oct. 2019.

⁸⁷ Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs, 'Towards a just Lebanon: Mapping the demands and goals of the October uprising', American University of Beirut, 2019.

emerged between members of the parliament on his approval.⁸⁸ Division emerged in the protest movement when some were content with the formation of the new government and its attempts to curb the economic turmoil, while others saw it as a facade with different faces representing the same ruling parties.⁸⁹ The movement's focus shifted when protests started to target banks and the central bank, Banque du Liban (BDL), in an attempt to promote critical reform after the monetary, financial and fiscal crises caused by the BDL's unsustainable policies.⁹⁰

The restrictions imposed in response to COVID-19, compounded by relatively large fines for violations, reduced the size of the protests. Nonetheless, sporadic protests against worsening living conditions and the banking crisis continued. In addition, the strict lockdown measures imposed by the Ministry of Public Health took its toll on Lebanon's already weak economy.⁹¹ Thus, the many social inequalities and economic hardships that people protested against only deepened during the lockdown period. Amid imposed curfews and the shutdown of businesses, there was a particular increase in violence by both protesters and security forces in Tripoli, one of Lebanon's most impoverished areas, with a high unemployment rate.⁹² The lockdown phase was an opening for security forces to implement even stricter action against those violating the curfews and not abiding with the closure of their businesses or shops.⁹³ The question of how to mitigate the current economic crisis remains unanswered. Correspondingly, the motives that drove protestors from October 2019 onwards have not been adequately addressed, while the economy has only deteriorated.

Although the case studies here focus on developments up to July 2020, more recent events in Lebanon should be mentioned: on 4 August an explosion caused by large amounts of ammonium nitrate stockpiled at the port of Beirut devastated a large part of the city, killed hundreds, injured thousands and left hundreds of thousands homeless.⁹⁴ Following the country's worst ever financial and economic crises, the explosion exacerbated already dire living conditions. Days after the blast and amid continuing protests over the government's mishandling of the calamity, Diab and his cabinet resigned. However, the protesters were unsatisfied with the resignations and demanded fundamental reforms to the political system. They have continued to demonstrate, and violence between the protestors and the security forces has erupted.⁹⁵

⁸⁸ Cornish, C., 'Hassan Diab appointed Lebanon PM with Hizbollah backing', *Financial Times*, 19 Dec. 2019.

⁸⁹ Perry, T. et al., 'Lebanon government wins confidence vote as protests rock Beirut', Reuters, 11 Feb. 2020.

⁹⁰ BBC, 'Demonstrators in Beirut target banks in continued protests', 15 Jan. 2020.

⁹¹ Azhari, T., 'Lebanon will shut airport, restrict movement over coronavirus', Al Jazeera, 16 Mar. 2020.

⁹² Lewis, L. and Bou Mansour, C., 'Fire, injury and death: What's happening in Lebanon's Tripoli?', *Middle East Monitor*, 18 May 2020.

⁹³ Kadi, S., 'Lebanon bracing for a harsher post-COVID-19 phase', *Arab Weekly*, 26 Apr. 2020.

⁹⁴ Cornish, C., 'Beirut explosion: "In the blink of an eye, the whole world changed"', *Financial Times*, 5 Aug. 2020.

⁹⁵ Trew, B., 'Live ammunition fired at Beirut protesters in wake of devastating blast, report finds', 27 Aug. 2020.

Sporadic protests

Egypt

Egypt was one of the main centres of the Arab Spring. Demonstrations highlighted the status quo of Egypt's authoritarian system entrenched with clientelist networks and poor conditions for the masses.⁹⁶ The 2011 Egypt Revolution culminated with the ending of President Hosni Mubarak's 30-year rule and the dissolution of his National Democratic Party (NDP).⁹⁷ A year later, Mohamed Morsi, affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood, won democratic presidential elections with 51 per cent of the votes.⁹⁸ However, in 2013 he was ousted by a military coup headed by the current president, General Abdel Fattah al-Sisi.⁹⁹ While al-Sisi's Egypt has tried to achieve economic prosperity and generate a form of social cohesion alongside austerity measures agreed with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in 2016, the interaction of the state with its people has encountered a number of predicaments since the 2013 coup.

Correspondingly, 36 per cent of Egyptians believe the most important issue that the state should tackle is the economy.¹⁰⁰ Those with lower incomes are less likely to believe that the economy is improving.¹⁰¹ In 2017 sporadic demonstrations erupted in various cities against the end of bread subsidies, referred to as the Intifada al-Tamween (supply uprising).¹⁰² The protests were against the proposal to cut bread rations for citizens holding different types of government-issued subsidy card.¹⁰³ However, the demonstrations seemed to lose momentum when the Ministry of Supply and Internal Trade issued new electronic cards, but the policy remained.¹⁰⁴

Protests were rekindled in September 2019 when Mohammed Ali, a businessman and self-exiled ex-military contractor, posted videos online and disclosed allegations of corruption against President al-Sisi. Ali's claims that massive amounts of public money had been squandered on luxury assets and about corruption practices involving al-Sisi and other generals attracted significant attention.¹⁰⁵ The allegations of corruption come at a time of heightened austerity measures. The proportion of Egyptians living below the poverty line increased from 25.2 per cent in 2010 to 32.5 in 2017–18.¹⁰⁶ Moreover, the Egyptian pound had devalued and inflation had soared. The protests thus emerged at a time of collective frustration in an environment that restricted gatherings and assemblies.

⁹⁶ Sukri, A. and Rasheed, Z., "'We're a mess': Egypt's economic woes fuel anger against el-Sisi', *Al Jazeera*, 24 Sep. 2019.

⁹⁷ *Al Jazeera*, 'Timeline: Egypt's revolution', 14 Feb. 2011.

⁹⁸ *Al Jazeera*, 'Celebration in Egypt as Morsi declared winner', 24 June 2012.

⁹⁹ BBC, 'Egypt's Mohammed Morsi: A turbulent presidency cut short', 17 June 2019.

¹⁰⁰ Arab Barometer V, *Egypt Country Report* (Arab Barometer: Princeton, NJ, 2019).

¹⁰¹ Arab Barometer V (note 100).

¹⁰² *Al-Masry Al-Youm*, ['Intifada al-Tamween' tops 'Twitter'], 7 Mar. 2017, (in Arabic).

¹⁰³ *Al Arabiya*, 'What you need to know about Egypt's bread crisis', 9 Mar. 2017.

¹⁰⁴ Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy, 'Expert Q&A on Egypt's bread protests', 9 Mar. 2017.

¹⁰⁵ Saba, J., 'Mohamed Ali: The self-exiled Egyptian sparking protests at home', 24 Sep. 2019, BBC.

¹⁰⁶ Sinha, N., 'Poverty and equity brief: Arab Republic of Egypt', World Bank, Apr. 2020.

Nevertheless, Egypt's 2019 protests were short lived (see figure 2.2). Dissent was met by force from the security forces. There was a crackdown against those who protested or took part in any form of opposition. Public space for dissenting voices remains highly contested and controlled, mainly by the state's hard-line policies and laws, which curtail protests and their development among the population.¹⁰⁷

COVID-19 is set to exacerbate the already bleak economic prospects by pushing more people below the poverty line and in turn increasing dissatisfaction with the government. Given Egypt's heavy-handed approach to dissent, it remains to be seen whether this will lead to more all-encompassing protests against the government, building on those in 2019. However, it is indicative of the state of state–society relations in Egypt that the government has been forced to rely on religious actors to ensure adherence with the COVID-19 restrictions since it lacks the necessary legitimacy itself.¹⁰⁸

Iran

The 1979 Iranian Revolution overthrew the monarchy, replacing it with an Islamic republic under the Velayat-e-Faqih guardianship system, the rule of a clerical establishment over the people. Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, is head of state and commander-in-chief of the armed forces and has prerogatives over certain appointments and key government organizations.¹⁰⁹

Iran's political system combines elements of Islamic law with elements of a modern republic, including a unicameral legislature (Majlis), an executive president and government, and a judiciary—all overseen by a clerical body, the Guardian Council. The Majlis and president are elected, as is the Assembly of Experts, which is responsible for appointing and monitoring the supreme leader. The 12-member Guardian Council vets laws passed by the Majlis and vets candidates for all elected bodies, giving it large influence over Iran's electoral system.¹¹⁰ For example, the turnout for the February 2020 parliamentary elections reached a historic low after the Council significantly reduced the number of reformists candidates allowed to run.¹¹¹

Plummeting oil prices and the reimposition of sanctions by the USA (following its withdrawal from multilateral agreement constraining Iran's nuclear programme) have had a toll on Iran's economy.¹¹² Iran's recession accelerated in 2019–20. Its GDP contracted by 7.6 per cent between April and December 2019 largely due to a 37 per cent decline in the oil sector as sanctions increasingly tightened.¹¹³ Demand

¹⁰⁷ El Sirgany, S., 'The ongoing campaign to restrict Egypt's public space', MENASource, Atlantic Council, 11 Sep. 2014.

¹⁰⁸ Brown, N. J., 'Death on the Nile', Diwan, Carnegie Middle East Center, 27 Mar. 2020.

¹⁰⁹ Kadivar, M., 'Ayatollah Khomeini's political theory and public interest', Working paper, Aga Khan University, Institute for the Study of Muslim Civilisations, 2014.

¹¹⁰ Council on Foreign Relations, 'The Islamic republic's power centers', 25 Feb. 2020.

¹¹¹ BBC, 'Iran elections: Record low turnout but hardliners set for win', 23 Feb. 2020.

¹¹² Erästö, T., 'Implementation of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action', *SIPRI Yearbook 2020: Armaments, Disarmament and International Security* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2020).

¹¹³ World Bank, *Marco Poverty Outlook* (World Bank: Washington, DC, Apr. 2020), pp. 152–53.

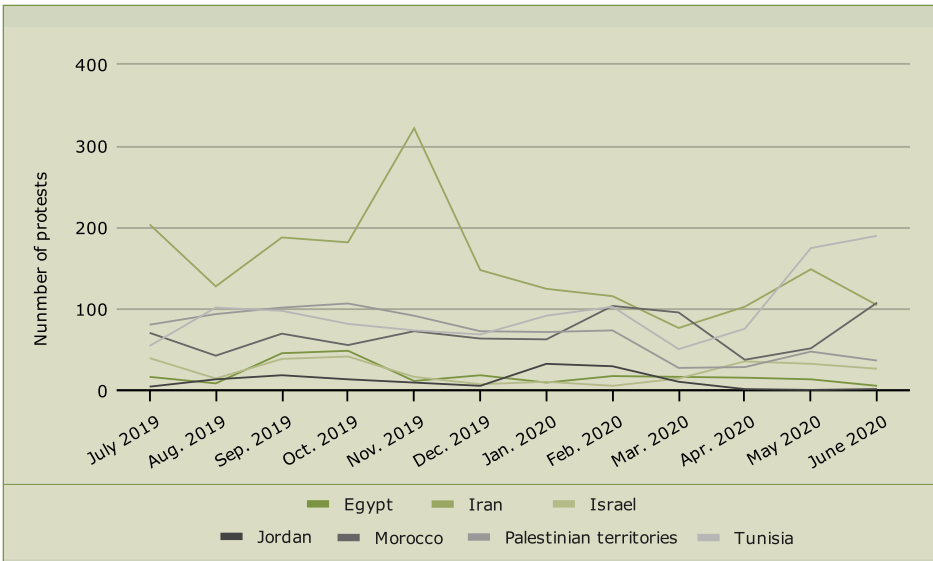


Figure 2.2. Number of protests in countries with sporadic protests, June 2019–June 2020

Note: Figures are numbers of protest events and do not relate to the scale of the protest.

Source: Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) database, <<https://acleddata.com/dashboard/>>.

for Iranian oil has fallen due to sanctions and a global oil glut.¹¹⁴ In addition, US sanctions deter banks around the world from conducting business with Iran. The dire economic conditions and high inflation have aggravated an already fragile situation for Iran’s human rights, with outcomes affecting economic, social and cultural rights.¹¹⁵

Protests in Iran have taken place intermittently over the years for a variety of reasons. The disputed 2009 presidential elections, in which President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad won a second term, sparked the Green Movement or Persian Awakening, with protestors chanting ‘where is my vote?’¹¹⁶ In 2017–18 there was a cycle of large protests in reaction to the struggling economy.¹¹⁷ Most recently, protests across Iran began in November 2019 after the government increased fuel prices in a bid to reduce the budget deficit and the impact of sanctions (see figure 2.2). The protests were widespread, including middle- and lower-income groups and diverse social classes.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁴ Ebadi, E., ‘Oil price drop brings more economic challenges for Iran’, Atlantic Council, 18 May 2020.

¹¹⁵ Amnesty International, *Human Rights in the Middle East and North Africa: Review of 2019* (Amnesty International: London, 2020), pp. 23–26.

¹¹⁶ Dabashi, H., ‘What happened to the Green Movement in Iran?’, Al Jazeera, 12 June 2013.

¹¹⁷ Shahi, A. and Abdoh-Tabrizi, E., ‘Iran’s 2019–2020 demonstrations: The changing dynamics of political protests in Iran’, *Asian Affairs*, vol. 51, no. 1 (2020), pp. 1–41, p. 3.

¹¹⁸ Kadivar, M. A., Khani, S. and Sotoudeh, A., ‘Iran’s protests are not just about gas prices’, *Foreign Affairs*, 4 Dec. 2019.

Youth have played a leading role in the protests since 2017, as they have been hit hardest by the weak economy, with unemployment and lack of job prospects. Protests in Iran, in particular in the city of Mahshahr, have been marred by violence, with the security apparatus cracking down on protesters.¹¹⁹ To limit media coverage of the widespread public protests, the government shut down the internet.¹²⁰ President Hassan Rouhani promised that families would receive financial assistance but also warned that violence from protesters would not be tolerated.¹²¹ However, Iran's subsequent budget plan for 2020/21 included the raising of taxes to increase revenue, which would adversely affect those already struggling.¹²²

COVID-19 struck Iran hard due to the government's initial reluctance to introduce containment measures, leading to a high death toll.¹²³ Lockdown measures have further strained the economy.¹²⁴ Iran's GDP is likely to remain subdued and the recession is projected to last until 2023.¹²⁵ This could exacerbate socio-economic grievances, fuel protests and strain state–society relations while inhibiting the state's ability to curtail protests.

Israel

State–society relations in Israel are largely shaped by the complexities that arise from combining strong state institutions with deep political and identity divisions. The interplay of democracy and ethnic relations in Israel has been described as 'a system in which two contradictory principles operate: "the democratic principle", making for equal rights and treatment of all citizens, and "the ethnic principle", making for fashioning a homogenous nation state and privileging the ethnic majority'.¹²⁶ While Jewish people (with various religious and cultural affiliations) constitute the ethnic majority, about a fifth of Israel's population is Arab, with many religious denominations (including Muslim, Druze and Christians). Although officially designated Arab-Israelis, many Arabs in Israel consider themselves Palestinians with Israeli citizenship.¹²⁷

Between April 2019 and March 2020, Israel held three inconclusive elections for its parliament, the Knesset. The result was a prolonged political stalemate. In each election the Likud party and the Blue and White alliance secured similar shares of the vote, and their respective leaders—Benjamin Netanyahu and Benny Gantz—both repeatedly failed to form a government. However, in April 2020, the

¹¹⁹ Kadivar et al. (note 118).

¹²⁰ NetBlocks, 'Internet disrupted in Iran amid fuel protests in multiple cities', 15 Nov. 2019.

¹²¹ Al Jazeera, 'Iran's protests: All you need to know in 600 words', 20 Nov. 2019.

¹²² Basravi, Z., 'Social media criticism in Iran as petrol prices stay high', Al Jazeera, 3 May 2020.

¹²³ Arab News, 'Iran faces "second wave" of virus as death toll surges toward 7,000', 18 May 2020.

¹²⁴ Kadivar et al. (note 118).

¹²⁵ World Bank (note 113).

¹²⁶ Smootha, S., 'Ethnic democracy: Israel as an archetype', *Israel Studies*, vol. 2 no. 2 (Fall 1997), pp. 198–241, p. 200.

