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Responding to popular protests in the MENA region

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Question

How have governments in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) responded to popular protest movements, and what support have international actors offered? What were the outcomes of the governments' responses?

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1. Summary

This review looks at government responses to violent protests in a selection of countries in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). Focusing on the 2011 Arab Spring protests, it finds that the initial response of most regimes was violent repression – Tunisia where the president stepped down, and Morocco and Jordan where the respective monarchies promised reform, are the only exceptions. However, the consistent failure by MENA governments to address the socioeconomic as well as political underlying causes of citizens' grievances – in other words, their failure to genuinely accommodate protesters' demands – leaves them vulnerable to renewed protests. That is what is currently happening in most of the countries reviewed. But this time round, unwilling to carry out the kinds of radical reforms needed, virtually all regimes are responding with violent repression.

Government responses to violent protests can fall into the following broad categories: non-response, accommodation, non-violent repression and violent repression. This review examines which of these were used by governments in select countries in the MENA region, and the long-term effects of these: were citizens' grievances addressed, did reform take place, did regimes survive, and did protests die down over the long-term? It also looks at the role of international actors, specifically whether they exerted influence on governments to respond in a certain way.

The countries covered in this review are Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Morocco and Tunisia. They were chosen to be geographically representative (spread throughout the MENA region) and because they illustrate a range of government responses to violent protests.

Given the time constraints implicit in a limited review of this nature, it was impossible to cover government responses to violent protests in each country over extended periods of time. Hence the approach taken has been <u>to focus on one or more sets of violent protests that were especially large-scale/significant, and assess the response to these</u>. In most of the countries included in this review, those were the Arab Spring protests of 2011 (the exception is Iran, in which it was the protests following the 2009 presidential election results). The fact that most countries experienced protests around the same time facilitates comparison between their responses. Moreover, almost a decade has elapsed since those protests, and this provides a good perspective to assess what the long-term effects of government responses in each case were. It is also interesting to note that most of the countries covered in this review are currently experiencing significant public protests. This too allows comparisons to be made, both between individual country government's responses then (in 2009/2011) and now, and between different countries now. This review draws largely on grey literature and media articles.

Key findings are as follows:

- **Of the six countries reviewed, only one government response can be considered as genuine accommodation**: Tunisia. Jordan's is best described as nominal accommodation, while Morocco's fits best into non-violent repression. Other responses (in Egypt, Iran and Iraq) all fall overwhelmingly under violent repression.

- **The typical initial response by most governments to the 2011 Arab Spring/2009 Iranian elections protests, even Tunisia, was violent repression**. Only Jordan and Morocco did not resort to violence (or only limited use of force). Tunisia's switch to accommodation came about because violent repression wasn't working.

- **There were differences in the demands being made by protesters in 2011.** Thus in Tunisia and Egypt the call from the outset was for regime change (the ouster of Ben Ali and Mubarak respectively). But in Jordan and Morocco people were demanding reform rather than regime change.

- **Government responses can lead to changes in protesters' demands, typically by making them more radical.** This is seen where governments fail to keep reform promises (in such cases demands tend to change over the long-term), or if governments respond to protests with great brutality (in which case, demands can shift from reform to regime change very quickly). Examples of the former are being seen in Jordan and Morocco, where after years of failing to address citizens' needs, protesters are now calling for regime change. An example of the latter is Iraq, where the government's uncompromising crackdown on protests in 2019 led to demands changing from improved services and jobs, to a radical overhaul of the political system.

- **Tunisia is the only country where accommodation led to genuine political reform** – the ouster of the old regime and its replacement with democratic institutions, demonstrated by the conduct of successive free and fair elections. In the case of Jordan and Morocco, accommodation only comprised 'tweaking' with the system, while actual power remained with the respective monarchs. In the case of Egypt, where Mubarak did step down, he was quickly replaced by another ruler with military roots – hence, as in Jordan and Egypt, power has remained with the same groups.

- **The failure to carry out genuine reform, or in Tunisia's case the failure to address socioeconomic grievances, means that all countries are facing renewed protests**. The intensity of these varies from country to country, but in all cases the initial government responses (in 2009/2011) did not lead to long-term stability.

- **The cases reviewed here show that violent repression only works to end protests temporarily, and can often be 'counterproductive'**, in that it fuels greater anger and continued protests. Protesters' resolve and determination increases the more repressive regimes become and the more brutal the treatment meted out to them.

- **Social media is a powerful tool for protesters** – seen in Tunisia, Iraq and Iran in particular. Governments recognize this, because their responses increasingly feature measures to control social media or restrict access through internet outages.

- Various factors influence the actions of governments and protesters. One factor that has worked to the advantage of incumbents, e.g. in Jordan, Morocco and Egypt, is **fear of the alternative**. Conflict, violence and instability in countries like Syria and Libya – and the fear that the same could happen in their countries – can weaken domestic protests.

- **The role of the international community varies, but it is rare to see significant pressure being applied on regimes to accommodate protesters' demands**. In some cases, there is tolerance of human rights violations because the international community too is worried about the alternative – their national interests are served more by stability and the status quo, than by genuine democratic reform. This can facilitate governments which resort to violent repression.

- **All the countries reviewed are unstable and in an unpredictable position**. Virtually all are seeing what appear to be irreconcilable pressures: demands for radical change by protesters, versus determination by regimes to stay in power and to use increasing violence to do so. The situation in these countries is not sustainable over the long-term:

either regimes will have to give in, or they will end up with large-scale social unrest and civil war.

2. Classification of responses to violent protests

Government responses to protests are also highly diverse, covering 'a wide spectrum from complete tolerance to the harshest possible repression' (Carothers & Youngs, 2020: 23). Brancati (2016: 107-126) groups government responses to protest movements into the following four general patterns:

- **Non-response** or **toleration** of protests, in which governments allow protests to proceed but do not engage with them in any significant way.
- **Accommodation** or **concession** to protesters' demands, which could range from tokenistic offers such as agreeing to discuss issues without making specific reform commitments, or making political, economic, or other policy concessions that respond to protesters' demands in whole or in part.
- **Non-violent repression** through measures such as restricting demonstrations, controlling print and broadcast media, restricting communications media such as cell phones and the internet, and organising counter-protests.
- **Violent repression**, through deploying police, paramilitary, or military forces to use varying degrees of force against protesters, such as hand-to-hand weapons, tear gas, water cannons, or firearms using conventional or non-lethal ammunition.

Various factors influence government responses to protests and their decision to opt for accommodation or repression. These include the size of protests, the level of violence used in protests, the time duration of protests, the impact they have on daily activities and the economy, the demands being made by the protesters (reform of existing system vs. radical overhaul and regime change), the record of previous human rights violations and previous repression of protests, whether or not a country has strong economic ties internationally, and the existing 'level' of democracy in the country (Lucas, 2020). The types of responses and factors influencing responses are discussed fully in the helpdesk report accompanying this one: Lucas, B. (2020), *Responding to Protest Movements: Latin America and Eastern Europe*.

It is important to stress that the MENA countries included in this review do not always fit neatly into the above categories: in virtually all cases, government responses changed over time as the situation facing them developed, and could range from accommodation to violent repression. Hence a 'best fit' approach has been taken here, with the countries covered in this review slotted into the category (accommodation, non-violent repression, non-violent repression) which best characterizes the overall government response to violent protests. No examples of 'no response' were found in the MENA region.

3. Accommodation

Tunisia

Protests and government response

Tunisia was the country in which the 2011 'Arab Spring' of popular protest movements began. On 17 December 2010 Mohammed Bouazizi, a young vegetable seller frustrated with government corruption and economic hardship, set himself on fire outside a municipal office in the town of Sidi Bouzid (Angrist, 2013: 548). The incident was widely shared on social media, and led to street protests across the country against unemployment, poverty, corruption and political repression.

These protests were not the first against the government of President Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali. In 1984, following an International Monetary Fund (IMF) request to temporarily lift subsidies on basic foodstuffs, the cost of bread rose by 108% (Abdoueldehab, 2018). This triggered massive bread riots known as *intifadat al khubz*. The government responded with violent repression: almost 100 people died and around 1,000 were injured (Abdoueldehab, 2018). In 2008, a mass revolt against unemployment and economic hardship in the town of Gafsa went on for six months. Again the regime responded with violence, leading to several deaths and many injuries. But while the Gafsa revolt was put down, it was seen as a turning point: 'Gafsa and its aftermath helped chip away at the fear barrier that prevented many Tunisians from challenging the regime's repressive policies' (Abdoueldahab, 2018).

The response of the Ben Ali government to the 2010/2011 protests was initially violent repression: dozens of protesters were killed in clashes with the police. This in turn attracted international criticism; Ben Ali then dismissed the Interior Minister and pledged to set up an investigative committee to examine the response to the crisis. In the meantime, protests continued and spread to Tunis city: the government then deployed troops to control the unrest, but these were unable to do so. At this point the government response shifted from violent repression to accommodation. On 13 January 2011 Ben Ali appeared on national television and promised he would not seek another term as president when his current tenure ended in 2014. He also expressed regret over the deaths of protesters, and promised the police would not use live fire except in self-defence, food prices would be reduced and restrictions on internet use would be eased.

The concessions were not enough to appease the protesters, and clashes with the security forces continued, leading to further deaths. On 14 January a state of emergency was declared, and state media reported that the government had been dissolved and elections would be held within six months. That announcement also **failed to quell the protests: Ben Ali then stepped down as president and left the country.**

An interim government was initially formed, led by members of Ben Ali's party, Rassemblement Constitutionel Democratique (RCD). It promised measures to preserve economic stability and to establish political freedom in the country, and said it would act quickly to release political prisoners and end media censorship. Ongoing protests at the participation of RCD politicians led to the formation of a unity government which included opposition figures as well as some RCD ministers. This too triggered protests, and the opposition members then resigned over the inclusion of ministers from the previous regime. The latter then withdrew from the RCD and the interim government announced further reforms, including lifting Ben Ali's ban on opposition

political parties and granting amnesty to all political prisoners. In February 2011 the government officially suspended all RCD activities.

Outcomes

Since the 2011 revolution, **Tunisia has successfully held two rounds of elections**: the first represented an opening up of the political system with power going to a coalition of parties led by Ennahda, the main Islamist party. This went on to draft a new constitution in 2013, widely seen as the most progressive in the Arab world (Feuer, 2018). The second election in 2014 marked the defeat of an Islamist incumbent government and the first successful democratic transition of power in Tunisia (Chomiak, 2016a). The 2014 elections produced an alliance between Ennahda and Nidaa Tounes, the country's main secular party – showing that in Tunisia Islamist and secular parties could coexist and work together (Yahya, 2016; Feuer, 2018). The country's progress was internationally recognized with the award of the 2015 Nobel Peace Prize to the Tunisian National Dialogue Quartet for its contribution to building a pluralist democracy.

In terms of outcomes, then, Tunisia has definitely made progress on democratic reform and political freedom. Even though anti-government protests persist (see below) the literature stresses that the Tunisia of today is a very different place to that of 2010. 'Public political space has changed radically from a controlled and repressive dictatorship to a significantly more open pitch on which a battle of ideas can be loudly debated' (Chomiak, 2016a). 'Public debate in Tunisia has been marked by contentious and open discussions about previously taboo topics, including religion and political orders, rule of law, stability vs reform, gay rights….' (Chomiak, 2016a). Cordall (2018) echoes this: 'Eight years on, few would argue against the notion that Tunisia has gained its democracy and its people their voice'. Tunisia also appears to have contained the threat of Islamist extremism. The country experienced security challenges from Islamist extremism in the 2010s but measures such as improved border controls and counter-terrorism apparatus mean there has been no serious incident since 2016 (Feuer, 2018).

However, while there has been progress on the democratic front, **the second main source of grievance in the 2011 protests – economic hardship and corruption – has not been addressed**. Figures for the economy make for grim reading: unemployment rate of 15% nationally, rising to 30% among university students, and 30% in some of the hard-pressed towns of the interior; high fiscal deficit, and public debt eating up half of GDP; as of 2018, the currency had lost a quarter of its value in just two years; and 'skyrocketing prices' for staples such as meat and vegetables (Chomiak, 2016a; Feuer, 2018). In 2016 the IMF approved a four-year loan of USD 2.9 billion; in exchange the government agreed to shrink the public sector (which accounted for 50% of government expenditure), raise taxes and implement subsidy reforms – leading to price hikes.

Also significant is continuing inequality between the traditionally privileged capital and coastal populations, and those in the interior and south (Yahya, 2016). Kasserine, for example, a southern governorate, as of 2012 had a poverty rate of 32% compared with the national average of 15.5%, and an illiteracy rate of 32% compared with the 12% national rate (Yahya, 2016: 6). Such inequality – and popular resentment among marginalized populations – has only increased since the revolution.

The country saw **protests at the lack of jobs in the winter of 2016 and spring of 2017**, but those were mainly in traditionally marginalized communities in the interior. The 2018 Finance Act, brought in at the beginning of the year, imposed increases in the price of fuel, produce and other

goods, and caused Tunisians to take to the streets in over twenty locations – including the capital (Feuer, 2018; ICG, 2018). Protesters called on the government to increase the minimum wage and aid to poor families, and to address unemployment and the rising cost of living (Abdouldehab, 2018). They wanted a revision of the budget and the austerity measures imposed by the Finance Act.

What has also infuriated the public is that corruption and economic crimes continue, and – even more - that the government has actively tried to prevent perpetrators of corruption from being prosecuted (Abdouldehab, 2018). In 2017 the government of President Essebi got the Economic Reconciliation Bill passed, which effectively removed some economic crimes from the purview of the Truth and Dignity Commission, an independent state body set up in 2013 to examine government repression between 1956 and 2013 and recommend institutional reforms to prevent a backslide into dictatorship (Goldstein, 2019). The Reconciliation Bill also gave amnesty to some corrupt former officials. Popular anger at the bill gave rise to a movement called *Manich Msameh* (I will not forgive) (Chomiak, 2016).

The challenge for the government is to 'reconcile pressure from the street with that coming from its international partners, including the IMF, which has called for accelerated reforms and greater fiscal responsibility' (ICG, 2018). As of early 2018 the government's response to the protests 'suggested an attempt to **strike a balance between identifying with the economic grievances of average Tunisians and condemning the violence** to which some protestors have resorted in expressing those grievances' (Feuer, 2018). Thus, Prime Minister Chahed issued a series of statements acknowledging the country's economic severities and his government promised to give over USD 70 million in aid to poor families (Feuer, 2018; Abdouldehab, 2018). However, he also characterised the riots as serving 'networks of corruption' and indicated that the state would not tolerate acts of vigilantism (Feuer, 2018).

It is relevant to mention the role of the police in the past few years in Tunisia, in particular their response to the protests that have periodically taken place. Feuer (2018) notes that US security assistance to Tunisia has included police training, and that this made a difference to police handling of protests: 'The initial returns on this were apparent in 2016, when a similar outbreak was met with police restraint – widely seen as a product of US (and French) training and credited with preventing the protests from spiralling out of control'. However, the International Crisis Group, describing the protests in early 2018, claim that: 'The police, which must address the rioting, is showing signs of panic and over-reach: among the over 700 persons arrested since the unrest began are left-wing bloggers and activists who have conducted no illegal acts. The reversion to bad old habits of the era of dictatorship is dangerous' (ICG, 2018).

Prospects

Tunisia has faced violent protests throughout the past two decades. The response of the authorities up to the 2011 revolution was to suppress these through use of force. This was the approach initially taken in early 2011, but its failure to control the unrest led to a shift to accommodation. Ben Ali stepped down as president, an interim government took over, elections were held and a new coalition of parties took power. The 'accommodation of political demands' seen in 2011 has therefore had long-term effects: namely, a consolidation of democracy in the country. However, **there has been a failure by successive governments to accommodate demands for economic change – and that has led to periodic renewed protests. To date, the government's response to these has been a mixture of accommodation and violent repression.** The literature argues that Tunisia today is a very different country to Tunisia in 2011,

and hence the current protests are unlikely to lead to revolution. But it also warns that persistent failure to address economic grievances will ultimately impact Tunisia's democratic progress.