¹²⁷ Berger, M., 'Palestinian in Israel', *Foreign Policy*, 18 Jan. 2019.

two leaders agreed to form a coalition government, with Netanyahu remaining as prime minister for an initial 18 months, to then be replaced by Gantz.¹²⁸

Israel has an independent judiciary, and the Supreme Court is considered the primary guardian of human and minority rights. It exercises judicial review over the executive and legislative branches and reviews petitions by citizens and advocacy groups. The Supreme Court's decisions are generally accepted and respected, but since 2017 there have been attempts by (mainly right wing) politicians to limit the actions of what they consider an exceedingly liberal court.¹²⁹

Israel's military plays an important role in state–society relations. It is a vital institution not only for the security of the state, but also for nation-building and the construction national identity. Under civilian control and largely based on conscription, the military is considered a 'people's army'. Israeli men and women must complete a three-year military service, after which they remain on reserve duty for several years.¹³⁰ However, conscription does not apply equally to all Israeli citizens. The participation of ultra-Orthodox Jews and Arab-Israelis is limited, which has raised questions about burden sharing among different segments of society and revealed underlying cleavages.¹³¹

Traditionally, Israeli politics and political discourse has been dominated by national security, with the Israeli–Palestinian conflict largely defining priorities and informing the state's emphasis on military spending and settlements in the Palestinian territories. In July 2011, however, there was a shift with social justice issues becoming prominent as hundreds of thousands of Israelis protested against living costs, especially sharply increasing rents and lack of affordable housing. The protestors' demands quickly transformed into calls for broader social justice and social change.¹³² The government contained the protests with several measures to ease the housing crisis.¹³³

In December 2017 large demonstrations erupted over a proposed law that would end the publication of the outcome of police investigations and any recommended prosecutions. Protestors considered the bill to be designed to protect Netanyahu, who was himself under investigation for corruption.¹³⁴ In response, the bill was amended to exclude ongoing investigations against Netanyahu.¹³⁵ Similar protests broke out in May 2019 when opposition parties organized demonstrations to condemn legislative efforts that would grant Netanyahu immunity from prosecution while in office. Protesters also denounced parallel attempts

¹²⁸ Lis, J., 'After securing lawmakers' endorsements, Netanyahu tasked with forming a government', *Haaretz*, 7 May 2020.

¹²⁹ Wootliff, R., 'Chief justice to PM: Bill for 61 MKs to overturn rulings "a danger to democracy"', *Times of Israel*, 29 Apr. 2018.

¹³⁰ Elran, M. and Sheffer, G. (eds), *Military Service in Israel: Challenges and Ramifications*, Institute for National Security Studies (INSS) Memorandum no. 159 (INSS: Tel Aviv, Sep. 2016).

¹³¹ Jager, A., 'The myth of compulsory military service in Israel', *Jerusalem Post*, 18 Oct. 2018.

¹³² Schechter, A., 'A short guide to Israel's social protest', *Haaretz*, 11 July 2012.

¹³³ Rosenberg, O., Lior, I. and Cohen, G., 'Some 450,000 Israelis march at massive "march of the million" rallies across country', *Haaretz*, 3 Sep. 2011.

¹³⁴ Wootliff, R., 'Newspaper publisher said to be at center of Netanyahu probe', *Times of Israel*, 8 Jan. 2017.

¹³⁵ *The Guardian*, 'Netanyahu tells backers to reword contentious police bill after protests', 3 Dec. 2017.

to limit the powers of the Supreme Court to repeal laws passed by the Knesset, including the immunity bill.¹³⁶ Many viewed these actions as major attacks on Israel's democracy and institutions.¹³⁷ After Netanyahu was charged with corruption in November, demonstrations calling on him to step down intensified across the country, while pro-Netanyahu supporters held counter-rallies as a show of support.¹³⁸

In August 2018 tens of thousands of Israelis, particularly Arabs and Druze, protested against a controversial Basic Law that defines Israel as the nation state of the Jewish people, giving them a unique right to exercise national self-determination. The Nation State Law, passed in July 2018, established Hebrew as Israel's official language and demoted Arabic to a 'special status'. It acknowledges the importance of Jewish settlements in the Palestinian territories and asserts a commitment to their development.¹³⁹ Once the law was passed, the Supreme Court began to review the numerous petitions filed against it, amid intense debate about whether the Court had the authority to reverse a Basic Law.¹⁴⁰

To fight the COVID-19 pandemic, Israel declared a state of emergency and enforced lockdown measures. This did not, however, prevent protests from taking place. In April 2020 thousands of Israelis staged a series of protests, known as the Black Flag protests, against the Netanyahu-Gantz coalition (see figure 2.2). Wearing masks and respecting social distancing measures, protesters condemned the coalition arrangement, which they considered to be an attack on Israeli democracy.¹⁴¹ Protesters called on the Supreme Court to disqualify politicians charged with a crime from forming a government, pitting supporters of Netanyahu against those calling for his disqualification.¹⁴²

Israel's protests highlight the important role of institutions, such as the Supreme Court, in mediating state-society relations, a role that becomes all the more important in polarized societies. Israel's democratic institutions often mediate political tensions and conflict. Recently, the same institutions have come under attack owing to a rise in populist and illiberal tendencies, which could undermine Israel's democracy.¹⁴³ Moreover, with tensions in the governmental coalition and the unfavourable effects of the pandemic on the economy, the protests continue with significant numbers.

¹³⁶ Reuters, 'Israelis protest moves to grant Netanyahu immunity, limit Supreme Court', 25 May 2019.

¹³⁷ Peleg, B., 'Tens of thousands of Israelis protest Netanyahu's immunity bills in opposition's first rally', *Haaretz*, 25 May 2019.

¹³⁸ Peleg, B. et al., 'After indictment, thousands attend pro- and anti-Netanyahu protests across Israel', *Haaretz*, 24 Nov. 2019.

¹³⁹ Lis, J., 'Israel's contentious Nation-State Law: Everything you need to know', *Haaretz*, 19 July 2018.

¹⁴⁰ Lintl, P. and Wolfrum, S., 'Israel's Nation-State Law', *Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP) Comment no. 41*, Oct. 2018.

¹⁴¹ Breiner, J., 'Two thousand Israelis brave coronavirus fears to protest assault on democracy', *Haaretz*, 19 Apr. 2020.

¹⁴² Lis (note 128).

¹⁴³ Cofman Wittes, T. and Mizrahi-Arnaud, Y., 'Is Israel in democratic decline?', Policy brief, Brookings Institution, Mar. 2019.

Jordan

Jordan is a constitutional monarchy with both a bicameral parliamentary system and various authorities vested in the king. He is the head of state, commander-in-chief of the armed forces and the principal executive of the Jordanian state. Although the constitution provides for a multiparty system, the monarch's extensive powers allow him to unilaterally approve legislation and dissolve the government. Because of its geopolitical importance, Jordan is supported by the USA and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and its member states. This has been crucial for securing loans and financial aid. Nonetheless, it grapples with several political and governance problems.

Following the Arab Spring, King Abdullah II outlined his vision for a full democratic transition that would gradually change Jordan from a constitutional monarchy to a parliamentary monarchy with greater citizen participation.¹⁴⁴ However, constitutional amendments approved by the parliament in 2016, but not submitted to a popular referendum, seem to be leading in the opposite direction.¹⁴⁵ The constitution places the king above politics and beyond legal accountability, and grants him broad executive powers with few constitutional checks. The king has the exclusive power over key appointments, including the heads of the gendarmerie, the army and intelligence. He appoints the members of the Constitutional Court and of the Judiciary Council, which is responsible for nominating court judges, casting doubts on the judiciary's independence.

Despite the concentration of powers, the monarchy remains popular among Jordanians, particularly those of tribal descent. It has sustained a tacit alliance, receiving loyalty and legitimacy in exchange for services and employment in the public sector and the military for tribal members. In contrast, Jordanians of Palestinian origin dominate the private sector. Among Jordanians, trust in the army (95 per cent) and the police (90 per cent) is much higher than trust in the government (38 per cent) or the parliament (14 per cent).¹⁴⁶

Jordan's political system is characterized by a stark contrast between a powerful monarchy on the one hand and a debilitated government and weak parliament on the other. The cabinet and the prime minister tend to serve as a buffer against popular anger, bearing responsibility for unpopular policies: they are often blamed while the monarchy is spared, and they tend to be appointed, reshuffled and dismissed whenever the king deems it necessary.¹⁴⁷ As for the parliament, the members of the Senate and its speaker are all appointed by the king, while the House of Representatives, although directly elected, has only limited legislative and oversight powers and tends to be dominated by supporters

¹⁴⁴ King Abdullah II, 'Goals, achievements and conventions: Pillars for deepening our democratic transition', 13 Oct. 2014.

¹⁴⁵ Obeidat, S., 'Jordan's 2016 constitutional amendments: A return to absolute monarchy?', ConstitutionNet, International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA), 27 May 2016.

¹⁴⁶ Arab Barometer V, *Jordan Country Report* (Arab Barometer: Princeton, NJ, 2019), p. 9.

¹⁴⁷ Hartnett, A. S., 'Can Jordan's new prime minister reform the government?', *Washington Post*, 13 June 2018.

of the king. Voting continues to be governed by dynamics of tribal politics, family affiliations and networks of patronage, while the opposition—mainly the Islamic Action Front (IAF), the political arm of the Muslim Brotherhood in Jordan—has been weakened by internal conflict and fragmentation.¹⁴⁸ Nevertheless, the opposition has typically avoided questioning the nature and the legitimacy of the monarch. Instead, it focuses on aspects of state administration, foreign policy, and the government’s economic and social policies.¹⁴⁹

Popular mobilization has been sporadic, mainly targeting specific issues, especially economic policy, corruption and, occasionally, foreign policy.¹⁵⁰ In September 2019 teachers staged a countrywide strike that lasted for a month to demand salary increases and to hold the government accountable for failing to deliver on its promises to raise salaries (see figure 2.2).¹⁵¹ In 2018, with the threat of insolvency looming, the government aimed to implement IMF-backed austerity measures through a tax reform law.¹⁵² The proposed increases in the prices of fuel and electricity and reduction in subsidies for basic commodities sparked public anger and triggered some of the largest protests in years.

There have also been some protests related to foreign policy. In March 2019 Jordanians took to the streets to demand the abrogation of a controversial deal for Israel to supply Jordan with gas.¹⁵³ In January 2020 thousands of people protested against US President Donald J. Trump’s proposed Middle East peace plan.¹⁵⁴ Jordanians often call into question their country’s relations with Israel—including the landmark 1994 peace treaty—and lament what they consider an unacceptable normalization of relations to the detriment of Palestinians.¹⁵⁵

Jordan’s response to the protests often reflects the boundaries of its national interests and what is accepted by its allies and aid providers. Following the protests against the tax law reform, in June 2018 King Abdallah II replaced the prime minister, Hani Mulki, with Omar al-Razzaz. The new prime minister was tasked with initiating a national dialogue with the aim of clearly articulating the social contract governing state–society relations, particularly the tax system, to better reflect the rights and duties of citizens.¹⁵⁶ However, amid continued unrest, the government withdrew the proposed tax legislation. Saudi Arabia and the USA offered Jordan financial aid, while the IMF agreed to provide even more loans.¹⁵⁷ In 2019 the government also yielded to the teachers demands and offered them

¹⁴⁸ Alnaimat, T., ‘The continued fragmentation of the Jordanian Brotherhood’, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 18 Oct. 2018.

¹⁴⁹ Schwedler, J., ‘Jordan’s austerity protests in context’, Atlantic Council, 8 June 2018.

¹⁵⁰ Yom, S., ‘Jordan’s protests are a ritual not a revolution’, *Foreign Policy*, 11 June 2018.

¹⁵¹ Al Jazeera, ‘Jordan teachers end four-week strike in pay deal with government’, 6 Oct. 2019.

¹⁵² Al Jazeera, ‘Jordan protests: What you should know’, Al Jazeera, 4 June 2018.

¹⁵³ Ghazal, M., ‘Hundreds gather downtown to protest Jordan–Israel gas deal’, *Jordan Times*, 23 Mar. 2019.

¹⁵⁴ Ersan, M., ‘Protests break out in Jordan against Trump’s “deal of the century”’, Al-Monitor, 30 Jan. 2020.

¹⁵⁵ Mitha, F., ‘The Jordanian–Israeli relationship: The reality of “cooperation”’, *Middle East Policy*, vol. 17, no. 2 (Summer 2010).

¹⁵⁶ *Jordan Times*, ‘New social contract key item on gov’t agenda—Razzaz’, 12 June 2018.

¹⁵⁷ Yom (note 150).

generous salary raises, despite financial reform plans to reduce debt.¹⁵⁸ However, in the case of Israeli–Jordanian relations, the routine strategy has been to tolerate protests, albeit keeping an eye on their potential escalation, while maintaining its strategic orientation and reiterating its commitment to a two-state solution to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict.¹⁵⁹

To battle COVID-19, the government declared a state of emergency and imposed a countrywide curfew.¹⁶⁰ The intermittent nature of protests in Jordan and their tendency to target specific policies rather than demand broad and systemic change have meant that the COVID-19 pandemic has not interrupted any ongoing social movement. However, the economic impact will almost certainly further aggravate Jordan's debt crisis, and this is likely to spark a new wave of protests.

Morocco

Morocco is a constitutional monarchy and the king holds considerable executive powers. Following his ascension in 1999, King Mohammed VI initiated political reforms and launched socio-economic development projects, which inspired hopes for an era of democratization and prosperity.¹⁶¹ However, after uprisings in 2011, the monarchy has reversed much political liberalization and tightened its hold on the public space through repression of dissent.

Despite the multiparty system, the monarchy wields substantial political power. It controls the highly fragmented political scene, often playing political forces against each other. The king decides the strategic orientation of the country, constraining elected officials' ability to shape policy. The government is often reduced to day-to-day administration, exposing it to popular discontent. The main opposition, the Islamist Parti de la justice et du développement (PJD, Justice and Development Party), won successive parliamentary elections in 2011 and 2016 and sought to redefine politics. However, the monarchy has sought to capitalize on the PJD's internal divisions while supporting pro-palace parties such as the Rassemblement National des Indépendants (RNI, National Rally of Independents).¹⁶²

Political and socio-economic challenges in Morocco create conditions for tense state–society relations. Moroccans consider the economy, widespread corruption, and dismal infrastructure and services to be the biggest problems. The inability of successive governments to alleviate poverty and reduce inequalities

¹⁵⁸ Al Jazeera, 'Jordan teachers end four-week strike in pay deal with government', 6 Oct. 2019.

¹⁵⁹ Schwedler, J., 'Routines and ruptures in anti-Israeli protests in Jordan', eds F. Volpi and J. M. Jasper, *Microfoundations of the Arab Uprisings: Mapping Interactions between Regimes and Protesters* (Amsterdam University Press: Amsterdam, 2018), pp. 67–88.

¹⁶⁰ Younes, A., 'Jordan imposes state of emergency to curb coronavirus pandemic', Al Jazeera, 17 Mar. 2020.

¹⁶¹ Feuer, S. and Ayadi, R., 'Twenty years under King Mohammed VI (part 1): Domestic developments', PolicyWatch no. 3155, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 25 July 2019.

¹⁶² Fakir, I., *Morocco's Islamist Party: Redefining Politics Under Pressure* (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace: Washington, DC, Dec. 2017).

has undermined faith in public institutions. Trust in the government has declined over recent years, especially among the young and educated.¹⁶³

The 20 February Movement of 2011, part of the wider Arab Spring, was the most significant challenge to the king. Protesters called for political and social reforms and better living conditions. To prevent the escalation of protests, the monarchy quickly announced constitutional reforms and the government increased subsidies for basic commodities. Simultaneously, the monarchy sought to marginalize the movement, claiming it wanted complete political change.¹⁶⁴ It further weakened the movement by organizing counter-protests and co-opting its key leaders. Once the monarchy had secured its positions, greater repression was used against the activists, resulting in clashes between security forces and protesters. Fragmentation and divergences between Islamist and leftist groups also led to the eventual decline of the 20 February Movement.¹⁶⁵

In October 2016 the death of Mouhcine Fikri, a fish seller crushed in a rubbish truck while trying to retrieve goods confiscated by the police, sparked large protests in the Rif region of northern Morocco.¹⁶⁶ The protests denouncing public officials' abuse of authority and disregard for the dignity of Moroccan citizens soon spread across the country. The protests eventually transformed into a popular movement known as the Hirak al-Rif (Rif Movement). The politicization of the Amazigh (Berber) identity provided a basis for mobilization in the Rif, a long marginalized region where dissent has often been repressed.¹⁶⁷ From June 2017 violent clashes between protesters and the police erupted following the arrest of key figures of the Hirak al-Rif, many of whom were given long prison sentences for their participation in the protests.¹⁶⁸ The state responded with promises of reconciliation and development initiatives, but the monarchy blamed the government for the situation in the Rif and dismissed several ministers and officials.¹⁶⁹ In April 2019, after an appeals court upheld the long prison sentences, thousands of protesters demanded the release of the political prisoners, criticizing the use of the justice system to silence dissent.¹⁷⁰ Similar protests occurred in 2017 in the mining city of Jerada after the death of two coalminers in a clandestine mine.¹⁷¹ Throughout 2019 teachers protested in Rabat over the pay and poor job

¹⁶³ Arab Barometer V, *Morocco Country Report* (Arab Barometer: Princeton, NJ, 2019).

¹⁶⁴ Badran, S. Z., 'Demobilising the February 20 Movement in Morocco: Regime strategies during the Arab Spring', *Journal of North African Studies*, vol. 25, no. 4 (2020), pp. 1–25.