Role of international actors

The international community has played a generally supportive role for the promotion of democracy in Tunisia. Thus, after initial silence, world leaders such as Barack Obama, Nicholas Sarkozy and others praised the Tunisian people, and urged calm and restraint, and called for free and fair elections. As noted, international criticism of the crackdown by security forces on protesters, and the violence used which killed dozens, was a factor in Ben Ali's switch from violent repression to accommodation. Since Ben Ali's ouster international partners have continued to support Tunisia's democratic transition, largely in the form of vast amounts of concessional lending. However, Fabiani (2018) argues that this has been counterproductive: it has enabled successive Tunisian governments to make economically unsound policies, e.g. expanding the public sector to create jobs. It also means that Tunisia is facing greater pressure from lenders to take austerity measures – which, in turn, is making socioeconomic challenges worse, and contributing to rising public anger and protests.

Jordan

Protests and government response

Jordan was affected by the 2011 Arab Spring but to a far lesser extent than other countries in the region. Protests involved a very wide range of groups and communities, with sometimes quite diverse demands, but the overall focus was on reform rather than regime change.

The two key groups (populations) involved in the 2011 protests were Palestinians and East Bankers.[1] The former's protests featured the Islamic Action Front (IAF), Jordan's largest and most organized party, and the Muslim Brotherhood, as well as small leftist and pan-Arab nationalist parties. They demanded electoral and political reform, curbs on the powers of the king, and an end to corruption– but they refrained from calling for regime change (Ryan, 2014, cited in Idris & Laws, 2016). East Banker protests over socioeconomic grievances actually started within a few years of King Abdullah ascending the throne, and certainly long before the 2011 Arab Spring. They expressed anger at neoliberal economic policies; growing privatization; cuts in state subsidies, public sector employment and social welfare; the rising cost of living; and corruption (Idris & Laws, 2016). However, while frustrated with the monarchy, they were not calling for wider democratic reforms, as these would empower Palestinians who form the majority in Jordan.

In general then, both the Palestinian urban protests and those of the East Bankers targeted only parliament and the government, and avoided direct attacks on the monarchy. However, the anti-government protests in 2011 also included youth-based popular movements, known as al-Herak. These were based in East Banker communities that were traditionally loyal to the regime. But unlike their elders who sought material patronage, Herak

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[1] Jordanian society is divided into East Bankers (or Transjordanians) – the 'original' people living in the territory of Jordan, and Palestinian Jordanians – refugees who fled to the country in 1948 and 1967 and their descendants (Idris & Laws, 2016: 3).

activists demanded political rights. They called for the powers of the king to be reduced, electoral law revisions, and an end to corruption. They openly attacked and insulted the king. At its height, the Herak movement involved over 40 protest groups based in tribal communities and rural towns across Jordan (Idris & Laws, 2016).

The government's response to the 2011 protests did involve suppression, but not the large-scale use of force seen in other countries. Khorma (2014, cited in Idris & Laws, 2016) identifies 'the measured way in which the authorities dealt with the demonstrations, mostly avoiding bloodshed (unlike in neighbouring countries) as a factor preventing escalation and leading to a marked decline in protests'. In the early demonstrations, police even provided protesters with juice to cope with the heat, though as they continued their reaction was harsher, involving use of batons and tear gas. Many people were arrested in the demonstrations, but the king typically ordered their release after a short time (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2016: 9, cited in Idris & Laws, 2016).

However, violent repression was used against the youth Herak movement. This subsided in 2013, felled 'by an armada of repressive initiatives'. Yom (2015 cited in Idris & Laws, 2016) argues that the intensive efforts made by the regime to suppress Herak indicate how threatening it appeared. The regime 'sought to smash hirak groups through sweeping dragnets and coercive assaults' (Yom, 2015: 293, cited in Idris & Laws, 2016). The police and General Intelligence Directorate (GID) (which serves as the guardian to the throne and is very powerful) arrested hundreds of tribal protesters, and 'they were especially targeted for physical abuse due to their perceived disloyalty' as fellow East Bankers. Other GID activities in the Arab Spring uprisings included: financing pro-regime rallies, bribing journalists to write pro-regime stories and parliamentarians to denounce the opposition, infiltrating youth opposition movements and spreading anti-Islamist rumours in loyal tribal communities.

Despite this repression, **in general the government tried to give the impression of accommodating the demands of protesters in 2011**. It was **able to find scapegoats**: the king removed the government of Prime Minister Samir Rifai, and over the next two years brought in five different prime ministers and six different governments (Idris & Laws, 2016). It also made **commitments to reform**, and a series of domestic political reforms were introduced: the establishment of a constitutional review and National Dialogue committees; the creation of a Constitutional Court; changes to the Political Parties Law and the Public Assemblies Law; and the conduct of new rounds of national parliamentary and municipal elections (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2018: 5).

Outcomes

By 2013 anti-government protests in Jordan had subsided. As well as the measures taken by the government – repression of the Herak movement, GID actions against opposition groups, scapegoating politicians, and making reform commitments - one further very important factor contributing to this was the conflict in Syria, and ongoing turmoil in other regional countries like Libya and Iraq. This worked in the regime's favour by 'dampening Jordanians' appetite for a confrontation with the regime' (Itani, 2013: 5 cited in Idris & Laws, 2016).

> For now Jordanians have generally opted for stability and peace rather than demanding reform, given the devastation caused by civil conflict among their neighbours. All realistic scenarios for the future show the monarchy is highly likely to remain in place. No institution or group is nearly strong or independent enough to displace it, and arguably

public appdetite for regime change is negligible (Carrion, 2015: 7, cited in Idris & Laws, 2016).

The 2011 demonstrations appeared to have initiated some substantial changes to political life. However, the reforms were limited, and from 2014 onwards – taking advantage of the population's over-riding concerns about security (stemming from the Syrian conflict) – **the regime was able to reconsolidate control of the executive over the legislature and judiciary**. Terrorism was redefined in the Anti-Terrorism Law in the course of 2014, rendering it extremely vague, and the security apparatus was given greater latitude to restrict voices of dissent in the public sphere. In record time in early 2016, parliament approved constitutional amendments strengthening the executive: the king is now able to unilaterally appoint the head of the GID; chief judge and all members of the Constitutional Court; the Chief Justice; head of the Gendarmerie and commander of the army (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2018: 3). These appointments previously required the countersignature of the prime minister or minister of the relevant ministry. The king's powers over the legislative system include the ability to appoint and dismiss the prime minister, convene parliament for extraordinary sessions, dissolve the parliament, and ratify all legislation before becoming law (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2018: 9). In sum, 'Democratic advancement and active citizenship….remain rhetoric more than policy' (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2018: 29).

Since 2017 protests have re-emerged in Jordan. Two examples stand out. In 2018 the government made efforts to introduce legislation that would increase tax revenue by drawing more people into the tax net (currently a tiny proportion of Jordanians pay tax). Prime Minister Hani Al-Mulki, appointed in 2016, got the income tax law endorsed by the cabinet in May 2018 (Magid, 2018). But there was mass opposition to the proposed legislation, both on the grounds of reluctance to pay tax, and because of public distrust of the government and fears that tax revenue would go into the pockets of corrupt officials rather than be spent on improving services. King Abdullah, without whose backing the bill could not have been put forward in the first place, responded by dismissing Al-Mulki, and appointing a new Prime Minister, Omar al-Razzaz. Under pressure from the IMF and faced with spiralling debt and a dire budget crunch, al-Razzaz also put forward a tax bill in September 2018. While some details had changed, essentially this was the same as the Al-Mulki bill (Magid, 2018). Magid (2018) argues that the new bill must have had the support of the king, but – despite being far more influential - he delegated the role of promoting it to his prime minister. However, in this case the 'king's musical chairs game, shuffling out premiers while keeping the same despised policies' (Magid, 2018) did not work. Mass protests continued, and the government was eventually forced to revise its plans and turn to the Arab Gulf monarchies, who collectively pledged USD 2.5 billion to Jordan in grants and loans in order to stabilize its fiscal position (Sharp, 2019: 1).