¹⁶⁵ Rachidi, I., 'Inside the movement: What is left of Morocco's February 20?', *Middle East Eye*, 26 Feb. 2015.

¹⁶⁶ Fakir, I., 'A Bouazizi moment?', Diwan, Carnegie Middle East Center, 3 Nov. 2016.

¹⁶⁷ Suárez-Collado, A., "'Le temps des cerises" in Rif: Analysis of a year of protests in northern Morocco', Barcelona Centre for International Affairs (CIDOB) Notes Internacionales no. 184, Nov. 2017.

¹⁶⁸ Kabbadj, O., 'De 20 ans de prison ferme pour Nasser Zafzafi à 1 an pour les autres détenus' [From 20 years in prison for Nasser Zafzafi to 1 year for the other detainees], *TelQuel*, 26 June 2018.

¹⁶⁹ Lamlili, N., 'Maroc: Mohammed VI limoge plusieurs ministres à la suite de la contestation dans le Rif' [Morocco: Mohammed VI dismisses several ministers following protests in the Rif], *Jeune Afrique*, 24 Oct. 2017.

¹⁷⁰ Agence France-Presse, 'Des milliers de manifestants réclament la libération des détenus du Hirak' [Thousands of demonstrators demand the release of Hirak detainees], *TelQuel*, 22 Apr. 2019.

¹⁷¹ *TelQuel*, 'Les promesses de l'Etat pour mettre fin à la contestation à Jerada' [The state's promises to end the Jerada protest], 16 Jan. 2018.

security of young teachers on fixed-term contracts (see figure 2.2). No compromise was reached and a countrywide strike scheduled for the end of March 2020 did not take place due to the COVID-19 pandemic.¹⁷²

The Moroccan state's response to protests often consists of a combination of appeasement and repression. To prevent the escalation of popular mobilization, the authorities make promises to address the demands of the protesters, often announcing development projects and holding some officials accountable for the deteriorated situation. However, this initial response is often followed by a crackdown on protests and the prosecution of key figures. The demands of recent protests have been modest compared to those of 2011, focusing almost exclusively on socio-economic grievances. Yet the state has been more disposed to use repression in the peripheral regions of Morocco, which indicates that it has adapted after the 2011 crisis and tightened its grip over society by shrinking the public space.

In response to the spread of COVID-19, Morocco declared a state of emergency and imposed a strict lockdown enforced by the police and the military.¹⁷³ The government wanted to pass a controversial law to limit freedom of expression and the use of social media, which was eventually dropped after widespread opposition.¹⁷⁴ The heavy economic losses incurred by Morocco during the pandemic suggest that its economic prospects are grim.¹⁷⁵ This will exacerbate existing tensions between state and society, potentially sparking fresh protests.

Palestinian territories

The decades-long Israeli–Palestinian conflict and the limited statehood of the Palestinian National Authority make it difficult to assess governance and state–society relations in the Palestinian territories. This difficulty is further compounded by the rift between Fatah and Hamas—the two largest Palestinian political movements—following the latter's victory in the 2006 parliamentary elections. The elections revealed both widespread frustration with Fatah's leadership and the ability of Hamas to mobilize its extensive social welfare networks to garner support.¹⁷⁶ The tensions culminated in Hamas taking control of the Gaza Strip and establishing a government there separate from the Fatah-dominated Palestinian Authority Government in the West Bank.

The powers of the Palestinian Authority are considerably curtailed by Israel's presence in the West Bank, while the rift with Hamas has undermined its already

¹⁷² Medias24, 'Enseignants des Académies: Six jours de grève en mars, le ministère réagit' [Academy teachers: Six days of strikes in March, the ministry reacts], 24 Feb. 2020.

¹⁷³ *L'Opinion* (Rabat), 'Grande raffe du Coronavirus: Plus de 30.000 personnes arrêtées pour non-respect de l'état d'urgence' [Major Coronavirus round-up: More than 30 000 people arrested for non-compliance with the state of emergency], 13 Apr. 2020.

¹⁷⁴ Khetrou, K., 'Loi 22.20: Le gouvernement se résout à reporter l'examen du texte' [Bill 22.20: Government decides to defer consideration of the text], *Hespress*, 7 May 2020.

¹⁷⁵ El Kanabi, M. J., 'Benchaaboun: Le Maroc perd 1 milliard dhs par jour de confinement' [Benchaaboun: Morocco loses 1 billion dirhams per day of containment], *Hespress*, 19 May 2020.

¹⁷⁶ Saarela, S., 'The victory of Hamas in 2006 legislative elections and the failure of the world to react—Mapping the Fatah–Hamas conflict', University of Kent, Conflict Analysis Research Centre (CARC), 18 Mar. 2018.

weak and dysfunctional institutional structures. The Palestinian Legislative Council, for example, has not convened since 2007, and no elections have been held since 2006. In Gaza, a land, air and sea blockade imposed by Israel and Egypt since 2007 has devastated the economy, causing a severe humanitarian crisis. Moreover, due to Hamas's designation as a terrorist organization, many countries and donors have provided humanitarian assistance only to the West Bank.¹⁷⁷

As a consequence, neither government has been able to provide adequate services, although the situation is more precarious in Gaza than in the West Bank. The unemployment rate in Gaza (an estimated 45 per cent) is three times that of the West Bank (15 per cent).¹⁷⁸ However, the level of trust in government institutions is much lower in the West Bank (27 per cent) than in Gaza (42 per cent), reflecting a crisis of legitimacy in the political elites and public frustration towards them.¹⁷⁹ Both administrations have little tolerance for dissent, and Palestinians are alienated from political participation while political leaders have consolidated power. They have repressed opponents and critics through intimidation, unlawful detention and torture. The two governments' respective security forces have repeatedly targeted each other's supporters on charges of inciting 'sectarian strife' and 'insulting authorities'.¹⁸⁰

Palestinian protests against Israel have been ongoing since the latter's creation in 1948, and they have routinely resulted in bloody clashes with Israeli forces. In March 2018 protests along the Gaza–Israel border, known as the Great March of Return, called for the right for Palestinian refugees to return to the lands and homes of their ancestors. The protests began as peaceful rallies but soon turned violent, with hundreds killed and thousands wounded by March 2019.¹⁸¹ Palestinians also protested against US President Trump's proposed peace plan in 2020 (see figure 2.2) and the decision to relocate the US embassy to Jerusalem in 2018.¹⁸²

In addition, in 2011–12 Palestinians staged several protests against poor socio-economic conditions across the territories. Protesters in the West Bank demanded the resignation of the prime minister, Salam Fayyad.¹⁸³ The Palestinian Authority appeased the protests with salary increases and cuts in fuel prices.¹⁸⁴ In late 2018 and early 2019 Palestinians in the West Bank protested against a social security law that required private sector workers to contribute to social protection

¹⁷⁷ Brown, N. J., *Time to Rethink, But Not Abandon, International Aide to Palestinians*, Working paper (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace: Washington, DC, Dec. 2018).

¹⁷⁸ Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, 'The labour force survey results 2019', 13 Feb. 2020.

¹⁷⁹ Arab Barometer V, *Palestine Country Report* (Arab Barometer: Princeton, NJ, 2019), pp. 8–9.

¹⁸⁰ Human Rights Watch (HRW), *Two Authorities, One Way, Zero Dissent: Arbitrary Arrest & Torture Under the Palestinian Authority & Hamas* (HRW: New York, 23 Oct. 2018).

¹⁸¹ Fayyad, H., 'Gaza's Great March of Return protests explained', Al Jazeera, 30 Mar. 2019.

¹⁸² *Asharq Al-Awsat*, 'Palestinians protest against Trump's Middle East peace plan', 29 Jan. 2020; and Holmes, O. and Balousha, H., 'Israel faces outcry over Gaza killings during Jerusalem embassy protests', *The Guardian*, 15 May 2018.

¹⁸³ Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 'The Palestinian protests of September 2012: The birth of a social protest movement', 17 Sep. 2012.

¹⁸⁴ BBC, 'Palestinian PM unveils measures to calm protests', 11 Sep. 2012.

benefits.¹⁸⁵ They saw the proposal as an additional burden. After months of protests, Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas ordered the suspension of the controversial law but stated that dialogue would continue over contested parts.¹⁸⁶ Meanwhile in Gaza, the Hamas government faced its most serious challenge when protests erupted in March 2019 demanding employment opportunities and better living conditions. The protests were repressed by the Hamas security forces, which arrested and beat protesters and reportedly fired live ammunition into the air.¹⁸⁷

Although protesters have occasionally obtained some small concessions, the trend in the Palestinian territories is that protests have little influence on the social contract underpinning state–society relations, precisely because the state is effectively a divided and inherently weak quasi-state. In theory, the Palestinian Authority was supposed to bring the Palestinian people a step closer to statehood by consolidating good governance and democratic politics. In practice, however, the governments in the West Bank and Gaza have both developed authoritarian features that limit the ability of Palestinians to challenge the social contract—a social contract that is already troubled by the realities of Israeli occupation and the asymmetrical power relations between Israel and the Palestinians.

The international community has played a central, albeit ambiguous, role in shaping state–society relations in the Palestinian territories. This role has oscillated between a focus on humanitarian aid and democratic norms at times and a focus on maintaining security interests at other times, as illustrated by the international refusal to accept Hamas’s 2006 election victory in a largely democratic vote.

The response to the COVID-19 pandemic has differed between the West Bank and Gaza. Whereas the Palestinian Authority declared a state of emergency and ordered a strict lockdown in the West Bank, Hamas closed public spaces but did not impose severe restrictions on movement.¹⁸⁸ However, concerns about the spread of the virus prompted the cancellation of mass demonstrations along the Gaza–Israel border that were supposed to commemorate the second anniversary of the Great March of Return protests and Land Day (30 March). In both Gaza and the West Bank, street mobilizations were replaced by balcony protests and online activism.¹⁸⁹ In general, COVID-19 has made an already perilous socio-economic situation worse in both parts of the Palestinian territories and has emphasized their vulnerabilities and economic dependence on Israel and foreign aid.

¹⁸⁵ Ashly, J., “‘We want it cancelled’: Palestinians protest social security law”, *Al Jazeera*, 16 Nov. 2018.

¹⁸⁶ Middle East Eye, ‘Mahmoud Abbas suspends PA’s controversial social security law’, 28 Jan. 2019.

¹⁸⁷ Knell, Y., ‘Gaza economic protests expose cracks in Hamas’s rule’, *BBC*, 18 Mar. 2019.

¹⁸⁸ al-Mughrabi, N. and Sawafta, A., ‘Lockdown in West Bank, crowds in Gaza: Palestinians divided over coronavirus’, *Reuters*, 9 Apr. 2020.

¹⁸⁹ Masrawa, L., ‘Coronavirus: Palestinians cancel Land Day demonstrations for the first time’, *Middle East Eye*, 30 Mar. 2020.

Tunisia

In 2011 a popular uprising ended the 23-year authoritarian rule of President Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali.¹⁹⁰ The protests had initially been driven by socio-economic grievances—inspired by the suicide of a despairing fruit seller in the city of Sidi Bouzid in central Tunisia—but they quickly expanded to include democracy, human rights, political participation and government change. Tunisia is the only country in MENA where the 2011 protests resulted in lasting democratic change and a significant redevelopment of the relationship between state and society. Nevertheless, the transition has been tumultuous, with a low point in 2014 when a series of political assassinations raised fears of civil conflict. To prevent further polarization and stave off unrest, following the presidential and parliamentary elections in October–November the Islamist Ennahda party and the secularist Nidaa Tounes agreed to a coalition government. In July 2016 this was expanded to a full a national unity government with the inclusion of opposition parties.¹⁹¹

In October 2019, following the death of President Beji Caid Essebsi of Nidaa Tounes, Tunisians elected Kaïs Saïed as president. Saïed ran as an independent on a minimalist electoral campaign. His election signalled the continued eagerness of Tunisians to dismantle the political establishment.¹⁹² In the 2019 parliamentary elections, Ennahda was the largest party, with 52 of the 217 seats, followed by the newly created liberal Qalb Tounes party, with 38 seats. Nidaa Tounes, the largest party in 2014, incurred major losses, winning just 3 seats.¹⁹³ After a long and difficult process, a new government was installed in February 2020, bringing together Ennahda and the secular-liberal Tahya Tounes, but excluding Qalb Tounes on the grounds that it was not sufficiently committed to the revolution's social and democratic goals.¹⁹⁴

The parliament is constrained by power arrangements and consensus deals between the leaders of the major political parties. Tensions within the coalition government have slowed the implementation of the reforms introduced in the 2014 Constitution.¹⁹⁵ This has left a considerable discrepancy between the progressive constitution, promising fundamental rights and strong and independent institutions, and the lagging pace of democratic transformation.

Despite the rocky transition, support for democracy remains high. For Tunisians, success hinges on the ability of democratic institutions to address socio-economic challenges. The most important of these challenges is the dire economic situation

¹⁹⁰ Meddeb, H., 'Tunisia's geography of anger: Regional inequalities and the rise of populism', Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Feb. 2020.

¹⁹¹ Yerkes, S. and Ben Yahmed, Z., *Tunisia's Political System: From Stagnation to Competition*, Working paper (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace: Washington, DC, Mar. 2019), pp. 2–3.

¹⁹² Bobin, F., Haddad, M. and Blaise, L., 'Election présidentielle en Tunisie : Kaïs Saïed, ou le nouveau paradigme tunisien' [Presidential election in Tunisia: Kaïs Saïed, or the new Tunisian paradigm], *Le Monde*, 13 Oct. 2019.

¹⁹³ Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), 'Tunisia—Assembly of People's Representatives: Election results 2019', Nov. 2019.

¹⁹⁴ Edroos, F., 'After months of political wrangling, Tunisia's parliament approves new government', *Middle East Eye*, 27 Feb. 2020.

¹⁹⁵ International Crisis Group (ICG), *Stemming Tunisia's Authoritarian Drift*, Middle East and North Africa Report no. 180 (ICG: Brussels, 11 Jan. 2018), p. 10.

(48 per cent), followed by terrorism (13 per cent) and the fight against corruption (12 per cent).¹⁹⁶

The economy has been weak since the 2011 revolution, with slow and unsteady economic growth (1.0 per cent in 2019), a high unemployment rate (15 per cent) and rising inflation (7.6 per cent).¹⁹⁷ Tunisia is also constrained by conditions attached to a \$2.8 billion loan it received from the IMF in 2016, which forced the government to adopt unpopular austerity measures.¹⁹⁸ These socio-economic problems have been aggravated by corruption, undermining public trust. Anti-corruption measures announced since 2011 have largely remained unenforced, amplifying the public perception of impunity and government ineffectiveness.¹⁹⁹

The threat of terrorism and violent extremism has been another considerable challenge for stability in Tunisia. This problem has been made worse by youth radicalization and the scores of jihadi fighters returning from abroad.²⁰⁰

The socio-economic grievances that sparked the 2011 revolution linger as the government continues to struggle with economic recovery and as disenchantment continues to grow over the failure of the political elites to deliver on the promises of the revolution. Thus, street protests have been common. In January 2019 Tunisia's largest labour union, the Union Générale Tunisienne du Travail (UGTT, Tunisian General Labour Union), staged a countrywide strike to exert pressure on the government to increase the salaries of public employees.²⁰¹ In April demonstrators took to the streets against the government's decision to raise fuel prices.²⁰² In November and December more protests broke out after a young man in Sidi Bouzid set himself on fire out of despair, evoking the incident that triggered the 2011 uprisings. Clashes between the protesters and the security forces ensued.²⁰³ In 2020 protests in the central provinces attest to the population's disenchantment with successive government's failure to reduce inequalities and the gap with the more affluent coastal areas.²⁰⁴

Protests in Tunisia have generally been peaceful, and the government's response has been a combination of repression and concessions. Some critics argue that the state of emergency (in place since 2015) and a controversial counterterrorism law are used with the specific purpose of banning gatherings.²⁰⁵ Yet, when the situation has been deemed too volatile, the government has granted concessions, which has contributed to the preservation of the fragile progress achieved. This has been despite the challenges and amid the emergence of a discourse that

¹⁹⁶ Arab Barometer V, *Tunisia Country Report* (Arab Barometer: Princeton, NJ, 2019).

¹⁹⁷ World Bank Data, 21 June 2020.

¹⁹⁸ Yerkes, S. and Mighri, H., 'Tunisia's perennial priorities', Diwan, Carnegie Middle East Center, 20 Mar. 2020.

¹⁹⁹ Kukutschka and Vrushi (note 78).

²⁰⁰ Zelin, A. Y., *Tunisian Foreign Fighters in Iraq and Syria*, Washington Institute Policy Notes no. 5 (Washington Institute for Near East Policy: Washington, DC, 2018).

²⁰¹ Amara, T., 'Big strike paralyzes Tunisia, thousands protest over pay row', Reuters, 17 Jan. 2019.

²⁰² Middle East Monitor, 'Tunisia protests against "government policies"', Middle East Monitor, 5 Apr. 2019.

²⁰³ Amara, T., 'Tunisia's police and demonstrators clash in third night of protests', Reuters, 2 Dec. 2019.

²⁰⁴ Meddeb (note 190).

²⁰⁵ Freedom House, 'Freedom in the World 2020: Tunisia', 2020.

suggests that the democratic shift has weakened institutions and that returning to authoritarianism is necessary to navigate the crisis.²⁰⁶

To contain the spread of COVID-19, Tunisia announced a countrywide curfew in March 2020 and the army was tasked to enforce the lockdown. However, under the burden of the economic impact of the pandemic, in May–June hundreds of people defied the lockdown to protest against the loss of livelihood and to demand financial support and fewer restrictions (see figure 2.2).²⁰⁷ COVID-19 is likely to fuel protest. It will have a long-lasting effect on Tunisia: GDP is expected to decline by 4.3 per cent in 2020 with the greatest recession in decades looming.²⁰⁸ To help Tunisia cope with the repercussions of COVID-19, the IMF has approved an emergency loan of \$745 million while the EU has granted €250 million (\$300 million) in aid.²⁰⁹ While this financial support is vital, the international community will need to find ways of support that go beyond economic assistance.

Scarce protests

Kuwait

Kuwait is a monarchy, like its neighbours in the GCC, ruled by the Al-Sabah family. It has a hybrid system of governance: unlike some of its GCC counterparts, it incorporates elements of a semi-democratic system through political participation in its parliamentary elections. Nonetheless, the emir has control over the cabinet and the National Assembly.

As a result of the Arab Spring, Kuwait reformed its electoral law to reduce the number of constituencies for elections to the National Assembly. Some argue that the purpose of this reform was to end tribal influence.²¹⁰ These events were a continuation of events since late-2010 and early 2011, where the prime minister, Sheikh Nasser al-Mohammad al-Ahmad—a member of the Al-Sabah royal family—faced questioning in the National Assembly over the state’s use of force in breaking up a meeting of academics and parliamentarians on alleged constitutional violations by the government.²¹¹ In the National Assembly, where there are no official political parties, the opposition political factions (Islamists, liberals and tribal factions) have collectively taken the lead in questioning the prime minister.

The 2011–12 unrest led to the early dissolution of the National Assembly and elections in February 2012. However, in June the Constitutional Court ruled that the new, opposition-dominated parliament was unlawful and reinstated

²⁰⁶ International Crisis Group (note 195).

²⁰⁷ Barbarani, S., ‘“We need food”: Tunisians struggle under coronavirus lockdown’, Al Jazeera, 11 Apr. 2020.

²⁰⁸ International Monetary Fund (IMF), ‘IMF Executive Board approves a US\$745 million disbursement to Tunisia to address the COVID-19 pandemic’, Press Release no. 20/144, 10 Apr. 2020.

²⁰⁹ Middle East Monitor, ‘Tunisia gets 250 million euros from EU to tackle coronavirus impact’, 29 Mar. 2020.

²¹⁰ DaziHeni, F., ‘The Arab Spring impact on Kuwaiti “exceptionalism”’, *Arabian Humanities*, vol. 5, no 4 (June 2015).

²¹¹ Diwan, K. S., ‘Kuwait: Too much politics, or not enough?’, *Foreign Policy*, 10 Jan. 2011.

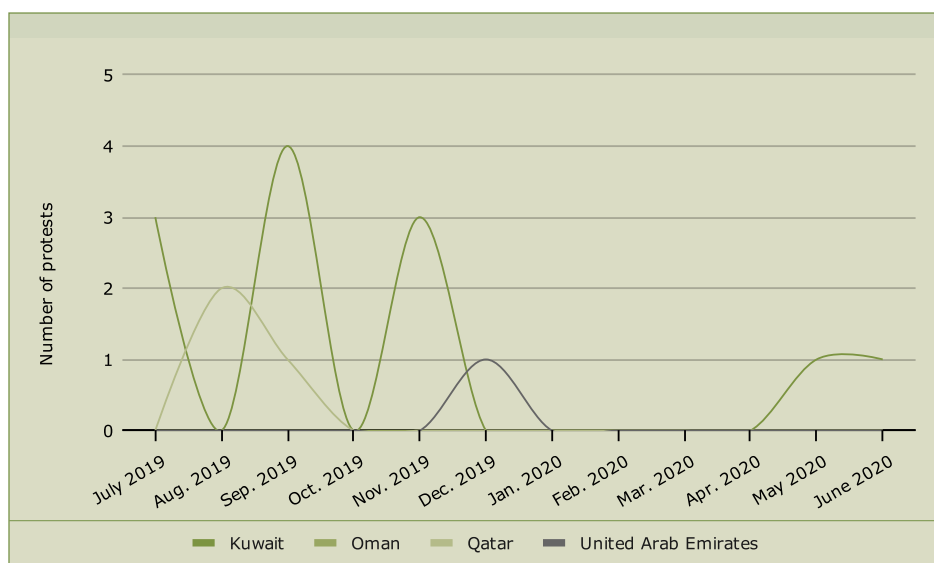


Figure 2.3. Number of protests in countries with scarce protests, June 2019–June 2020

Notes: Figures are numbers of protest events and do not relate to the scale of the protest. Oman recorded zero protests during this period.

Source: Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) database, <<https://acleddata.com/dashboard/>>.

the previous pro-government membership. This ruling is believed to have been influenced by the strong grip of the monarchy in order to circumvent any plausible dissent, particularly in regard to tribal expression of grievances and political participation.²¹² Subsequent protests have been suppressed by the authorities and large gatherings have been banned.

Although Kuwait is seen as being more liberal than its GCC peers, essential elements of an inclusive society—such as rule of law, political accountability and regulatory quality—declined over the period 2009–19, whereas government constraints increased. However, levels of government transparency remained at more or less the same.²¹³

Amid the challenges in the region surrounding Kuwait and in anticipation of the parliamentary elections due in 2020, Kuwait still has a long way to go in delivering proportional representation for its citizens. Although some reforms have been adopted, such as the reduction in the number of electoral districts, significant changes to the social contract have been prevented by the same ruling elites that have been in power since Kuwait gained independence.

In response to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, following the imposition of a lockdown and with plummeting oil revenues, Kuwait has proposed larger investment in its own agricultural sector to strengthen its capacity.²¹⁴ Kuwait has

²¹² BBC, 'Kuwait protest at court ruling dissolving parliament', 27 June 2012.

²¹³ Legatum Institute, '2019 Legatum Prosperity Index: Kuwait', 2019.

²¹⁴ Oxford Business Group, 'How Covid-19 is honing Kuwait's focus on food security', 4 May 2020.

also provided broader stimulus packages to support its small- and medium-sized enterprises and businesses.²¹⁵ The approach of the government has meant that there have been few recent protests (see figure 2.3) and this is unlikely to change.

Oman

Oman is an absolute monarchy. The only role of its bicameral parliament, the Council of Oman, is to act as an advisory body for the executive, headed by the Sultan. Oman has no constitution other than a royal decree, known as the Basic Law or White Book. The White Book underwent a number of amendments in response to protests in 2011.²¹⁶ Citizens of Oman have had a relatively uncontested relationship with the Sultan, but protesters have criticized corruption and lack of job opportunities.²¹⁷ Oman depends heavily on oil production, which left it particularly vulnerable in 2014 when falling oil prices reduced Oman's economic growth.²¹⁸

The death in January 2020 of Sultan Qaboos bin Said Al Said, who had ruled Oman since 1970, and the accession of Sultan Haitham bin Tariq Al Said marked a new era for Oman. This change has also been influenced by fluctuations in the oil price and the poor state of Oman's finances, which are forcing it to cut public expenditure and impose austerity measures.²¹⁹

Protests in early 2011 focused on questions related to the proceeds from oil and gas and promised economic growth.²²⁰ Protesters across the country, especially the youth, called for political reforms and better economic opportunities. As a result, Sultan Qaboos reshuffled the cabinet and promised 50 000 jobs and unemployment benefits.²²¹ The number of protests remains limited in Oman (see figure 2.3). However, employment opportunities are a priority and persistent problems related to Oman's sovereign ratings and the state's debt could lead to a return of protests.

Changes in oil prices paired with the repercussions of the response to the COVID-19 pandemic may have a further impact on Oman, particularly on its attempt to diversify its economy.²²² State–society relations in Oman depend on economic opportunities, which could lead to further protest, particularly as Oman begins to levy more taxes and limits the financial benefits on which these relations were previously built.

Qatar

The small state of Qatar is ruled by the al-Thani dynasty. Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani became emir in 2013 after his father's abdication. The emir, who wields

²¹⁵ Oxford Business Group, 'Kuwait's coordinated response to Covid-19', 16 Apr. 2020.

²¹⁶ [Royal Decree no. 99/2011 amending some provisions of the Basic Law of the State], Omani Ministry of Legal Affairs, 19 Oct. 2011, (in Arabic).

²¹⁷ Spinner, J., 'Oman's days of rage', 28 Feb. 2011, *Foreign Policy*.

²¹⁸ Reuters, 'S&P cuts Oman rating deeper into junk, trims Bahrain's outlook', 28 Mar. 2020.

²¹⁹ Castelier, S., 'Is Oman's model of governance about to shift?', 9 Apr. 2020, *Al-Monitor*.

²²⁰ Al Jazeera, 'Deaths in Oman protests', 27 Feb. 2011.

²²¹ al-Shaibany, S., 'Protesters across Oman demand reform, jobs', Reuters, 4 Mar. 2011.

²²² Sievers, M. J., 'Oman's handling of the coronavirus', *MENASource*, Atlantic Council, 3 Apr. 2020.

absolute power, has generally appointed his relatives to preside over government and the state administration. The family's monopoly of power creates a system where outsiders and opposition forces are denied political space. Political parties are not allowed.

Qatar is the world's largest exporter of liquified natural gas and a major oil producer. It has the largest hydrocarbon reserves per capita in the Gulf, which enables it to extend significant benefits to its citizens: free education, healthcare and subsidized products. However, citizens make up less than 15 per cent of the resident population. A vast majority of Qatari nationals (84 per cent according to some estimates) are public sector employees who receive relatively high salaries.²²³ In contrast, non-citizens—particularly the poorer and low-skilled migrant workers—tend to be excluded from social protection schemes and are often victims of abuse and exploitation. In response to international criticism, Qatar has promised to reform its labour laws to improve the conditions of expatriate workers.²²⁴

Qatar has taken steps to reduce its dependence on hydrocarbon revenues with economic diversification plans that include developing tourism, financial services and logistics. It has also heavily invested abroad, mainly in the USA and Europe, but also in Asia and Africa.²²⁵ Nonetheless, oil and gas revenues still constitute a substantial share of government income. The 2014 collapse in oil prices slowed Qatar's economic growth, prompting spending cuts, although the impact on Qatar's economy has been milder than in other Gulf countries.²²⁶ In 2016 Qatar reported its first budget deficit in more than a decade.

In 2017 Saudi Arabia, followed by other GCC countries, initiated an economic and diplomatic embargo on Qatar. Saudi Arabia and its allies accused Qatar of supporting terrorism through its backing of the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamist movements. The tensions started in 2011 when Qatar adopted a radically different attitude during the Arab Spring by appearing to support demands for political change in several MENA countries, including its GCC allies. Having itself remained largely immune to popular mobilization—owing to its political stability and considerable economic strength—Qatar saw the protests as an opportunity to increase its influence in MENA and diversify its alliances by pursuing a more independent foreign policy and eschewing Saudi Arabia's ascendancy. The blockade forced Qatar to find alternative suppliers and supply routes for food and consumer products. So far, Qatar has been able to withstand the blockade financially, and it has even reduced its deficit despite the crisis.²²⁷ However, the

²²³ Gross, S. and Ghafar, A. A., *The Shifting Energy Landscape and the Gulf Economies' Diversification Challenge* (Brookings Institution: Washington, DC, Dec. 2019).

²²⁴ Al Jazeera, 'UN agency welcomes "milestone" in Qatar's kafala labour reforms', 16 Jan. 2020.

²²⁵ McSparren, J., Besada, H. and Saravade, V., *Qatar's Global Investment Strategy for Diversification and Security in the Post-Financial Crisis Era*, Centre on Governance Research Paper no. 02/2017 (University of Ottawa, Centre on Governance: Ottawa, May 2017).

²²⁶ Cafiero, G., 'Qatar cuts spending to cope with low oil prices', Middle East Institute, 1 Mar. 2016.

²²⁷ Ulrichsen, K. C., 'How Qatar weathered the Gulf crisis: Putting pressure on Doha didn't work', *Foreign Affairs*, 11 June 2018.

diplomatic and geopolitical impacts of the blockade have been more profound, revealing a deep rift among the GCC members.

Demonstrations and protest movements are unusual in Qatar (see figure 2.3). The few that did occur in 2019 were staged by migrant workers who, despite the difficulty of protest, have demonstrated against discrimination, poor working conditions and abuse. These protests happened despite expatriate workers being denied political rights. They were mainly peaceful and the Qatari authorities seemingly refrained from repressing the migrant workers—at least not collectively or openly.²²⁸ Following strikes in August 2019, the authorities announced that the striking expatriate workers had been paid their outstanding salaries and that the employers had been held accountable for their violations.²²⁹

In contrast, Qatari nationals do not have the socio-economic grievances that typically underlie and drive social movements and protests elsewhere. However, Qataris who aspire to democratic change and political participation have indeed faced repression.²³⁰ The state allows no space for public political debate and has little tolerance for criticism of the ruling family. Those who have dared to challenge it have often seen their citizenship revoked. For instance, in 2017 several members of the al-Murrah tribe, which has historically been close to Saudi Arabia by virtue of extensive kinship relations, were stripped of their citizenship for opposing Qatar's foreign policy and its attitude towards its Gulf neighbours.²³¹

The blockade on Qatar and the attempts to isolate it politically and economically have resulted in a surge in national pride and increased support for the al-Thani family, with the emir being viewed as a symbol of resistance and unity.²³² It appears that as long as Qatar continues to use its income from hydrocarbons and its large sovereign wealth fund to provide for its citizens, the prevailing state–society relations will persist.²³³

To curb the spread of COVID-19, Qatar closed public spaces and imposed a total police-enforced lockdown on its industrial area, which is home to thousands of migrant workers. However, in a further demonstration of the discrepancy in treatment of citizens and non-citizens, Qatar reportedly failed to protect expatriate workers, who tend to live in overcrowded dormitories and who reportedly continued to work despite the lockdown.²³⁴

United Arab Emirates

The UAE is a federation of seven emirates, each ruled by a dynastic family. The ruler of Abu Dhabi is the head of state, while the ruler of Dubai appoints and

²²⁸ France 24, 'Rare protest in Qatar over unpaid wages', 23 May 2020.

²²⁹ Ullah, A., 'Migrant workers in Qatar win salaries and concessions after strike action', *Middle East Eye*, 20 Aug. 2019.

²³⁰ *The Economist*, 'Qatar, the Gulf emirate famed for openness, is silencing critics', 13 Feb. 2020.

²³¹ Alkhereiji, M., 'Qatari government revokes citizenships in crackdown on dissent', *Arab Weekly*, 8 Oct. 2017.

²³² Milada, M., 'Tamim Al Majd: A symbol of pride & defiance', *The Peninsula* (Doha), 18 Dec. 2017.

²³³ Al Arabiya, 'Here are the top 10 sovereign wealth funds in the Arab world', 29 Aug. 2019.

²³⁴ Pattison, P. and Sedhai R., 'Covid-19 lockdown turns Qatar's largest migrant camp into "virtual prison"', *The Guardian*, 20 Mar. 2020.

presides over the government. The central and most powerful organ is the Federal Supreme Council, comprised of the rulers of the seven emirates. Members of the ruling families hold top positions in the institutions of the federal government and the governments of the emirates.²³⁵

The Federal National Council (FNC), the UAE's parliament, consists of 40 members representing the seven emirates. Half are directly appointed by the rulers and the other 20 are indirectly elected by an electoral college of about 340 000 handpicked citizens.²³⁶ Since political parties are banned, candidates for the FNC run as independents. The FNC remains unrepresentative and powerless as it can neither legislate nor scrutinize the government.