In autumn 2019, 100,000 public school teachers organized a nationwide strike, demanding that the government raise teacher salaries (Sharp, 2019: 1). After the strike shut down schools for a month, the government partially acceded to their demands, despite budgetary strains as it attempts to cut expenses to comply with IMF conditionalities (Sharp, 2019: 1). While the government eventually responded to both the tax by accommodating protesters' demands, this has worsened the country's fiscal position – and is clearly not a sustainable approach.

Prospects

Sharp (2019: 1) argues that the monarchy in Jordan has remained resilient owing to a number of factors:

These include a strong sense of social cohesion, strong support for the government from both Western powers and the Gulf Arab monarchies, and an internal security apparatus that is highly capable and, according to human rights groups, uses vague and broad criminal provisions in the legal system to dissuade dissent by detaining protesters.

Despite this resilience, there are many worrying signs for the regime. Jordan faces serious socioeconomic challenges. There is growing public dissatisfaction with economic conditions, corruption, unemployment and inflation (Sharp, 2019). The influx of large numbers of Syrian refugees has exacerbated these problems. The recent protests over income tax and teachers' salaries were both major instances of unrest over economic conditions.

The aborted income tax legislation exemplified **King Abdullah's continued practice of scapegoating politicians, and presenting himself as pro-reform and sympathetic to the public's demands.** As seen, the strategy did not work in that case and attempts to use it in future are likely to face similar challenges. Furthermore, according to one analyst, King Abdullah's habit of dismissing prime ministers and governments is particularly harmful, in that it 'highlights to Jordanians the impotence and irrelevance of political institutions. It fuels public cynicism toward the political process' (Itani, 2013: 5 cited in Idris & Laws, 2016). It thus increases the chances of social unrest.

Given the growing challenges and likelihood of mass protests, and the failure of the 'traditional' approach of promising reform/changing the government, 'it is becoming unclear how the government of Jordan will be able to appease its restive public given the limited policy tools and financial options at its disposal' (Sharp, 2019: 1). Significantly, **public criticism is increasingly being directed towards the monarchy itself rather than the government.** 'The people used to blame greedy ministers and corrupt officials for their misery – and looked to the king for remedies. Now when they protest, as they often do, they call out King Abdullah by name' (*Economist*, cited in Sharp, 2019: 1).

Role of international actors

In the wake of the 2011 protests, the Jordanian monarchy's political reform efforts were directed at both domestic and international audiences, in particular the United States and the European Union (Ryan, 2014 cited in Idris & Laws, 2016). **King Abdullah contrasted Jordan's reform drive with the failure of other Arab regimes to reform** (and the subsequent unrest in the region), emphasising 'Jordan's exceptionalism'. 'Abdullah has followed a policy of continuing his father's paternalistic style of rule from a moderate, pro-West political viewpoint, claiming to gradually evolve the political landscape in Jordan from an autocratic state into a democracy with political pluralism' (EFDS, 2016: 1, cited in Idris & Laws, 2016). This portrayal has been effective in that **Western allies have placed only minimal pressure on King Abdullah to pursue greater domestic political reform**.

There are **other reasons for the lack of international criticism of the Jordanian monarchy**. King Abdullah and Jordan are valued by the Gulf States, who have given it substantial aid 'as part of what has been described as the conservative counter-revolution against the so-called Arab Spring' (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2018: 35). Both they and the West see it as an ally against Islamist extremism. King Abdullah has very effectively promoted himself as a leader of 'moderate' Islam. Jordan's credibility in the fight against extremism has been bolstered by the attacks it has suffered, and the counter-strikes it has carried out against Islamic State. This in turn enhances the king's personal standing domestically and internationally (Bertelsmann

Stiftung, 2018: 35). Related to this is that in the context of MENA, with conflict in Syria, Iraq, Libya and instability in many other countries, 'Jordan emerges as a stable island in a sea of upheaval' (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2018: 35). The monarchy has also been very successful at building on its close relationship with successive American administrations, to forge a solid network of bilateral relationships with state and non-state actors including Japan, the EU, the United Kingdom, Saudi Arabia, the IMF and World Bank (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2018: 36).

4. Non-violent repression

Morocco

Protests and government response

Morocco was among the countries least affected by the Arab Spring. Protests there started on 20 February 2011, giving rise to the name 'February 20 Movement' and were less intense and involved less people than those in neighbouring countries. The protesters called for economic, political and social change including increased freedoms, equality, democracy, and end to corruption and police oppression, as well as measures to improve healthcare and education, and address housing shortages, unemployment and inflation (Strachan, 2014: 1). Crucially, the **Moroccan protests did not feature calls for regime change** and the ouster of King Mohammed VI, who had ascended the throne upon the death of his father King Hassan II in 1999 (Chtatou, 2019).

Despite the relative failure to mobilize large numbers of Moroccans, and the fact that the movement was a loose coalition of liberals, leftists and Islamists who were calling for reform rather than regime change: the '**monarchy quickly grasped that the strength of the leaderless movement did not come from its numbers but from the legitimacy of their demands'** (Boukhars & Hamid, 2011). On 9 March 2011 King Mohammed made a speech in which he **promised constitutional change and wide-ranging reforms. This move effectively halted the momentum of the February 20 Movement.** In a speech on 17 June the king gave full details of the reforms: under the new constitution there would be an elected prime minister drawn from the ranks of the largest party in parliament; parliament would be able to play a stronger role in oversight of the executive branch; and a decentralization process would be started with more power devolved to elected regional councils (Boukhars & Hamid, 2011). To address socioeconomic grievances, the government doubled subsidies, raised public sector salaries, increased the minimum wage, recruited 4,300 graduates in the public sector, and cancelled farmers' debt (Boukhars & Hamid, 2011).

The changes, while apparently deep and wide-ranging, actually maintained the dominant position of the king: he remained the country's supreme religious and military authority, and continued to have veto power over all major decisions (Boukhars & Hamid, 2011; Schwarz, 2018). Nonetheless, the reforms put the February 20 Movement on the back foot 'trying – and struggling – to devise a response to one of the few Arab regimes that has demonstrated a flexible and apparently effective approach to the Arab revolts'. **The regime was also helped by the turmoil Moroccans saw in other Arab Spring countries** – they were keen to avoid a similar fate and hence put less pressure on the king (Strachan, 2014). As a result, King Mohammed VI was able to hold onto power with relative ease, and the 2011 protests in Morocco died down.

The monarchy's response to the 2011 protests continued a pattern of seeming accommodation that had been established by his father King Hassan II. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, King Hassan II reacted to social unrest and two military coup attempts through redistributive policies aimed at appeasing the constituencies of the political opposition: he raised the minimum wage, granted scholarships to all students attending university and expanded the parastatal sector (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2018: 4). In the 1990s, in response to growing opposition, Hassan II carried out liberalization measures to appease opponents and lessen international pressure with regard to Morocco's deplorable human rights record: political prisoners were released, press freedom increased, and constitutional reforms carried out to provide for the first direct elections of all members of parliament in 1997 (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2018: 5). On becoming king in 1999, Mohammed VI presented himself as a reformer, for example, setting up the Equity and Reconciliation Commission to identify and compensate victims of human rights abuses, and improving the legal status of women (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2018: 5).

Over the decades the monarchy in Morocco has also been very effective at co-opting opposition forces and public life. Thus, Morocco's political parties were quite active and effective during the 1960s and 1970s, but King Hassan II successfully 'disrupted this political scene by encouraging schisms within strong opposition parties and co-opting leaders of the opposition through rentier privileges as well as ministerial positions and political power' (Chtatou, 2019). Through this process, the parties became closer to 'tribal businesses' which 'guaranteed money, powerful jobs, and the benediction of the monarchy to their members in exchange for preserving the status quo' (Chtatou, 2019). In 1998 Hassan II appointed the main opposition leader (Abderahmane Youssoufi) as prime minister, and included two other opposition parties in the government, leading to them 'losing much of their reform drive and mobilization potential over time' (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2018: 5). Following his announcement of reforms, King Mohammed VI called early parliamentary elections in November 2011. The Party of Justice and Development (PJD), previously the most important opposition party, gained the most seats and its leader Abdelilah Benikrane became the head of the government. 'Nonetheless, the PJD – similar to previously co-opted opposition parties – has not been able to implement elements of its political agenda which stand in contrast to the monarchy's interests' (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2018: 5).