The UAE is a rentier state with significant reliance on oil revenues.²³⁷ Abu Dhabi has the largest reserves of oil, while Dubai has successfully diversified its economy by integrating itself into the globalized world economy. Income from oil is used to provide citizens with generous welfare, including access to free healthcare, education and services, and even direct cash payments. Employment in the bloated state bureaucracy and state-owned enterprises represent another way to distribute the oil wealth while concurrently giving citizens a stake in and an attachment to the state. The UAE's dependence on migrant labour has resulted in its citizens being outnumbered by foreigners, who represent nearly 80 per cent of the resident population. Migrants have virtually no prospect of gaining citizenship, and poorer expatriate workers remain vulnerable to exploitation and discrimination.²³⁸

The Arab Spring uprisings did not spread to the UAE. There are several reasons for this. First, the state is based on intricate kin networks that tie many citizens to the ruling families and thus ensure a high degree of loyalty and allegiance.²³⁹ Second, the social contract underpinning state–society relations—which secures loyalty in exchange for generous welfare and no taxes—leaves no real socio-economic grievances or incentives to challenge the system. Those with actual economic grievances and incentives for dissent are the expatriates, who are given only limited rights. The absence of protests does not, however, mean that opposition and dissent are non-existent.²⁴⁰ Several activists have challenged the government by demanding extended political rights and denouncing systematic violations of human rights and pervasive discrimination. However, the response has consistently been to silence dissent. Many activists have been arbitrarily

²³⁵ Diwan, K. S., *New Generation Royals and Succession Dynamics in the Gulf States*, Issue Paper no. 2 (Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington: Washington, DC, 21 Mar. 2017).

²³⁶ Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), 'United Arab Emirates—Federal National Council: Election results 2019', Nov. 2019.

²³⁷ Herb, M. and Lynch, M., *The Politics of Rentier States in the Gulf*, Project on Middle East Political Science (POMEPS) Studies no. 33 (Elliott School of International Affairs, POMEPS: Washington, DC, Jan. 2019).

²³⁸ Human Rights Watch (HRW), *World Report 2019: Events of 2018* (HRW: New York, 2019), pp. 613–17.

²³⁹ van der Meulen, H., 'The role of tribal and kinship ties in the politics of the United Arab Emirates', Doctoral thesis, Tufts University, Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, 1997.

²⁴⁰ Forstenlechner, I., Rutledge, E. and Alnuaimi, R. S., 'The UAE, the "Arab Spring" and different types of dissent', *Middle East Policy*, vol. 19, no. 4 (Winter 2012), pp. 54–67.

arrested and subjected to solitary confinement in inhumane detention conditions.²⁴¹ The government has also targeted the relatives of dissenters by banning many of them from travelling, preventing them from renewing or obtaining documents, or denying them access to jobs and education. Some have even had their citizenship revoked.²⁴² The response to dissent also explains why protests remain extremely difficult, almost inconceivable, in the UAE (see figure 2.3).

The UAE adopted a range of measures to contain the spread of COVID-19, including imposing a curfew.²⁴³ The interruption of infrastructure projects and the suspension of activity in the tourism and logistics sectors, combined with plummeting oil prices, have had serious repercussions for businesses. It prompted the government to announce financial stimulus packages to protect the economy.²⁴⁴ The pandemic has also highlighted the UAE's vulnerabilities related to food security given its overdependence on imports.²⁴⁵ Despite economic shocks induced by COVID-19, the UAE and the individual emirates retain considerable financial strength, with sovereign wealth funds whose assets are estimated to exceed \$1 trillion.²⁴⁶ The COVID-19 pandemic is thus unlikely to have an impact on state–society relations. Instead, it has provided the UAE with an opportunity to enhance its influence in world politics by assuming the role of foreign aid provider—it has shipped urgent medical supplies to a number of countries, including Iran (despite tense bilateral relations), Italy and Pakistan.²⁴⁷

Highly suppressed protests

Bahrain

Power in Bahrain is concentrated in its royal family, which penetrates all levels of the state through extended kin relations, with family members generally placed in key positions in the state apparatus.²⁴⁸ King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa came to power in 1999, while his uncle, Prince Khalifa bin Salman Al Khalifa, has been Bahrain's prime minister since 1971. While the Al Khalifa dynasty is Sunni, the population is predominantly Shia (70 per cent).²⁴⁹ This has a profound impact on state–society relations, with the ruling family lacking popular legitimacy.

²⁴¹ Amnesty International (note 115), pp. 68–70.

²⁴² Human Rights Watch (HRW), 'UAE: Unrelenting harassment of dissenters' families', 22 Dec. 2019.

²⁴³ Al Jazeera, 'UAE announces \$5,500 fine for coronavirus fake news', 18 Apr. 2020.

²⁴⁴ Reuters, 'As oil prices crash, Saudi, UAE businesses scramble for cash', Al Jazeera, 31 Mar. 2020.

²⁴⁵ Swilam, S. and El Dahan, M., 'UAE adopts law to organize food strategic stocks in emergencies', Reuters, 30 Mar. 2020.

²⁴⁶ Al Arabiya (note 233).

²⁴⁷ Galeeva, D., 'Small states response to COVID-19: View from the UAE', Elliott School of International Affairs, Project on Middle East Political Science (POMEPS), Apr. 2019.

²⁴⁸ Herb, M., *All in the Family: Absolutism, Revolution, and Democracy in the Middle Eastern Monarchies* (SUNY Press: Albany, NY, 1999), p. 109.

²⁴⁹ Louër, L., 'Le soulèvement au Bahreïn' [The uprising in Bahrain], *Tumultes*, nos 38–39 (2012), pp. 213–37, p. 214.

Sectarian divisions have fomented a contentious environment, and the Shia groups constitute the main opposition.²⁵⁰

The Bahraini Parliament has two houses. The king appoints the 40 members of the upper house, the Shura Council. While the 40 members of the lower house, the Council of Representatives, are elected, the elections have been neither free nor fair. They are undermined by systematic exclusion of the opposition and widespread gerrymandering to weaken the Shia community. Political parties are outlawed, but political participation does occur through informal political societies. However, the two main opposition political societies, the Shia Al-Wefaq National Islamic Society and the secularist National Democratic Action Society–Waad were disbanded in 2016 and 2017, respectively, ahead of the 2018 elections.²⁵¹

The prevailing distrust between the Sunni dynasty and the majority Shia population has prompted Bahrain to naturalize and enlist Sunni soldiers, mainly from Pakistan, in large numbers. Consequently, foreign recruits significantly outnumber Bahraini nationals in the security apparatus. Although foreign recruits are common in the GCC states, in Bahrain it is primarily intended to avoid reliance on Shia citizens.²⁵²

Bahrain's welfare state—once generously financed by the revenues of the 1970s oil boom—has now become particularly fragile.²⁵³ This in turn has put the country's rentier social contract to the test and has challenged the monarch's hold on society. Over the past decade, Bahrain has become dependent on financial support from its Gulf neighbours. In 2018, for instance, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and the UAE pledged \$10 billion to bail out the Bahraini Government and help it reduce its soaring public debt.²⁵⁴

When King Hamad assumed power in 1999, he was widely perceived as a reformer committed to a political liberalization programme to transform Bahrain into a constitutional monarchy with an elected parliament.²⁵⁵ The original enthusiasm soon faded following some cosmetic reforms. The stalled reforms renewed sectarian tensions, with Shia communities denouncing political and economic marginalization. Bahrain was the only Gulf state to face mass protests during the Arab Spring. Protestors' demands initially focused on political reform and discrimination against the Shia majority, but they expanded to include calls for complete change. The state responded with force. Saudi Arabia and the UAE sent their militaries to support Bahrain in ending the unrest. The GCC also pledged a \$20 billion aid package to Bahrain and Oman to fund socio-economic policies in a move to calm public discontent.²⁵⁶ The support to Bahrain indicated that the GCC

²⁵⁰ Kasbarian, S. and Mabon, S., 'Contested spaces and sectarian narratives in post-uprising Bahrain', *Global Discourse*, vol. 6, no. 4 (2016), pp. 677–96.

²⁵¹ Freedom House, 'Freedom in the world 2020: Bahrain', 2020.

²⁵² Barany, Z., 'Foreign contract soldiers in the Gulf', Carnegie Middle East Center, 5 Feb. 2020.

²⁵³ Gross and Ghafar (note 223).

²⁵⁴ Barbuscia, D., 'Bahrain promised \$10 billion of support from Gulf neighbours', Reuters, 4 Oct. 2018.

²⁵⁵ Louër, L., 'Bahrain's fragile political reforms', Sada, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 20 Aug. 2008.

²⁵⁶ Nuruzzaman, M., 'Politics, economics and Saudi military intervention in Bahrain', *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, vol. 43, no. 2 (2013), pp. 363–78.

states were concerned that Shia mobilization there, which they claimed had been stirred up by Iran, would incite their own Shia communities to rise up.²⁵⁷

After the 2011 protests the Bahraini Government initiated a national dialogue and established the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry (BICI), indicating the government's readiness to take heed of the protests and improve political inclusion. These initiatives soon came to be seen as providing a mere democratic facade. The national dialogue collapsed in 2014, while many of the BICI's recommendations have been reversed.²⁵⁸ Since the 2011 uprising, dissent has been relentlessly cracked down on and protestors are met with excessive violence. Arbitrary arrests and unlawful detentions are frequent, and the authorities reportedly torture political prisoners.²⁵⁹ The government has also stripped a large number of Bahrainis of their citizenship.²⁶⁰

In February 2018 there were large protests to commemorate the seventh anniversary of the 2011 uprisings.²⁶¹ Although generally peaceful, some of the demonstrations turned violent, as rioters clashed with the security forces. Subsequent protests erupted following the execution of prominent Shia activists—Bahrain reinstated the death penalty in 2017 after a seven-year moratorium.²⁶² In January 2020 two well-known Shia activists who had been arrested in 2014 for their participation in the 2011 uprisings were sentenced to death.²⁶³ Several political opponents are currently on death row.²⁶⁴ In July 2019 protests broke out after the execution of two Shia activist accused of terrorism (see figure 2.4).²⁶⁵

In response to the economic ramifications of the COVID-19 pandemic, the government decided to pay the salaries of a large number of private sector employees for three months, introduced tax breaks, and scrapped utility bills for all citizens and businesses.²⁶⁶ It is unlikely that the pandemic will trigger a new dynamic in Bahrain's state–society relations. Tensions between the population and the state were already high before the pandemic, and they will certainly remain so after it ends. Meanwhile, the state will probably continue to keep a strong grip on society through enhanced policing, surveillance and systematic exclusion of the opposition, but it will also use welfare payments to minimize social discontent. The sustainability of such methods is doubtful given the wider impact of COVID-19 and historically low oil prices.

²⁵⁷ Friedman, B., 'Battle for Bahrain: What one uprising meant for the Gulf states and Iran', *World Affairs*, vol. 174, no. 6 (Mar. Apr. 2012), pp. 74–84.

²⁵⁸ Freedom House (note 251).

²⁵⁹ Human Rights Watch (note 238), pp. 59–64.

²⁶⁰ Middle East Eye, 'Key Bahrain activists not among hundreds having citizenship restored', 29 Apr. 2019.

²⁶¹ Regencia, T., 'Clashes mark anniversary of Bahrain's 2011 uprising', Al Jazeera, 14 Feb. 2018.

²⁶² Human Rights Watch (HRW), 'Bahrain: Suspend death penalty', 15 May 2019.

²⁶³ Middle East Eye, 'Bahrain court reimposes death penalty for two pro-democracy activists', 8 Jan. 2020.

²⁶⁴ Human Rights Watch (note 262).

²⁶⁵ El Yaakoubi, A., 'Renewed unrest grips Bahrain after authorities execute activists', Reuters, 29 July 2019.

²⁶⁶ Middle East Eye, 'Coronavirus: Bahrain to pay private sector salaries for three months', 8 Apr. 2020.

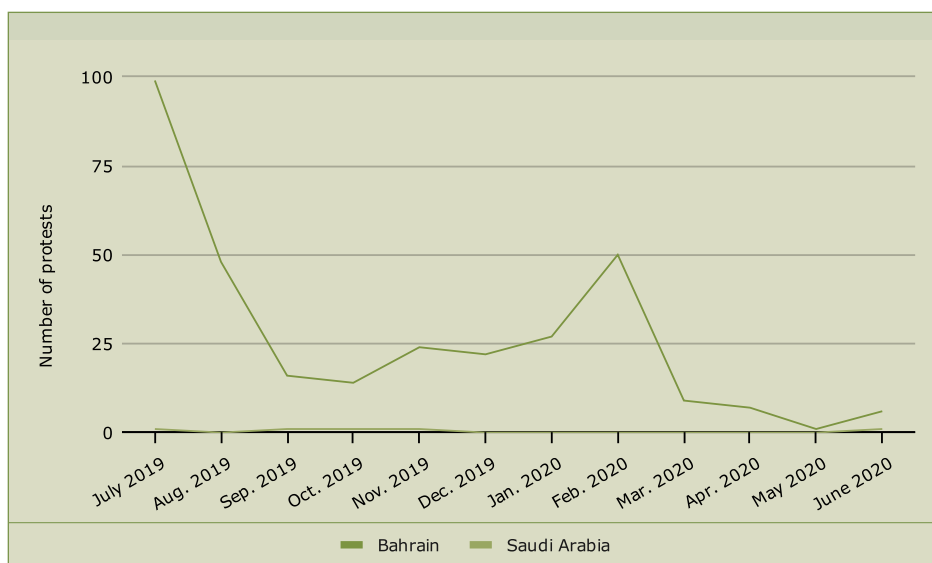


Figure 2.4. Number of protests in countries with highly suppressed protests, June 2019–June 2020

Notes: Figures are numbers of protest events and do not relate to the scale of the protest. Saudi Arabia recorded a total of five protests during this period.

Source: Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) database, <<https://acleddata.com/dashboard/>>.

Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia holds considerable influence in regional and international affairs owing to its geopolitical importance. It is one of the world's largest hydrocarbon producers and exporters.²⁶⁷

The Al Saud dynasty has ruled the kingdom since its foundation. In 2017 King Salman bin Abdulaziz al-Saud appointed his son, Mohammed bin Salman, as crown prince and effective ruler of the country. Saudi Arabia has embarked on diversifying its oil-dependent economy with an ambitious liberalization agenda, which includes a significant social and cultural shift in Saudi Arabian society.²⁶⁸ The modernization programme has improved governance performance ratings. Correspondingly, perceptions of governance performance in areas such as executive constraint, political accountability, rule of law, government integrity, government effectiveness and regulatory quality have all increased. Personal freedom also increased.²⁶⁹ However, there are accusations that the modernization programme is used to mask political oppression.²⁷⁰

Mohammed bin Salman's modernization and cultural liberalization are viewed favourably by many Saudi Arabians, who believe that such reforms help

²⁶⁷ World Bank, 'Country profile: Saudi Arabia', World Development Indicators database.

²⁶⁸ Trofimov, Y., 'A social revolution in Saudi Arabia', *Wall Street Journal*, 15 Nov. 2019.

²⁶⁹ Legatum Institute, '2019 Legatum Prosperity Index: Saudi Arabia', 2019.

²⁷⁰ Aziza, S., 'How Saudi Arabia's reforms mask political oppression', Pulitzer Center, 4 June 2018.

their country to adapt to a globalized world.²⁷¹ The aim of his Saudi Vision 2030 strategic framework is to move away from reliance on oil and minerals, and instead invest in the country's human capital.²⁷² This vision is accompanied by reforms that include lifting the male guardianship on women; allowing women to drive; demoting the once-powerful religious police; and ending capital punishment for minors and flogging.²⁷³ The new economic policies include an obligation for Saudi Arabia-based companies to prioritize recruitment of qualified Saudi Arabians.²⁷⁴ However, the reform has been top-down, rather than a response to calls from the population. Moreover, those who challenge Mohammed bin Salman's rule are dealt with harshly.

Saudi Arabia's Shia minority have long complained about political and economic marginalization and repression. Such complaints were exacerbated by the sectarian tensions that arose when the authorities forcibly countered protests in 2011–12 in Qatif region in the oil-rich Eastern province.²⁷⁵ The protests were seen to threaten national security and were met by force and charges of domestic terrorism. In 2017–19 protests erupted again in Qatif. The security apparatus responded with force and many people were detained and arrested, and many others were either injured or killed in an exchange of force.²⁷⁶ The Saudi Arabian state prides itself as being a unifier against measures that challenge its authority and being able to counter any attempts to jeopardize its security. The monarchy's use of force demonstrated that tolerance towards any form of protest is inconceivable when the state's security is under jeopardy.

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, Saudi Arabia initiated a lockdown of all public spaces. The impact of the outbreak is likely to halt economic activities that are core to Saudi Vision 2030. Paired with the drop in oil prices, Saudi Arabia has curtailed its spending at a time when other major economies have increased it. The resulting austerity measures include a reduction in the stipend paid to government workers and an increase in VAT from 5 per cent to 15 per cent. Thus, the contract on which state–society relations are built is changing. Although this change is accompanied by more social freedoms, these do not include political representation, and it is based on Mohammed bin Salman's vision, rather than broad calls for change.²⁷⁷ As a result, tensions in state–society relations are likely to remain. However, any protest will be dealt with quickly.

²⁷¹ Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, *Vision 2030* (Council of Economic and Development Affairs: Riyadh, 2016).