The **same approach was used to undermine the print media**, which by the 1990s was acting as a powerful accountability agent, criticizing both the government and the monarchy. The newspapers were offered financial rewards to praise the establishment – which resulted in falling sales and some print media organizations closing altogether (Chtatou, 2019). A third example of co-option is the **monarchy's control of religious affairs in Morocco**. Chtatou (2019) notes that the 'sovereign makes annual money gifts to the religious lodges of moderate Sufi Islam located all over the country to secure their infallible support, a tradition begun in the past that continues today'. During the 2011 protests, followers of the powerful Sufi Boutchichiya Tariqa lodge staged a mass demonstration in Casablanca in support of the monarch (Chtatou, 2019).

Outcomes

King Mohammed VI's prompt response to the 2011 Moroccan protests effectively defused them and enabled him to continue in power. However, the failure to carry out genuine democratic reform and to cede control to an elected government - 'Elected officials in Morocco do not possess effective power to rule' (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2018: 9) - mean that little progress has been made on addressing the challenges the country faces, in particular economic inequality and hardship.

Moreover, Chtatou (2019) claims that, '**Moroccans are increasingly recognizing and rejecting the state's attempts to co-opt the country's political field** because it enhances corruption, nepotism, tribalism, patriarchy and abuse of power'. He argues that the ineffectiveness of political parties has contributed to three prominent uprisings in Morocco's periphery: the hirak movement in the traditionally rebellious Rif region in the north, in the southern city of Zagora and in the ex-mining city of Jerada (Chtatou, 2019). The protests have spread to the capital, Rabat. Chahir (2019) describes crowds of thousands there chanting 'Long live the people' and 'Corrupt state'.

The government's response to these latest protests has been less one of accommodation, and more of non-violent as well as violent repression. On the former, accommodating the demands of protesters, Schwarz (2018) notes that: 'the monarchy reacted according to a well-known pattern: in July, some of the less known protesters were pardoned by the king, who also exhorted the political officials to do their job properly. By the end of October 2017, shortly before the anniversary of Mohsen Fikri's death[2], the king dismissed three ministers and several leaders, and appointed new ones'. However, as before in the wake of the Arab Spring protests and reforms, little has changed. A resident of the Rif commented: 'As always, the king shirks his responsibility and puts the blame on the politicians – but they cannot do anything without his consent' (cited in Schwarz, 2018).

Non-violent repression has been carried out largely through manipulation of religious leaders and through government-controlled media. Religion and religious figures have increasingly been used to discredit the protesters. In May 2017 the Ministry of Endowments and Islamic Affairs prepared a sermon delivered at several Al-Hoceima area (in the Rif region) mosques, accusing the protest leaders of stirring up fitna (a religiously loaded term connoting unrest against righteous authorities), spreading lies and deceiving the media (Monjib, 2017). One analyst commented: 'The authorities have always employed religion within politics and elections, but it has been even clearer in the case of the Rif movement' (Mohamed Chiker, cited in Monjib, 2017). The government has also tried to present some of the arrested leaders as extremists (Monjib, 2017).

Government-controlled media and social media have been used to attack the protesters. Government-run television stations were silent on the protests for a long time, but then slowly began attacking the leaders as separatists (working for foreign powers) and saboteurs (Monjib, 2017). Some channels published images allegedly showing property damage caused by rioters in Al-Hoceima, but they were actually from earlier football riots (Monjib, 2017). 'Independent' journalists have been tightly controlled by the authorities and occasionally prevented from reaching protest sites; a television team from France 24 was banned from producing a programme on the protests. The government also closely monitors Facebook and other social media networks to neutralize the most effective activists (Monjib, 2017).

Turning to violent repression, the leaders of the uprisings in the Rif, Zagora and Jerada, for example, were arrested and imprisoned to serve as a deterrent to others (Chtatou, 2019). Dozens of herak activists were sentenced by the courts to 20 years imprisonment – a verdict that

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[2] Mohsen Fikri was a fisherman in the Rif port city of Al-Hoceima. He was killed in October 2016, after police threw the fish he had caught into a garbage truck – when Fikri tried to retrieve the fish, the garbage compactor was activated and he died on the spot. Photos of his dead body spread quickly on social media, and triggered the hirak movement in the Rif. Moreover, thousands all over Morocco took to the streets to protest at the humiliation of ordinary people by the powerful. See Schwarz, 2018.

triggered widespread protests (Chahir, 2019). Moreover, the security forces have been engaged in trying to 'violently repress peaceful protests' (Chahir, 2019). Schwarz (2018) notes that, '**Protesters face massive repression, as evidenced by the arrest of hundreds of demonstrators and the persecution and intimidation of critical journalists and lawyers'**. In Jerada police broke up rallies by literally chasing the demonstrators with their vans (Schwarz, 2018). According to Amnesty International over 400 people had been arrested in Al Hoceima by November 2017, including 39-year-old Nasser Zafzafi, the movement's most prominent voice, who was facing life imprisonment (Schwarz, 2018).

Prospects

The monarchy in Morocco was able to survive the 2011 Arab Spring by making pre-emptive moves for reform. However, in reality power has remained with the King, and democratic institutions are weak and ineffective. For the past few years the country has seen growing unrest and anti-government protests, especially in the periphery but also in Rabat. Lacking options to carry out further 'nominal' reforms, and unwilling to cede power, the government is increasingly resorting to repression – some non-violent, but also growing violent repression. Unless the monarchy genuinely responds to calls for change, it is difficult to see how a further escalation of violence and mass unrest can be avoided.

Chahir **characterizes the 2019 protests as 'the dawn of a new Arab Spring'.** Significantly, he notes that 'the **king is starting to become the focus of sharp criticism**, especially on social media, something that was extremely rare in the past' (Chahir, 2019). Chahir warns that **violent social unrest could break out at any time in Morocco**: 'All it would take would be a catalyst, such as the death of a Rif leader on hunger strike, for the movement to be revived'.

Role of international actors

The international community, in particular the West, has generally had a positive attitude towards the monarchy in Morocco. The country was hailed for its reform efforts in the wake of the 2011 protests. Even though 'they did not touch upon the power base of the authoritarian monarchy – were sufficient to have Morocco recognized as a "country in transition" by the G8. This entails important economic support as well as political recognition for Morocco's "democratic processes"' (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2018: 35).

Morocco is viewed so favourably because it presents a stark contrast to the political instability, violence or outright civil war in much of the rest of the region. 'In this context, Morocco's political stability appears to Western countries worth supporting' (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2018: 36). Another consideration is that Morocco serves as a buffer zone for migrants from Sub-Saharan Africa, 'a position that has become increasingly important for European partners in the context of the refugee crisis' (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2018: 36).

According to the BTI country report on Morocco**, the pro-monarchy position of the West extends to ignoring human rights abuses being perpetrated by the Moroccan government** (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2018: 38):

> Human rights violations, lack of press freedom and the harassment of human rights NGOs continue to be worrying trends. These deficiencies have mainly attracted the attention of human rights organizations and press freedom watchdogs, but have not been properly taken up by intergovernmental actors. The ongoing disinterest of other governments signals their tacit toleration. In the wider regional context, Morocco's

political stability is likely to become even more valuable and further insulate the regime from critiques of its civil and human rights records.

5. Violent repression

Egypt

Protests and government response

Egypt was among the countries caught up in the 2011 Arab Spring in which the protests led to a change in the ruling order. Protests erupted on 25 January 2011, as thousands of people took to the street to voice their anger at the government of Hosni Mubarak, president since 1981, specifically at the widespread corruption and poverty in the country. **The initial government response was violent repression**: hundreds of protesters were killed in clashes with the security forces. But the uprising continued and **the government quickly shifted towards accommodation**. Mubarak tried to stay on, first, by promising not to seek re-election in September, and then by delegating power to his Vice President. However, on 11 February 2011 he had to cede control to the Armed Forces Supreme Council, which dissolved parliament and suspended the constitution. Mubarak was arrested and later convicted on charges of ordering the deaths of protesters in 2011, and sentenced to life imprisonment.