²⁷² Saudi Vision 2030, 'Message from HRH Prince Mohammed Bin Salman Bin Abdulaziz Al-Saud', [n.d.].

²⁷³ *The Guardian*, 'Saudi Arabia ends death penalty for crimes committed by minors', 27 Apr. 2020.

²⁷⁴ Saudi Aramco, 'Saudization guide for contractor companies', [n.d.].

²⁷⁵ BBC, 'Reporting Saudi Arabia's hidden uprising', 30 May 2014.

²⁷⁶ Reuters, 'Timeline—Protests in Saudi Arabia', 23 July 2012.

²⁷⁷ Luck, T., 'Young Saudis saw a future; then came a pandemic and an oil crash', *Christian Science Monitor*, 15 June 2020.

3. Trends and patterns

Key reasons for protests

Street protests have become the main avenue in the Middle East and North Africa for people to express their disenchantment with the performance of their governments, to denounce rampant corruption, and to demand social justice and better living conditions. Socio-economic grievances and demands for social justice have been a driving force behind many of the protest movements that have erupted in MENA over the past decade. However, while socio-economic demands have been the immediate cause of several protest movements, they are inseparable from overarching political grievances, which in many ways provide the conditions for popular mobilization. Protesters' recurring condemnation of corruption and their demands for greater accountability indicates the interconnectedness of socio-economic and political demands, as the poor economic conditions are seen to be caused by endemic corruption.

Unemployment and corruption

In countries that witnessed mass or sporadic protests, high unemployment rates, especially among the youth, have constituted a major challenge to the governments. Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Iran, Jordan, Morocco, the Palestinian territories and Tunisia have some of the highest rates of unemployment in MENA, particularly among young people (see figure 3.1). Moreover, with the exception of Lebanon, the youth population is growing considerably across the region (see figure 3.2), and so youth unemployment is likely to get worse. At the same time, successive governments have been unable to create meaningful opportunities for young people or to provide better living conditions for large segments of the population. Moreover, poor governance and several years of austerity policies have resulted in the deterioration of public infrastructure and healthcare, education and transport services. In Algeria, Iraq and Lebanon, the economic situation, the performance of the government and the quality of public services are major concerns for citizens (as described in chapter 2). In Iran, these issues have, to a large extent, been intricately linked to the international sanctions imposed on the state. As poverty rates have swelled and inequalities have widened, feelings of marginalization, injustice and despair have become deeply entrenched among populations in the region. Furthermore, widespread perceptions of corruption have contributed to the growing distrust of governments and other state institutions in countries with mass or sporadic protests. For example, three-quarters of Iraqis and Tunisians believe that their national state institutions are to a large extent plagued by corruption (see figure 3.3).

Across the region, several protests have arisen in response to specific issues before growing into prolonged large-scale popular movements with wide-ranging demands. Initial issues that sparked wider protests include graduate unemployment in Iraq in 2019, the housing shortage in Israel in 2011, the

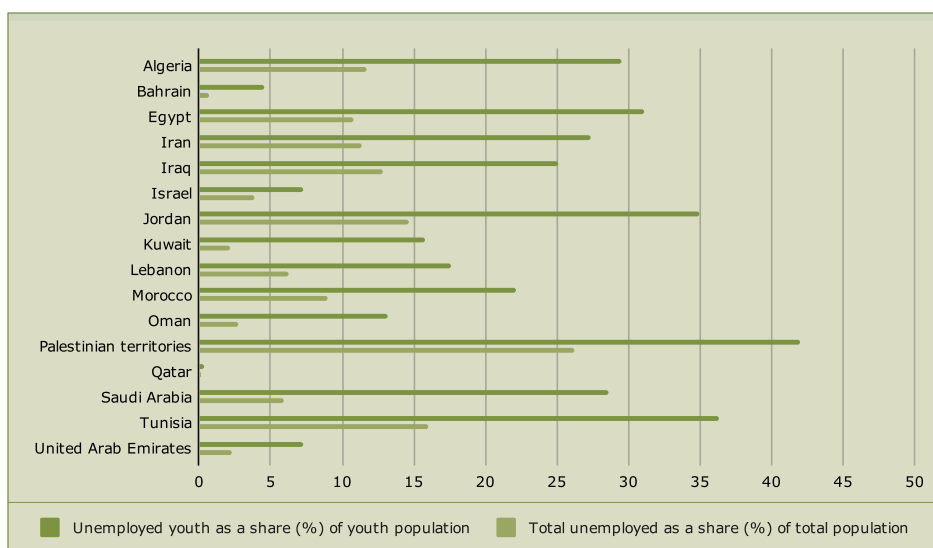


Figure 3.1. Unemployment and youth unemployment in the Middle East and North Africa, 2019

Note: Youth refers to people aged 15–24 years.

Source: World Bank Data, <<https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.UEM.1524.ZS>>.

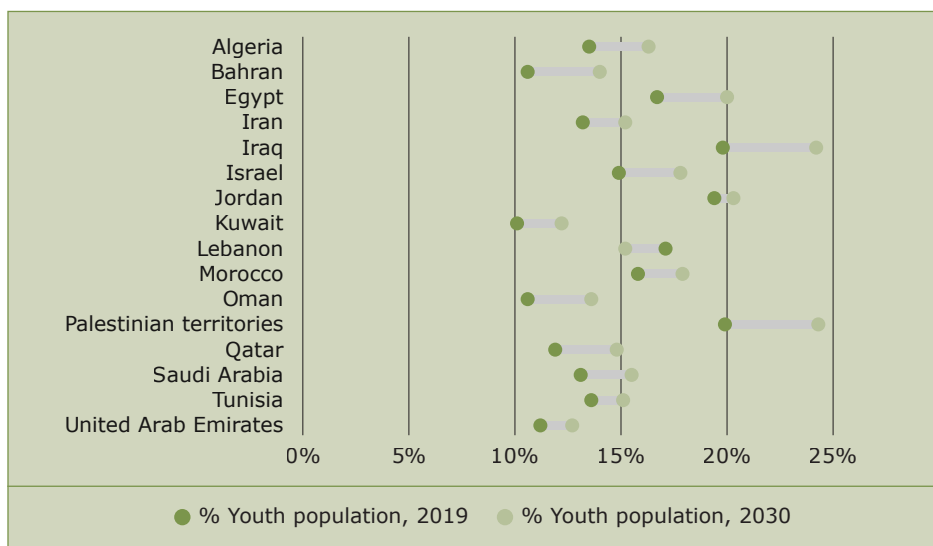


Figure 3.2. Youth population in 2019 and projected change 2030 in the Middle East and North Africa

Note: Youth refers to people aged 15–24 years.

Source: United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 'World Population Prospects 2019: Data query', <<https://population.un.org/wpp/DataQuery/>>.

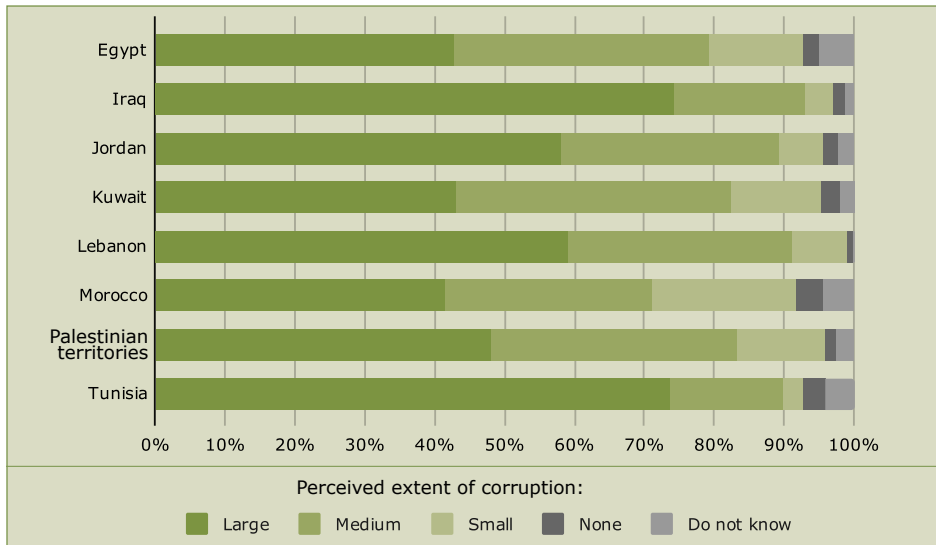


Figure 3.3. Perceptions of corruption in state institutions in select counties in the Middle East and North Africa, 2019

Note: The 8 countries are those for which data on corruption is available from Arab Barometer Wave V.

Source: Arab Barometer, Wave V data set, 2019, <www.arabbarometer.org/survey-data/data-downloads/>.

Lebanese waste management crisis in 2015, President Bouteflika’s fifth term in Algeria in 2019, the charge on online communications in Lebanon in 2019 and the outcome of the election in Iran in 2009. In contrast, other protest movements have maintained a narrow focus by targeting specific policies, such as the social security law in the West Bank in 2018–19, the new tax law in Jordan in 2018, and foreign policy-related protests in Jordan in 2019 and 2020. A narrow focus can also be maintained by protests representing the demands of specific groups, such as in the teachers’ protests in Morocco and Jordan in 2019, and the countrywide strikes of public sector employees in Tunisia in 2019.

Attempted renegotiation of the social contract

While protests have been a regular occurrence in many countries, the fundamental grievances of the protestors—in particular, genuine accountability, good governance and combatting systemic corruption—have largely remained unaddressed. As a result, protestors’ demands have grown. In some cases, this has led to protest movements representing an unprecedented challenge to the prevailing power structures as protesters have demanded nothing less than a renegotiation of the social contract that underpins state–society relations (e.g. in Algeria, Lebanon, Iraq). Protesters have sought a comprehensive overhaul of the political system, calling not only for leaders to step down, but also for the often-hidden political establishment to be uprooted. These demands for political renewal reflect longstanding pleas for greater political participation, democratic

government and respect for human rights in countries where voices of the opposition have long been silenced.

In the mass protests in Algeria, Iraq and Lebanon, protesters have been united by demands for social justice and democratic governance. These demonstrations have generally transcended the boundaries of identity to focus on shared causes, regardless of historical divides.²⁷⁸ Nonetheless, sectarian divisions and politicized identities have not been entirely absent from recent protest movements in MENA. They have sometimes emerged in highly fragmented societies (e.g. Israel) or in states where power structures are dominated by one group to the detriment of others (e.g. Bahrain). In these cases, protests have, yet again, brought to the fore unresolved tensions in the relationship between the political organization of the state on the one hand and questions of identity, citizenship and belonging on the other.²⁷⁹ However, if politicized identities as such have sometimes been a key reason for protest, at other times they have been used as an instrument for mobilization when making other social and political claims (e.g. the mobilization of Amazigh identity in Morocco's Rif region).

Key reasons for lack of protests

In most of the countries with scarce protests, the social contract secures the legitimacy of the government or monarch in exchange for generous welfare (see chapter 2). This leaves few socio-economic incentives for the citizens to challenge their rulers. Abundant oil wealth has enabled the Gulf monarchies to provide generous welfare that includes access to quality and free healthcare and education (and in some cases subsidies and grants) in return for loyalty and popular legitimacy. Public sector employment in the state bureaucracy and state-owned enterprises, with generous remuneration packages, serves as another redistribution channel that enables the oil-rich monarchies to lull any real demand for change. In addition, kinship networks that tie the citizens to the ruling dynasties play a crucial role in maintaining loyalty and allegiance among the public. With the exception of sporadic protests by indigenous minority Shia communities and migrant workers against marginalization, discrimination, poor working conditions and abusive treatment, there is no real economic grievance or incentive to protest in most member states of the GCC.

Apart from the lack of socio-economic incentive, the fear of repression and the extreme difficulty of protest are real in the countries where protests are limited or non-existent. The heavy-handed approach to any form of dissent explains the lack of protests in many GCC countries. The ruling families of Bahrain, Qatar and the UAE continue to flout and silence any calls for extended political rights and

²⁷⁸ E.g. Abdulhadi, R., 'Iraqi protesters unite behind demands, not sectarian identities', Atlantic Council, 31 Oct. 2019.

²⁷⁹ Colombo, S. et al., *New Trends in Identity Politics in the Middle East and North Africa and their Impact on State-Society Relations*, Middle East and North Africa Regional Architecture (MENARA) Working Paper no. 14 (Istituto Affari Internazionali: Rome, Oct. 2018). See also the case studies on Israel and Bahrain in chapter 2 in this paper.

political liberalization. In Kuwait all forms of association and assembly remain banned, and the Al-Sabah dynasty has maintained its strong grip on power through repressing expressions of tribal identity and any real political opposition. Both Bahrain and Saudi Arabia have responded to unrest from their indigenous Shia nationals related to political and economic marginalization with repression. In Oman demands for constitutional monarchy and economic reform to tackle unemployment and corruption have increasingly been met with force, while political activists, bloggers and writers have been detained and tortured.

In Bahrain, sectarian divisions have made protests particularly difficult for the majority Shia population. The ruling Sunni Al Khalifa family continues to ignore pleas for political representation and democratic change. Shia activists voicing dissent and opposition face retribution with imprisonment and threat of execution. Dwindling oil revenues in recent years have meant that Bahrain's ability to maintain a generous welfare system to reduce social discontent has started to wane. Promises of populist socio-economic policies to pacify public anger have increasingly been coupled with enhanced policing and surveillance as well as systematic exclusion of the Shia opposition to minimize social discontent. Because it is beholden to Saudi Arabia and, indirectly, to the USA, Bahrain views any form of dissent in terms of how it relates to the Iran–Saudi Arabia and Iran–USA relationships.

Similarly, protests and dissent in Saudi Arabia remain particularly difficult. The wealthy kingdom views any sort of dissent as foreign meddling to undermine its influence and standing in the Gulf. Protest movements are thus dealt with swiftly. The ascension of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman ushered in an ambitious modernization programme, with promises of substantial reforms to meet the demands of the country's young population. However, the programme, which includes plans for sweeping changes to meet the economic and demographic challenges, does not appear to include an opening of the political system. The prospects for democratization and political freedoms thus remain dim. Rights groups argue that the death sentence is being used by the Saudi Arabian authorities to crush all dissent, including those defending the rights of the kingdom's Shia community, journalists and former officials, even in exile.²⁸⁰

The effects of the global depression caused by the COVID-19 pandemic paired with a historic contraction in oil prices raise questions about the survival and resilience of the rentier state model as many Gulf countries are forced to introduce austerity measures. The oil market is likely to recover eventually; however, it is questionable whether the price can increase to the level necessary to sustain the rentier social contract over the longer term. Nonetheless, the basic tenets of the rentier social contract, such as generous welfare, are likely to be kept by the ruling monarchies. The social contract in these countries is a deep-rooted systemic structure that is linked to the institutional design of the economy, society and political environment. The financial benefits that the Gulf monarchies have conferred on their citizens in return for their acquiescence may change as the

²⁸⁰ E.g. Amnesty International, 'Saudi Arabia: 37 put to death in shocking execution spree', 23 Apr. 2019.

income from oil changes. But that income would have to fall significantly before it becomes necessary to redefine the fundamentals that underpin their state–society relations. Ultimately, the underlying aspects of the social contract are likely to remain intact until the oil runs out or becomes obsolete.

State responses to protests

The responses prompted by protests in the countries of the Middle East and North Africa have taken many forms: outright repression, appeasement through limited concessions (e.g. limited constitutional reforms, closely monitored inclusion of some political actors, and change of political leaders) and populist promises (e.g. subsidies, salary increases, employment and development projects)—or a combination of both repression and concessions. In general, however, all of these approaches tend to be designed to uphold the status quo and avert any substantial change to the social contract underpinning state–society relations.

The following typology of state responses to protests highlight trends and patterns that arise from the case studies in chapter 2. Of course, countries can fall into more than one category depending on events and the nature of demands, among other things.

Outright repression

Throughout MENA, states have often resorted to force and repression to quell protests, thus maintaining the ruling elites in place and preventing significant change to the existing social contract. In Bahrain and other GCC countries such as Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the UAE, the monarchs have severely suppressed dissent by targeting activists and political opponents, many of whom have been unlawfully detained, stripped of their citizenship or even sentenced to death.

A combination of repression and concessions

The most common response to the protests has been a combination of repression and populist promises. Such an approach has enabled governments and monarchs to appease protesters while preserving the status quo, as power structures have tended to remain unchanged and the political and economic establishments have remained in place. While ad hoc promises of socio-economic reform have often succeeded in defusing the tensions in the streets, they have not addressed the root causes of protest. This explains why protests are frequent in MENA and why they tend to stem from the same concerns and express the same grievances.

For example, in 2011 the Algerian Government used its oil riches to pay for subsidies and direct cash transfers. But these only calmed the protests temporarily, as the massive mobilization in 2019 confirmed. In an aspiring democracy such as Tunisia, the state has at times accommodated some demands and at other times resorted to repression. In Israel the 2011 social justice protests were quickly placated by promising several social measures. In Iran the government responded to the 2019 protests in by promising financial support while also warning against riots—only to raise taxes a few months later. Even in a context defined by Israeli

occupation and limited statehood, both the Palestinian Authority and Hamas have alternately made concessions and used repression in the face of protests.

As many governments continue to postpone genuine and comprehensive reforms, they seek to stave off unrest by announcing improvised populist promises. Funding these financial assistance packages has meant that they have tended to take on more debt. In turn, soaring debt and the financial crises in several MENA countries have often been addressed with austerity policies, price hikes and tax increases. Under such circumstances, the resurgence of new rounds of protest becomes only a matter of time.

Limited political reform

In addition to promises of socio-economic reforms and increased public spending, responses to the protests have tended to include the reshuffling of the government. However, this also appears to be designed to maintain the status quo and keep the true wielders of power immune to popular discontent. Prime ministers have stepped down, ministers have been sacked and individual public officials have been held accountable for wrongdoing that often reflects systemic failures. In contrast, the overall political configuration and power architecture tend to remain intact despite protesters' frequent calls for drastic changes and an overhaul of the political system as a whole.

In Lebanon, for example, as pressure from the streets mounted, Hariri resigned as prime minister and was replaced with Diab, who proceeded to form a technocratic government. Similarly, Mahdi resigned as Iraq's prime minister in response to protests, but the political system that was the core target of the protests remained intact. In Jordan, King Abdallah II dismissed Mulki as prime minister for failing to implement tax reforms. Cabinet reshuffle was also the response adopted by Oman in the face of protests (together with promises to create jobs and provide unemployment benefits). In Kuwait some demands for electoral reform have been met, with no notable change in state–society relations.

The toppling of leaders also arguably constitutes a form of limited political reform. While it gives a semblance of change, it often does not bring about a substantial transformation of the political system and social contract. While Tunisia is a notable exception in that the overthrow of Ben Ali ushered in a period of democratic transformation, Egypt and Algeria show how the deeply rooted political establishment can outlast the overthrown political leader—the removal of leaders does not necessarily affect the prevailing power structures.

The departure of Hosni Mubarak in Egypt ultimately led to the further consolidation of power by the existing elites. As the military establishment resumed control after the brief presidency of Mohamed Morsi, it further tightened its grip on society and considerably reduced the political space. A similar dynamic seems to be present in Algeria. Faced with mounting pressure from the streets, the immediate response was to oust President Bouteflika and his close associates while attempting to preserve the existing power structures and the military's control of the country. Even in Lebanon, the underlying sectarian power-sharing system has endured despite frequent changes in government leaders.

Incremental changes

In some instances, the responses have tilted towards incremental changes rather than a radical transformation of the political system. The cases of Morocco and Jordan illustrate this change with continuity, as both responded to protests by initiating limited, yet promising, reforms that seemed to set these countries on a democratization path. While these reforms were sufficient to appease protesters in the short term, in the long run they have not lived up to the expectations of the people in either country.

In Morocco constitutional amendments that required that the prime minister be selected from the party that wins parliamentary elections were introduced in the aftermath of the 2011 protests, suggesting the opening up of the political space to various actors and their inclusion in decision-making processes. In Jordan the monarchy announced a gradual shift to a system of parliamentary monarchy. In practice, however, these constitutional reforms have fallen short of the anticipated, and long overdue, political change. In both countries there are many signs that the political opening initiated in the aftermath of the 2011 protests may have been reversed. Moreover, the monarchical institutions have not only maintained their prominent role in the political system but have arguably become even more powerful.

As a result of such incremental changes, the ability of protesters to demand profound political change has become increasingly constrained. Moreover, although demands for a greater commitment to the reform process continue to be made, it is clear that socio-economic grievances, rather than political change, have become the driving force for protest in these countries.

In summary, governments in the Middle East and North Africa have been intent on preserving power structures and their responses have mirrored this. As such, real change has been lacking, which has resulted in the cyclical nature of protests in MENA over the past decade. However, external actors often play a part in these responses, as described in the next chapter.

4. The role and impact of external actors

The role of external actors

The engagement of external actors—both from within the region and elsewhere—in the Middle East and North Africa, particularly when it comes to protest movements, has taken many forms. This chapter examines the roles that these actors, and in particular the USA, European countries, Russia and China, have played and the attitudes that they have adopted towards protests. The purpose is to understand the impact, if any, that these international responses have had on state–society relations in the countries of MENA.

Depending on the situation, the role of external actors has sometimes been explicit (e.g. welcoming the protests, denouncing the response of political actors or providing financial assistance to sustain a transition) and at other times ambiguous (e.g. criticizing some governments but not others or actively supporting some protest movements but not others). In general, the response of an external actor to protests in a MENA country has depended on the kind of relationship (e.g. friend, ally or adversary) it has with that country. The reaction also depends on the interests that are stake. The actions of external actors in response to protests can be divided into four broad types: (a) support of the government or monarchy; (b) non-interference, due to strategic or counterterrorism interests as well as economic interests and arms sales; (c) support of the protests; and (d) financial assistance with various aims.

Support of the government or monarchy

External actors have sometimes directly intervened in favour of a government or monarch when protests seemed to threaten their interests. For example, under the 1994 GCC Security Convention, GCC states have traditionally supported each other in the face of threats to national and regional stability.²⁸¹ The treaty was amended and expanded in 2012 to give the GCC states more opportunities to intervene and a legal framework to crack down on political opposition, in the name of security and regional stability.²⁸² GCC countries have strongly opposed protests in Kuwait, and several Kuwaiti activists have been arrested at the request of Saudi Arabia.²⁸³ In Bahrain, the continuous political, diplomatic, financial and military support from GCC allies, which regard Bahrain's stability as an extension of their own, has largely helped to maintain the monarch's strong grip on society. Saudi Arabia, in particular, has provided unwavering support to the Bahraini monarch, given the latter's importance in Saudi Arabia's competition with Iran for regional hegemony and Bahrain's participation in Saudi Arabia's war in Yemen. The close relationship between the two countries has thus precluded the Bahraini protests

²⁸¹ Gulf Cooperation Council Security Convention, signed 28 Nov. 1994, entered into force 22 June 1995, amended convention signed 13 Nov. 2012, entered into force 27 Dec. 2013, (in Arabic).

²⁸² Human Rights Watch (HRW), 'GCC: Joint security agreement imperils rights', 26 Apr. 2014.

²⁸³ Al-Rasheed, M., 'Kuwaiti activists targeted under GCC security pact', Al-Monitor, 20 Mar. 2015.

from challenging the ruling family and altering the social contract. Outside the Gulf region, the GCC has increased support to fellow monarchies in Morocco and Jordan against protests, pledging financial support and even inviting them to become members of the GCC.²⁸⁴

External actors can also influence state–society relations by tipping the scale in favour of some actors, such as political parties, to the detriment of others. For example, breaking with a decades-long tradition, the US administration of President Trump has taken several steps that noticeably strengthen right-wing actors and sentiments in Israel: it moved the US embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, recognized Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, recognized Israel’s claim to sovereignty over the Golan Heights and proposed a peace plan for the Middle East that many consider to be highly detrimental to Palestinians.²⁸⁵ These actions, which occurred against the backdrop of protests denouncing Netanyahu’s involvement in corruption cases, have underscored the Trump administration’s support of the Likud-led government and have been interpreted as an interference in Israeli politics that is intended to give the advantage to right-wing parties and groups.²⁸⁶ Such engagement is bound to influence state–society relations as it has contributed to further polarization in Israeli politics and strengthened Netanyahu’s right-wing government, despite the widespread opposition it faces.²⁸⁷

Non-interference

The ability and the willingness of external actors to influence state–society relations in MENA has been hindered by entangled security and economic interests. The geopolitical significance of many MENA states and the pivotal role that they play in maintaining regional security and stability, as well as their extensive business and trade relations with great powers—including arms sales—make them too important for external actors to openly side with protestors’ demands. However, in the context of these interests, non-interference does have an impact: by legitimizing state actors and reducing pressure to respond to the demands of society, it helps to prevent evolution of the social contract.

Strategic interests and counterterrorism. Despite some occasional, often mild, criticism of state response to protests, the USA and European countries have maintained close economic and security relations with MENA countries and have refrained from interfering in their state–society relations. For example, the USA has many interests in the Gulf. Thousands of US troops and military personnel are stationed in the GCC states, which host several US military bases and facilities.²⁸⁸

²⁸⁴ Ryan, C., ‘Jordan, Morocco and an expanded GCC’, Middle East Report Online, 15 Apr. 2014.

²⁸⁵ Holmes, O. et al., ‘Trump unveils Middle East peace plan with no Palestinian support’, *The Guardian*, 28 Jan. 2020.

²⁸⁶ Zilber, N., ‘How Bibi’s bestie at the White House is helping him win the Israeli election’, *Foreign Policy*, 25 Mar. 2019.

²⁸⁷ Morris, L. and Eglash, R., ‘Under investigation and up for reelection, Netanyahu’s kinship with Trump has never been clearer’, *Washington Post*, 19 Mar. 2019.

²⁸⁸ Wallin, M., *U.S. Military Bases and Facilities in the Middle East*, Fact sheet (American Security Project: Washington, DC, June 2018).

The USA also maintains a military presence in Iraq, particularly in the KRI. Other external actors also have a military presence in the Gulf. The United Kingdom, for instance, inaugurated a naval support facility in Bahrain in 2018.²⁸⁹ France has also maintained a military base in the UAE since 2009.²⁹⁰ Consequently, external actors are wary of instability in the region that would threaten their national security interests.²⁹¹ However, an overemphasis on security empowers the elites to ignore demands for change in the social contract, which in turn leads to growing insecurity, as demonstrated by the widespread protests across the region.

Furthermore, several MENA countries are key partners of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar and the UAE take part in NATO's Istanbul Cooperation Initiative, a cooperation framework focused on cyber-defence, maritime security and training.²⁹² Similarly, the Mediterranean Dialogue is a cooperative agreement between NATO and seven countries—Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Mauritania, Morocco and Tunisia—in the fields of crisis management, border security and counterterrorism. The dialogue is guided by the view that the security of NATO members is intricately linked to security and stability in the Mediterranean.²⁹³

The geopolitical importance of MENA states means that they are pivotal to regional and international order. For example, Jordan's 1994 peace agreement with Israel is essential to maintaining stability in the region. This makes Jordan's internal stability an integral part of regional stability and makes Jordan a valuable partner of actors such as the USA, the UK and the EU. At the same time, Jordan's response to the recurring protests over its relations with Israel often reflects what is acceptable to its allies and aid providers—which partly determines Jordan's own national interest. In this respect, Jordan's routine strategy has been to tolerate protests (but keep an eye on their potential escalation) while maintaining the country's strategic orientations and reiterating its commitment to the two-state solution and to peace in the region.²⁹⁴ In North Africa, the gradual reforms introduced in Morocco in response to protests have been welcomed by the USA and European countries, for whom stability in Morocco is essential for broader stability in the region.²⁹⁵ For many years, Morocco has actively cooperated with its European neighbours in intelligence-sharing and migration control.²⁹⁶ Its

²⁸⁹ Stuble, P., 'UK opens permanent military base in Bahrain to strengthen Middle East presence', *The Independent*, 6 Apr. 2018.

²⁹⁰ Chrisafis, A., 'France opens military base in UAE despite Iranian concerns', *The Guardian*, 26 May 2009.

²⁹¹ McEvers, K., 'Bahrain: The revolution that wasn't', *The Arab Spring: One Year Later*, National Public Radio (NPR), 5 Jan. 2012.

²⁹² Samaan, J.-L., 'The strategic significance of the new NATO–ICI regional centre in Kuwait', NATO Defense College Foundation, 7 Jan. 2019.

²⁹³ North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), 'NATO Mediterranean Dialogue'.

²⁹⁴ Schwedler (note 159).

²⁹⁵ Colombo, S. and Voltolini, B., "'Business as usual" in EU democracy promotion towards Morocco? Assessing the limits of the EU's approach towards the Mediterranean after the Arab uprisings', *L'Europe en Formation*, no. 371 (Spring 2014), pp. 41–57.

²⁹⁶ Dworkin, A. and El Malki, F.-Z., 'The southern front line: EU counter-terrorism cooperation with Tunisia and Morocco', European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR) Policy Brief no. 246, Feb. 2018.

proximity to Europe makes it a significant entry point for migration to Europe, and the EU thus sees Morocco's cooperation as being vital to securing the EU's external borders. Furthermore, both Morocco and Algeria play important roles in efforts to restore peace and security in North Africa and the Sahel region.

Contribution to the global fight against terrorism also shapes relations between MENA states and external actors. Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia are engaged in this fight as part of the US-led Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership (TSCTP).²⁹⁷ Similarly, Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the UAE are active members of the Global Counterterrorism Forum (GCTF), a multilateral framework that aims to strengthen cooperation and promote experience sharing in the fight against terrorism.²⁹⁸ Moreover, their military contribution to the Global Coalition Against Daesh (i.e. Islamic State) makes them indispensable in counterterrorism efforts.²⁹⁹ Likewise, due to the KRI's strategic importance in the fight against Islamic State, external actors have backed the KRG despite some of its undemocratic practices and its heavy-handed response to peaceful protests.³⁰⁰ Moreover, the USA has funded peshmerga salaries, despite multiple problems with governance in the KRI.³⁰¹

In brief, security interests have often empowered political elites, as they overshadow wider concerns about governance and accountability.

Economic interests and arms sales. The financial strength of several MENA countries gives them a prominent position at the international level. Their extensive trade relations with external actors, particularly in arms sales, is one of the key reasons behind the reluctance of these actors to interfere in issues connected to state–society relations. External actors have repeatedly abstained from openly condemning the use of repression against peaceful protests, motivated by the need to preserve business and trade interests in the region.

In addition to being major exporters of natural gas and petroleum products, GCC countries, for instance, have wide-ranging economic links with global powers. European and US companies and investments are present in Bahrain, Qatar and the UAE, among others, in sectors such as banking, services, construction and infrastructure.³⁰² Conversely, GCC states, particularly Qatar and the UAE, have invested heavily in the USA and European countries through their massive sovereign wealth funds.³⁰³

²⁹⁷ Boudali, L. K., 'The Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership', United States Military Academy, Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, Apr. 2007.

²⁹⁸ Global Counterterrorism Forum, 'Background and mission'.

²⁹⁹ Global Coalition to Against Daesh, 'Partners list'.

³⁰⁰ O'Driscoll, D. and Baser, B., 'Referendums as a political party gamble: A critical analysis of the Kurdish referendum for independence', *International Political Science Review*, published online 29 Nov. 2019.

³⁰¹ O'Driscoll and Baser (note 300).

³⁰² Bianco, C., 'A Gulf apart: How Europe can gain influence with the Gulf Cooperation Council', European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR) Policy Brief no. 314, Feb. 2020.

³⁰³ England A. and Kerr S., 'Qatar's sovereign wealth fund back in the hunt for deals', *Financial Times*, 17 June 2019.

As part of the EU's European Neighbourhood Policy for the its 'Southern Neighbourhood', the EU fosters relations with 10 countries: Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, the Palestinian territories, Syria and Tunisia.³⁰⁴ Since the launch of the Barcelona Process in 1995, followed by the creation in 2008 of the Union for the Mediterranean, the EU has sought to promote economic integration in the region through a project for a Euro-Mediterranean free trade area involving the EU, Turkey and these 10 countries.³⁰⁵ Despite limited progress in achieving regional economic integration, the bilateral association agreements concluded between the EU and a number of MENA countries have enabled the development of trade relations between them.³⁰⁶ In this regard, the Southern Neighbourhood represents a significant trading partner of the EU. These economic relations benefit European economies, as the EU remains a net exporter to the other states of the proposed free trade area.³⁰⁷

The sale of arms is another important facet of trade relations between MENA countries and external actors. Many MENA countries are among the largest importers of major arms in the world, making them valued business partners. Over the period 2015–19, Saudi Arabia was the world's largest importer of major arms, accounting for 12 per cent of total imports, and Egypt, Algeria, the UAE, Iraq and Qatar were also among the top 10 (see table 4.1). Arms exports to MENA countries originate primarily from the USA, the UK, EU countries, Russia and China. In the case of Bahrain, arms sales were briefly suspended following its crackdown on the protests in 2011.³⁰⁸

Over the past decade, China has significantly boosted its presence in MENA. It has expanded its political and economic relations with a number of MENA countries, especially hydrocarbon exporters, to cover expanding energy needs as its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) advances.³⁰⁹ As China's foreign policy has traditionally been guided by principles of non-interference in other states, it has largely adopted a cautious stance toward protests in MENA countries, discreetly focusing on safeguarding its economic interests in the region.³¹⁰

Similarly, Russia's increasing role and influence in the MENA region—which takes place against the backdrop of the USA's gradual disengagement from the region—is based on maintaining good relations with various MENA governments

³⁰⁴ European Commission, 'European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations: Southern Neighbourhood', 31 Jan. 2020.