Multi-stage elections for Egypt's parliament were held between November 2011 and February 2012, and led to the Muslim Brotherhood (Freedom and Justice Party) winning around half the seats, the ultraconservative Islamist Al-Nour a further quarter, and the rest going to liberal, secular politicians. The first round of **presidential elections** was held in May 2012, and the second in June 2012, leading to the Muslim Brotherhood's Mohammed Morsi being sworn in as Egypt's first democratically elected President.

Outcomes

At this point, it appeared as if the Arab Spring protests had brought about genuine political reform and the introduction of democratic norms in Egypt. However, **the country's democratic progress quickly unravelled.** On the one hand, the Higher Constitutional Court declared the country's parliament invalid, and handed full legislative authority to the military. On the other, in November 2012, Morsi unilaterally decreed greater powers for himself, including an order preventing any court from overturning his decisions. The Islamist parties also rushed a new constitution through the constituent assembly which was subsequently approved by the public: 64% voted in favour of it, with a turnout of 32.9% (CNN, n.d.). As protests against Morsi's rising authoritarianism grew, he declared a 30-day night-time curfew and state of emergency in the provinces of Port Said, Suez and Ismailia. On 30 June 2013, the first anniversary of Morsi's election win, there were protests in Cairo and around Egypt demanding his ouster. Three days later he was removed from power in a military coup.

The 3 July 2013 coup effectively marked the return of power to the military/a military-backed ruler, which has persisted to the present day. Presidential elections were held in August 2014 and the former head of the military, Lt.-General Abdel-Fattah el-Sisi, won with over 96% of the vote (CNN, n.d.). He was re-elected in April 2018, again with 97% of the vote (turnout of 41%) (CNN, n.d.). Further signs of the 'reversal' of the Arab Spring revolution were seen in the treatment of Hosni Mubarak. In 2014 a judge dismissed murder charges against him and

acquitted his security chief over the killing of protesters in 2011; Mubarak and his sons were later convicted on corruption charges but in 2017 prosecutors ordered his release.

Even before taking power, and certainly since becoming President, **Sisi has done much to suppress political opposition.** On 24 November 2013 the Right to Protest law came into effect: this banned gatherings of more than ten people, with imprisonment or heavy fines for those who break the law. **Sisi's government has been particularly vigorous in its efforts to stamp out the Muslim Brotherhood.** Pro-Morsi protests in August 2013 were greeted with massive force by the police: over 600 people were killed when police cleared two sit-ins by Morsi supporters in Cairo (AP, 2018; CNN, n.d.) – hundreds more died in subsequent violence. In September 2013 an Egyptian court ordered the Brotherhood banned and its assets confiscated. By December, the government had designated the Muslim Brotherhood as a terrorist organization. In April 2014 the group's spiritual leader and 682 people were sentenced to death by an Egyptian court over violence and the killing of policemen (AP, 2018). In April 2015 Morsi was sentenced to 20 years in prison on charges linked to the killing of protesters in 2012. In July 2018, 75 people were sentenced to death for participating in pro-Morsi demonstrations in 2013.

However**, the crackdown extends far beyond the Muslim Brotherhood: the government has also been systematically targeting journalists, leading activists, NGOs and any critics of President Sisi** (Tahhan, 2018). A 2017 law criminalised the work of many NGOs and placed them under the direct surveillance of the country's security bodies (Tahhan, 2018). A 2017 Human Rights Watch report stated that Egypt's police and National Security officers were carrying out widespread and systematic torture of political prisoners.[3] According to one academic, as of 2016 there were 60,000 political prisoners, 830 people were tortured that year, and 434 websites were blocked (Dalia Fahmy, cited in Tahhan, 2018). Sisi's 2018 election victory came about after he eliminated any real opposition: 'At least six other candidates pulled out of the race, were prosecuted or jailed upon announcing their intention to run for elections or during their election campaigns' (Tahhan, 2018). One American academic commented: 'Egypt is much more authoritarian today than it was under any leader since Gamal Abdel Nasser…. Under Sisi, all oppositional activity has been outlawed, the Muslim Brotherhood banned, and political opponents – whether Islamist or secular – killed, imprisoned or tortured' (James Gelvin, cited in Tahhan, 2018).

Prospects

Egypt faces serious economic challenges. Sisi was initially able to stabilise the Egyptian economy, taking advantage of billions of dollars of Saudi and Gulf money that came into the country following his coup (Hessler, 2017; Tahhan, 2018). But given the underlying weaknesses in the economy – dwindling tourism revenue, very low manufacturing base, bloated civil service, massive subsidies on fuel and other goods – this was not sustainable. As of 2017 over a quarter of the Egyptian budget was being spent on government salaries, another quarter on interest payments for loans, and 30% more on subsidies, largely for energy (Hessler, 2017). Having refused in the past (in 2011 and 2013), in August 2017 the Egyptian government finally agreed to a loan from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) – under far more stringent terms. Government salaries were frozen, the Egyptian pound was devalued, energy subsidies were reduced, and a value-added tax introduced – 'a brutal combination in an economy that already has an inflation

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[3] Smith-Spark, L. (2017). 'Report: **Egypt** security forces "routinely torture political detainees"'. CNN, 7 September 2017. https://edition.cnn.com/2017/09/06/africa/egypt-torture-hrw-report/index.html

rate of more than 15%' (Hessler, 2017). In November 2017, the government allowed the currency to float, leading to it losing more than half its value. **Life has thus become much harder for the average Egyptian, with more than a quarter of the population living below the poverty line** (Hessler, 2017). Sisi's efforts to boost growth have focused on mega-construction projects, such as expansion of the Suez Canal, but most economists think these are unlikely to provide much short-term benefit (Hessler, 2017).

There is also conflict in the country's Sinai region. The major underlying cause of the conflict is anger among local Bedouin at the **Egyptian state's long-standing economic, social and political policies which serve to discriminate against and marginalize the Bedouin** (Idris, 2017). Examples include lack of political representation of the Bedouin, denial of land rights, and exclusion from the Sinai's tourist industry – a major source of revenue for Egypt and employment for migrant Nile Valley Egyptians. The trigger for the conflict was the 2011 Arab Spring, which created an opportunity for Bedouin tribes to rise up against the Mubarak regime, and (due to wider regional instability) fuelled an influx of weapons and militants into the Sinai. Over the years, and particularly since the ouster of Morsi in 2013, attacks on the police and security forces in Sinai have become more frequent, violent, sophisticated and ambitious (Idris, 2017).

The Sisi government's response to the Sinai conflict has been overwhelmingly security dominated. The state has carried out counter-insurgency operations and security crackdowns which affect militants and locals, fuelling resentment among the latter. Egypt's steps to stop smuggling of goods through the underground tunnel system linking Sinai and Gaza has had a particularly detrimental impact on the local Bedouin population, and further alienated them from the state (Idris, 2017). Sisi's use of brute force in the peninsula, rather than addressing the underlying grievances of local people and carrying out reform, has been criticised by analysts, who argue it heightens the violence in Sinai (Tahham, 2018). The ongoing Sinai conflict poses one of the biggest challenges for Sisi's government; peace requires a change of approach by Egypt – from violent repression to accommodation – but to date there is no sign of that happening.

Given the massive repression of all opposition to the government, the growing economic hardship and the ongoing conflict in Sinai, one could assume that Sisi's position is very weak. However, **a number of factors work in his favour: one of the biggest is fear of the alternative**. Libya, Syria and Iraq all illustrate what Egypt's future could be if there is another revolution. **Abdel-Fattah el-Sisi has consistently presented himself as a force for stability in Egypt,** and standing up to the threat of radical Islam. Egypt's experience of Islamist government under Morsi means the Islamist parties hold little appeal for Egyptians – and this too helps Sisi. Hessler (2017) argues that the possibility of total collapse in Egypt remains remote because, 'unlike colonial creations such as Syria and Iraq, Egypt has a powerful sense of unity – after all, it's the oldest country on earth'.

BUT there is little room for complacency. September 2019 saw rare anti-government protests in Cairo and other parts of the country, with those involved chanting Arab Spring slogans. The security forces responded by rounding up the protesters, while Sisi warned Egyptians against protesting or repeating the 2011 uprising (*Independent*, 2019). However, an Egyptian academic described the protests as a very important development because they were the first against Sisi's rule: 'The small demonstrations demolished the wall of fear installed by el-Sisi and that could lead to more protests in future' (Mustapha Kamel al-Sayyid, cited in *Independent*, 2019).