³⁰⁵ De Ville, F. and Reynaert, V., 'The Euro-Mediterranean free trade area: An evaluation on the eve of the (missed) deadline', *L'Europe en Formation*, no. 356 (Summer 2010), pp. 193–206.

³⁰⁶ De Ville and Reynaert (note 305).

³⁰⁷ European Commission, 'Euro-Mediterranean partnership', 5 May 2020.

³⁰⁸ SIPRI Arms Transfers Database, Mar. 2020; and Matthiesen, T., 'EU foreign policy toward Bahrain in the aftermath of the uprising', ed. A. Echagüe, *The Gulf States and the Arab Uprisings* (FRIDE and Gulf Research Center: Madrid, 2013), pp. 77–85.

³⁰⁹ Lons, C. et al., 'China's great game in the Middle East', Policy brief, European Council on Foreign Relations, Oct. 2019.

³¹⁰ Burton, G., 'What protests in Algeria and Sudan mean for China', *The Diplomat*, 8 Mar. 2019.

and monarchs whilst refraining from interfering in their domestic politics.³¹¹ However, Russia's active involvement in Libya and Syria has indicated a different approach, albeit one that continues to protect Russian economic and strategic interests in the region. Russian support has been crucial to empowering Khalifa Haftar in Libya and maintaining the position of President Bashar al-Assad in Syria.³¹²

While the need to preserve strategic and business interests in MENA has repeatedly informed external actors' deliberate policy of non-interference, this attitude has sometimes actually reflected their perplexity in the face of unanticipated events whose outcomes are difficult to gauge. Mass mobilizations in MENA present external actors with a real dilemma about which course of action to adopt, particularly when it comes to balancing short-term instability and long-term stability. Central to these considerations is the potentially serious consequences of active interference—Iraq and Libya are cases in point—which inevitably disturbs the social, political and economic fabric of states and precludes the development of a homegrown social contract.³¹³

Support of the protests

Although it is common for external actors—especially the USA and European countries—to defend the freedoms of expression and assembly of protesters and to condemn the use of force and repression by state authorities, this attitude is far from consistent and unambiguous. It often reflects not only existing tensions with the MENA state in question, but also the kinds of outcome favoured by different external actors. This can lead to silence or empty admonitions for allies, while adversaries get a stronger response.

For instance, protesters in Iran have garnered support from different actors, many of whom have called on the Iranian Government not to repress protests or persecute dissenters. Given the history of Iranian–US tensions, the USA has taken a more pronounced position: it has been quick to criticize the Iranian Government and highlight its repression of protesters.³¹⁴ The position of the EU has been slightly different. Although it has supported the protests and stressed the need to safeguard the freedoms of expression and assembly, the EU has attempted to maintain a more open relationship with Iran.³¹⁵ At the same time, Iran itself has supported protests in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, which have been largely composed of Shia groups.³¹⁶

³¹¹ Katz, M., 'Same ends but different means: Change, continuity and Moscow's Middle East policy', eds K. Mazran and A. Varvelli, ISPI and Atlantic Council, *The MENA Region: A Great Power Competition* (Ledizioni LediPublishing: Milan, Oct. 2019), pp. 39–51.

³¹² Katz (note 311).

³¹³ Costantini, I., *Statebuilding in the Middle East and North Africa: The Aftermath of Regime Change* (Routledge: London, 2018).

³¹⁴ Akbari, R. H., 'Yes, Iranians can protest against both US intervention and their government', 14 Jan. 2020, *The Guardian*.

³¹⁵ Council of the European Union, Declaration by the High Representative on behalf of the EU on the recent protests in Iran, 8 Dec. 2019.

³¹⁶ Jahanbani, N., 'Reviewing Iran's proxies by region: A look toward the Middle East, South Asia, and Africa', *CTC Sentinel*, vol. 13, no 5 (May 2020), pp.39–49.

Table 4.1. The 10 largest importers of major arms and their main suppliers, 2015–19

Importer	Share of total arms transfers (%)	Main suppliers, 2015–19		
		1st	2nd	3rd
Saudi Arabia	12	United States	United Kingdom	France
India	9.2	Russia	Israel	France
Egypt	5.8	France	Russia	United States
Australia	4.9	United States	Spain	France
China	4.3	Russia	France	Ukraine
Algeria	4.2	Russia	China	Germany
South Korea	3.4	United States	Germany	Spain
United Arab Emirates	3.4	United States	France	Netherlands
Iraq	3.4	United States	Russia	South Korea
Qatar	3.4	United States	France	Germany

Source: SIPRI Arms Transfers Database, Mar. 2020.

An external actor's support of protests has often reflected a desire for a change of government. This has led to contrasting and inconsistent attitudes towards protests that vary not only from one country to another, but even within the same country. For example, external actors, from within and outside the region, became concerned about the Islamist turn in Egypt's politics following the Arab Spring protests and the accession of the Muslim Brotherhood to power. The USA was opposed to an Islamist government, even though it was the outcome of democratic elections. In contrast, the USA showed a preference for General al-Sisi's military-led government, which is likely to be more protective of US interests.³¹⁷ Within the region, while Qatar supported the Muslim Brotherhood, other GCC countries stood by the military establishment.³¹⁸ The case of Egypt also shows how protest movements can be rather disconcerting for external actors, as they scramble to adapt to unforeseen changes, especially when these changes involve the risk of a total reversal of relations.

Financial assistance

External actors have often used financial assistance to ease political transitions and influence the reforms implemented.³¹⁹ For example, in the aftermath of the Arab Spring, the leaders of the Group of Eight (G8) leading industrialized countries launched the Deauville Partnership, an initiative to support democratic transition and economic transformation in Egypt, Jordan, Libya, Morocco,

³¹⁷ Hamid (note 6).

³¹⁸ Trager, E., 'The Muslim Brotherhood is the root of the Qatar crisis', *The Atlantic*, 2 July 2017.

³¹⁹ Lawson, M. L. and Epstein, S. B., *Democracy Promotion: An Objective of U.S. Foreign Assistance*, Congressional Research Service (CRS) Report for Congress R44858 (US Congress, CRS: Washington, DC, 4 Jan. 2019).

Tunisia and Yemen.³²⁰ It was financed by the IMF and bilateral assistance (with pledges of up to \$40 billion) and supported by the MENA Transition Fund projects of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). The partnership aimed to support these six countries in such areas as governance and transparency, creation of job opportunities, private sector development, and access to global and regional trade. In particular, the initiative focused on tackling youth unemployment in Jordan, Morocco and Tunisia, on promoting gender equality in North Africa, Egypt and Jordan, and on strengthening the rule of law in Egypt and Yemen.³²¹

In the case of Tunisia, financial assistance from external actors has aimed to support the fragile democratic transition after the collapse of the Ben Ali government. Tunisia has received various IMF loans with the purpose of implementing economic reforms.³²² Lebanon is also a beneficiary of financial assistance conditioned on structural reforms. At a 2018 conference on economic development, donors pledged loans of \$10.2 billion and grants of \$0.9 billion to enhance the Lebanese economy and support reforms that aim to strengthen economic growth.³²³ In April 2020, a loan from the IMF was proposed as one way to salvage Lebanon's economy.³²⁴ Nonetheless, considering the dire economic crisis that Lebanon has been going through, state–society relations have remained unstable, and the Beirut explosion in August 2020 has only deepened the government's crisis and pushed the Lebanese state to the brink of collapse.³²⁵ Although financial assistance and aid packages often have conditions attached and require structural reforms, these reforms are often not based on a deep and comprehensive understanding of local conditions and needs.³²⁶ They thus often reflect the global market's aims and fail to address and meet the demands of the population.

In other cases, financial assistance has served to bail out governments or monarchs facing intense popular mobilization against austerity measures intended to reduce soaring public debt. For example, Jordan's close relations with the USA and the GCC states, particularly Saudi Arabia, has been crucial for securing loans and financial aid over the years.³²⁷ Unable to implement tax reforms, and faced with continued unrest, the Jordanian Government withdrew a proposed tax law

³²⁰ International Financial Institutions, 'Deauville Partnership', Statement, 10 Sep. 2011.

³²¹ Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 'G7 Deauville Partnership—MENA Transition Fund project', 2018.

³²² International Monetary Fund (IMF), 'IMF Executive Board approves US\$2.9 billion extended arrangement under the extended fund facility for Tunisia', Press Release no. 16/238, 20 May 2016.

³²³ Economic Conference for Development through Reforms with the Private Sector, Joint statement, 6 Apr. 2018.

³²⁴ Azhari, T., 'Lebanon to seek IMF loan, says it needs \$10bn in aid', Al Jazeera, 30 Apr. 2020.

³²⁵ Abouaoun, E. and Yacoubian, M., 'After Beirut blast, what's next for Lebanon's broken political system?', United States Institute for Peace, 7 Aug. 2020.

³²⁶ Mossallem, M., *The IMF in the Arab World: Lessons Unlearned* (Bretton Woods Project: London, Nov. 2015); and Balfour, R., *EU Conditionality after the Arab Spring* (European Institute of the Mediterranean: Barcelona, 2012).

³²⁷ Ryan, C. R., 'Jordan', ed. M. Penner Angrist, *Politics and Society in the Contemporary Middle East* (Lynne Rienner: London, 2010), p. 314.

in 2018. Instead, Jordan's allies, once more, rushed to its rescue with financial aid, while the IMF agreed to provide even more loans.³²⁸ The strong support of external actors—from within the region and beyond—to the Jordanian monarchy has largely contributed to its resilience to popular protests by providing it with the financial resources to appease protesters.

The actors that receive financial aid and assistance from donor states and institutions also tend to reflect the preferences of the donors. In the case of international aid to the Palestinians, the EU has been the largest provider of external assistance through the 1997 Interim Association Agreement on Trade and Cooperation, a development partnership.³²⁹ Palestinians received aid in different areas through the European Neighbourhood Instrument (ENI), including governance reform, access to self-sufficient water and energy services, and sustainable economic development.³³⁰ However, although international aid to the Palestinians has, for many years, been linked to democratization and good governance, following the victory of Hamas in the largely democratic 2006 elections, it has become clear that the Palestinian Authority is the preferred choice for the international community, as most international assistance has been channelled to the West Bank.³³¹

The impact of external actors' actions

External actors from within and outside the region have adapted their roles in such a way as to preserve and consolidate their interests. Such issues as Iran's nuclear programme, the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, the fight against terrorism, and the wars in Libya, Syria and Yemen continue to deeply influence external actors' relations with MENA states. As most MENA states tend to have considerable military capabilities, their geopolitical and strategic importance gives them leverage with external actors from outside the region. In exchange for serving and preserving the interests of foreign powers in the region, MENA states receive diplomatic, political and economic support. However, the constant focus of external actors from outside the region on protecting their strategic interests and their enduring pursuit of influence in the region has affected state–society relations in MENA countries, tipping the balance in favour of the governments and sanctioning their lack of accountability to their societies. Consequently, over the past decades, stabilization policies that were intended to preserve strategic interests in the region have instead resulted in instability and insecurity.

³²⁸ Yom (note 150).

³²⁹ Office of the European Union Representative (West Bank and Gaza Strip, UNRWA), 'The European Union assistance to Palestinians', 16 May 2016.

³³⁰ European Commission, 'European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations: Palestine', 22 Jan. 2020.

³³¹ Brown, N. J., *Time to Rethink, But Not Abandon, International Aid to Palestinians*, Working paper (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace: Washington, DC, Dec. 2018); and Alashqar, Y., 'The Gaza Crisis: Restrictions and challenges to the humanitarian space in Gaza', *E-International Relations*, 30 Nov. 2019.

In many ways, protest movements in different countries have offered a novel terrain for clashes between the competing visions of different actors in the region. Supporting the protests or the government is sometimes more about regional alignment than internal governance. Thus, regional rivalries and the dynamics of international politics often hinder the potential for rewriting social contracts in individual countries, as foreign policy becomes the priority and overshadows governance and accountability questions at the domestic level.

5. Conclusions

The Arab Spring brought hope of a change in the relationships between society and the state across the Middle East and North Africa. Yet change did not come. Unsurprisingly, the region's elites were reluctant to change the system that keeps them in power. Government responses, therefore, generally consisted of repression laced in most cases with superficial accommodation, all with the objective of maintaining the status quo. However, the issues of social and economic inequalities and lack of political voice have not gone away, as the re-emergence of large-scale protest in 2019 has shown. Other factors—including climate change, water insecurity, demographics and the move away from hydrocarbons—will exacerbate the problems.³³² Other things being equal, efforts to maintain the status quo can only succeed for a limited time.

Those in power in MENA do not act in a vacuum; they are often empowered by the actions of external actors, whose motives and interests are regularly described in terms of stabilization and security. The paradox for the outside powers is that action on the basis of these twin objectives has supported an unstable and insecure system of power; protests across MENA attest to the way in which these two objectives enable processes that lead to instability and insecurity. International calls for democratization and transparent and accountable governance have not always been supported by adequate policies to empower forces of change or strengthen such processes—they have generally been displaced by the objective of security and stabilization.

The question that this analysis leads to is whether, by rethinking policies, the aims of stability and security may be achievable over the longer term. As the past decade demonstrates, the current approach is not leading in the right direction and local calls for change are increasing rather than dwindling. Is an alternative approach possible for external actors?

The analysis concludes by offering an affirmative response to this challenge, focusing on options for the EU. This paper covers a wide range of countries and identifies many issues that are common to the region as a whole but that need to be understood in local terms if they are to be addressed effectively. Rather than detailed proposals for addressing problems in each local and national context, the aim is to offer suggestions that can guide policymakers in their thinking and actions. These proposals focus on the potential for action by the European Union—specifically, the European Commission, the European External Action Service (EEAS) and its delegations in MENA countries—and individual EU member states or, when disagreement hinders a wider EU position, a collaboration of EU member states. This is not to neglect the role of other external actors. However, the EU is active in many fields and has many instruments at its disposal. Because MENA is a major neighbour of Europe, the EU has a legitimate basis for its interest in security and stability in the region and its affairs. Despite being the region's biggest trading

³³² Yousef, T. M. et al., 'The Middle East and North Africa over the next decade: Key challenges and policy options', Brookings Institution, 3 Mar. 2020.

partner, the EU is becoming less of an active player—the role of individual member states notwithstanding—and should reassess its role in the region.³³³

There are four core principles to identifying an alternative approach: rethink, refocus, reform and react.

1. *Rethink.* EU institutions and member states need to rethink their overall approach to the Middle East and North Africa. This would involve learning about the region and understanding how it is both an integrated region and highly diverse. It would involve understanding past policies and seeing their history from the region's perspective, diverse as it is. It would therefore involve listening to a range of different voices in the region and coming together to discuss the past and the future. The significance of the EU as an actor in MENA would be considerably increased if member states, through the EEAS, could form a consensus on its approach to the region. It is clear from this paper that failure to change will result in the continued reimposition of unstable equilibria in one country after another.
2. *Refocus.* The general process of rethinking where the EU stands in relation to MENA could be the first step in forming an approach to regional security and stability that takes the needs of the populations as the starting point. This could mean disagreeing with local elites' propensity to see every challenge as an issue of sabotage and instability. The current tendency to view MENA through the lens of security only acts as a self-fulfilling prophecy.
3. *Reform.* An emphasis on respecting the diverse realities and voices of MENA means that trying to generate or lead change from outside is not viable. But it is possible to offer support to positive developments, such as supporting small steps towards greater transparency and dialogue. These are necessary building blocks to address many of the core needs across the region. External actors can only help to facilitate the process, and smaller steps are more likely to be sustainable.
4. *React.* Policies should be based on local perceptions, needs and desires. Based on the trends and patterns highlighted in this paper, an environmentally sustainable approach to economic development and investment should be prioritized—this would entail supporting economic diversification and tackling local issues through locally focused investment.

³³³ European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR) MENA Programme, 'Mapping European leverage in the MENA region', ECFR, Dec. 2019.

Protest and State–Society Relations in the Middle East and North Africa

Nearly a decade after the Arab Spring, the substantial political change that many across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) have hoped for has yet to be seen. In fact, as the 2019 wave of protests shows, street protests continue to endure in the region, often over the same recurring issues.

This paper takes a regional approach to understanding the state of the social contract in MENA countries. It describes, country-by-country, the impact of protest movements, or their absence, on relations between society and the state, and the likely effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on those relations. It then examines the roles and impact of external actors, and the attitudes that they have adopted towards protests.

Based on this analysis, the authors recommend that the European Union (EU) adopts a new approach to regional security and stability that takes the needs of the populations as the starting point. This would involve a broader EU agreement on priorities in MENA that emphasize aspects that answer those needs.

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