The international community has not always been consistent in its promotion of democracy and human rights in Egypt. Following the February 2011 ouster of Hosni Mubarak, in May President Obama announced USD 1 billion in debt forgiveness for Egypt, as well as USD 1 billion in loan guarantees to finance key infrastructure work and other projects (CNN, n.d.). When there were widespread protests against Morsi's rule in June 2013, the Obama administration urged him to hold early elections. However, it failed to define Morsi's ouster by the military as a coup – something that would have triggered an automatic cancellation of aid; instead, it temporarily withheld some key military equipment (Hessler, 2017). But later that year (9 October 2013), as Sisi carried out a massive crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood, the US did suspend hundreds of millions of dollars in military aid to Egypt (CNN, n.d.). The freeze on weapons shipments was ended in March 2015, despite Sisi's growing repression of all opposition voices. In August 2017 the US did finally take action, cutting almost USD 100 million in aid to Egypt and holding back a further USD 195 million until it saw improvements in the country's track record on human rights and democracy (CNN, n.d.). By the following July, the US was lauding the steps Egypt had taken in response to its concerns, and in recognition of this released the USD 195 million in military aid.

The oscillating position of the US towards Egypt on issues of democracy and human rights makes sense if one assumes that Washington's primary concern is its own national interests (best served by stability in Egypt), rather than the promotion of genuine democracy in the country. Like many Gulf countries (notably Saudi Arabia and the UAE) who fear Islamist parties, Washington sees Sisi as preferable to the alternatives. Hessler (2017) argues that donor countries:

> have always been motivated by narrow definitions of stability: the US wants peace between Egypt and Israel, and the Gulf wants peace between Shiite and Sunni countries. All of them want an Egyptian government that fights Islamic extremism. If they truly desired social and political change, they wouldn't direct the majority of their funding toward the Egyptian military, a conservative institution with no expertise in economics, education, or social and political policy.

Iraq

Protests and government response

Despite having an elected government in power (post-Saddam Hussain), Iraq was not immune to the Arab Spring protests in 2011. However, these were on a far lower scale than in other MENA countries. People voiced their anger at the government's failure to improve services (in particular at electricity shortages) and at cutbacks in food rations (Ottaway & Kaysi, 2011). **Having seen regimes in Tunisia and Egypt topple within weeks of protests starting in those countries, the Iraqi government was quick to respond**. **It made economic promises**: the creation of 280,000 jobs, a monthly allowance of 15,000 dinars to each citizen to make up for the decreased food rations, and an end to electricity shortages by winter (Ottaway & Kaysi, 2011). **It also took political steps:** Prime Minister Maliki announced a 50% cut in his own salary, promised he would not run for a third term, and that he would seek a constitutional amendment imposing a two-term limit on the position (Ottaway & Kaysi, 2011). However, some violence was used, particularly in the provinces, and Maliki claimed that 'unnamed parties' were 'fomenting unrest', and that the Baathists were behind the protests (Ottaway & Kaysi, 2011). Ottaway and Kaysi

(2011) conclude that the February 2011 protests in Iraq, while modest, did shake the governing alliance.

In the years following the Arab Spring, Iraq saw periodic protests but these too were small-scale and didn't build up into a significant movement. That changed in October 2019. Public frustration at the government's failure to resolve the country's problems and improve living conditions grew. Many Iraqis live in poverty; youth unemployment is running at 36% and services remain poor – including lack of clean water and ongoing electricity outages (Bunyan, 2019; Jiyad, 2020). This is despite Iraq earning USD 65 billion in oil export revenue in 2018 (Bunyan, 2019). The public are also angry at the fact that the country's damaged infrastructure has still not been repaired/rebuilt – sixteen years after the ouster of Saddam Hussain and two years after the defeat of ISIS. The 'country is on the brink of a socio-economic implosion as a result of a youth bulge, economic degradation, and dilapidated infrastructure' (Alaaldin, 2020). Iraqis attribute the hardship they face to corruption on the part of those in power. Transparency International ranked Iraq the 12th most corrupt country in the world in 2018 (Bunyan, 2019).

These were **long-standing grievances**, but people seem to have been pushed to protest on the streets by **two triggers in late September 2019**. The first was the circulation of videos on social media showing postgraduate degree holders who had been demonstrating peacefully at the lack of jobs, being dispersed with water cannon by the security forces – many saw this as heavy-handed. The second was Prime Minister Adel Abdul-Mahdi's decision to demote Lt. Gen. Abdul-Wahab al-Sahdi from his post as head of counter-terrorism. Sahdi was a popular figure because of his role in freeing Mosul and defeating ISIS, and his demotion – variously described as due to his stance against corruption and/or his cooperation with the US and Saudis (drawing Iranian ire) – was seen as an insult.

The protests started in Baghdad on 1 October 2019. The government's response was an immediate and aggressive crackdown on the protesters: 150 were killed and scores injured in just the first week, with the security forces using water cannons, tear gas and live ammunition to clear them (Kirby, 2019). In addition an **internet blackout** was imposed in certain regions to stop people organizing on social media, and a curfew was imposed in Baghdad (Kirby, 2019).

The violent response by the government had the opposite effect to what was intended: rather than repressing the movement, it provoked massive public anger and led to many more people joining the protests. It also led to the protesters changing their demands: whereas at the beginning they had been calling for basic services, electricity, jobs and the like, the brutality of the security forces led to them calling for a complete change in the political system – for the government to resign, new electoral laws, fresh elections (Kirby, 2019).

Another feature that makes the current protests in Iraq different from previous ones is the **level of grassroots activism**: 'Instead of traditional forces, whether it's a political party or leaders of groups, being behind the mobilization, this time it was the citizens of Iraq who made this happen' (Bunyan, 2019). Moreover, **the protests cut across ethnic, sectarian and other lines**. 'These grievances unite all of those who have come to the street: the young people, the workers, the poor, the educated and the barely literate, the tribal leaders as well as urban street sweepers' (Rubin, 2019). Al Aqeedi (2020) argues that it is fostering a new Iraqi nationalism: 'For protesters, sectarian identities and religiously motivated imperatives took a back seat to a sense of belonging to Iraq'.

The government did also make some efforts to accommodate the protesters' demands. Iraqi leaders met with the protesters and promised to increase funding for certain services; Prime Minister Abdel Mahdi issued a reform plan that included more subsidies to the poor and educational and job training (even while he said there was no 'magical formula' to solve the country's problems); and on 31 October, President Salih promised electoral reforms to make the government more representative, along with other judicial and governmental reforms (Kirby, 2019). Salih also promised that the prime minister would step down once a suitable replacement was found. Al-Mahdi did resign in November but agreeing on a successor proved difficult and he stayed in office for a further two months. On 1 February 2020 Mohammed Allawi was nominated as prime minister.

However, alongside these 'concessions' **the violent repression continued unabated**. By the end of the year, over 500 protesters had been killed and 19,000 wounded (Rubin, 2019). By end January 2020 the number of dead had risen to over 600 (Alaaldin, 2020). Moreover, Rubin (2019) notes that, 'While the pace of killings in Iraq has ebbed and flowed, the attacks have become more brutal and there has been an increase in kidnappings, arrests and disappearances of protest leaders, doctors who treat wounded protesters, and journalists'. Bunyan (2019) also reports that activists and physicians have been killed or kidnapped while giving aid to demonstrators in Baghdad. Many of the security forces involved in combatting the protests have ties to Iran (those that grew out of armed Shiite groups, e.g. the Popular Mobilization Force or PMF[4]). These have followed Iran's approach to dealing with its domestic unrest: when faced with protests over gas prices in November 2019, Tehran 'crushed them brutally, killing as many as 450 people in four days and imprisoning 7,000' (Rubin, 2019).

Outcomes

The protests have not died down. After the first week of protests in early October and the government's brutal crackdown, there was a two-week lull in the protests, but they started again in earnest around October 25 and have sustained themselves ever since (Kirby, 2019). In January 2020 the United States killed Iranian commander Qassem Soleimani in Iraq. The fallout from that 'was expected to signal the death-knell of the movement, but even that has failed to decisively end what is arguably Iraq's biggest grassroots socio-political mobilization in history' (Alaaldin, 2020). Rubin (2019) echoes this assessment of the significance of the current protests: 'The political crisis that now controls Iraq is as serious as any since the overthrow of Saddam Hussein 16 years ago'.

Prior to the appointment of Prime Minister Allawi, the protesters had had the backing of one of Iraq's most powerful religious leaders, Moqtada al-Sadr. His Sadrist movement served as an important buffer against the militia groups such as the PMF that have been responsible for killing and injuring civilian protesters (Alaaldin, 2020). However, in late January 2020, a deal struck between al-Sadr, the Iraqi government under Prime Minister Allawi and Iran's proxies has resulted in the cleric withdrawing his support (Alaaldin, 2020). The protesters immediately rejected Allawi on the grounds that he belongs to the same political establishment they are trying to remove (Jiyad, 2020).

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[4] 'The 100,000 strong PMF was formed in response to the collapse of the Iraqi army, when ISIS seized Mosul in 2014. It is led and dominated by Iran-aligned groups that have been at the forefront of the violent crackdown against protesters. The power of the PMF is such that it has subsumed Iraq's regular army' (Alaaldin, 2020).

Iraq today is characterized by two seemingly irreconcilable realities: the resilience of the protesters and their determination to press on with their demands for a complete overhaul of the political system; and the apparent impossibility of the government giving in to those demands.

As noted, protests in Iraq have continued despite – or rather, because of – the brutal efforts by the government to repress them. The vast numbers of people killed seems to have made others even more determined. However, according to Alaaldin (2020) 'the zero-sum approach from the movement – calling for the entire overhaul of the political system – makes them their own worst enemy'. As Rubin (2019) notes, 'Parliament is unlikely to adopt reforms that would end the careers of everyone in it'. Allawi has signalled a willingness to meet demonstrators' demands for reform, and has said he supports holding early elections (Jiyad, 2020). Jiyad (2020) argues that the most he can hope to achieve is, one, protecting protesters, restoring a sense of security on the streets and securing a measure of justice for those who have been killed, and, two, delivering on early elections. But it will be impossible for him to deliver on the deeper reforms the protesters are demanding. **By insisting on nothing short of complete change, the protesters are setting themselves up for defeat.**

Alaaldin (2020) points out that – as well as the obvious opposition from the political elite - there are **few others who support what the protesters are calling for**. 'The environment is not conducive to a wholesale deconstruction (followed by reconstruction) of the state or its political system, and there are very few, if any, major actors internally in Iraq and externally that want a revolutionary change that effectively upends the post-2003 political order in its entirety' (Alaaldin, 2020). He concludes that the protesters will not succeed (Alaaldin, 2020):

> Iraq's ruling elites are likely to stay in power even if the protests reach critical mass. In other words, save for its destruction by way of an external invasion, a country-wide civil war (which itself requires a decisive victor), or another dictatorship that is brought about through a coup, for example (and even then, Iraqis may be worse off than they currently are), the current system will prevail.

Role of international actors

International actors – and specifically Iran – have played a major role in the Iraqi government's response to the current protests. Iran exerts massive influence in Shia-majority Iraq: as noted, many of the militia groups in Iraq have loyalties to Iran; Tehran's interests are taken into consideration when deciding the composition of the government – one reason for the delay in Prime Minister Al Mahdi stepping down was Iranian reluctance to see him go (Kirby, 2019). As one analyst notes: 'Iran is the most powerful external actor in Iraq today. Iran is effectively the power broker' (Lina Khatib cited in Bunyan, 2019). One of the aspects of Iraq's political system that has angered protesters is the level of Iranian influence – the fact that the country's politicians are more concerned about keeping Tehran happy than addressing the needs of their own citizens. The current protests have therefore featured anti-Iran slogans.

Given all this, it is no surprise that **Iran wants the protests crushed**: 'It is not in Iran's interests for the protests to succeed, because it sees them as a threat to its own influence in Iraq' (Khatib, cited in Bunyan, 2019). Rubin (2019) argues that the growing hostility between Iran and the United States makes Iraq even more important to the former:

Iran is particularly concerned that it maintain influence in Iraq's ministries, especially those dealing with security and economic matters. With America's tight sanctions against Iran, Tehran increasingly needs Iraq in order to "breathe" economically — both for its markets and for military purposes, to protect its interests in Syria and Lebanon.

Ironically, something that unites Tehran and Washington is their opposition to regime change in Iraq. The US government has made statements condemning the violence being meted out to the protesters, albeit seeming to blame Iran more than the government in Baghdad: 'Iraqis won't stand by as the Iranian regime drains their resources and uses armed groups and political allies to stop them from peacefully expressing their views' (10 November 2019 US statement cited in Bunyan, 2019). The US has also called on President Salih to keep his promises for electoral reform and to call early elections (Bunyan, 2016). However, the protests have attracted little media attention in the US: an anti-US protest organized by Moqtada el-Sadr in January, and an attack on a US diplomatic facility, drew far more coverage (Al Aqeedi, 2020). Moreover, despite the statements in support of the protesters' right to demonstrate, Alaaldin (2020) argues that the United States (and the wider international community) are opposed to their demands for the entire political system to be overhauled:

> Iraq's protesters may have to also come to terms with the reality that the international community is actually much more aligned with the Iraqi ruling class (even the militias brutally suppressing them) than they think. There is far too much at stake and far too many dangerous uncertainties in a post-war climate in Iraq and the region for any major external actors to seriously contemplate backing or actively supporting an attempt to overhaul Iraq's political system.

Iran

Protests and government response

This review focuses on three sets of protests in Iran and the government's response to them: those in 2009 following presidential elections; those in November 2019 over gas price increases; and the most recent in January 2020 over the military's shooting down of a Ukrainian passenger plane.

In June 2009's presidential elections, opposition supporters were confident – based on the campaign and polling on the eve of the election – that incumbent hardliner Mahmoud Ahmedinejad would be defeated by former prime minister and reformist candidate Mir Hussein Moussavi. However, official results gave Ahmedinejad 62.6% of the vote, and Moussavi just under 34%, with a record 85% turnout (Worth & Fathi, 2009). Moussavi alleged widespread election irregularities and called on Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khameini to intervene. The latter refused, instead congratulating Ahmedinejad on his victory. The results and Moussavi's rejection of them, prompted tens of thousands of his supporters to come out on the streets in protest – in the capital Tehran as well as in other major cities. From this **the 'Green Movement' emerged**, taking its name from the green sash given to Moussavi by reformer and former President Mohammed Khatami (Milani, n.d.). Over the next six months the Green Movement grew into a **nationwide force demanding democratic rights and challenging the country's leadership**. At its height, there were 3 million protesters on the streets of Tehran (Milani, n.d.).

The authorities responded strongly. Universities in Tehran were closed, cellphone transmissions were blocked along with access to Facebook and some other websites, text-messaging services were shutdown. Moussavi and his wife were placed under house arrest (– they have still not been released). Before long violent repression was also used, and this increased as momentum grew behind the Green Movement. Security forces including Revolutionary Guards, the Basij paramilitary units, and plain-clothed paramilitary forces were deployed: thousands of protesters were beaten, hundreds were arrested, and dozens killed by snipers (Milani, n.d.).

In autumn 2009 over 100 of the movement's most important leaders and activists appeared in Stalinesque show trials (Wright, 2020). They were forced to confess their crimes on national television: a common point the regime tried to convey was that the Green Movement was a creation of the US, designed to weaken the Islamic regime (Milani, n.d.). Others were tortured and killed in prison. Newspapers, magazines and websites close to the Green Movement were also shut down, and many journalists imprisoned (Milani, n.d.). In all some 72 people were killed by the security forces (Mackintosh, 2020). **The repressive approach was eventually effective: by early 2010 the Green Movement had died out.**

The November 2019 protests began after the government announced a sudden and massive increase in gas prices, following the removal of subsidies. Within days there were demonstrations across the country, condemning the 50%-plus rise in prices, and calling for the downfall of the government.

The protests were 'smothered in a government crackdown of unbridled force' (Mackintosh, 2020). The security forces opened fire on unarmed protesters. Over the course of four days, between 180 and 450 people were killed (possibly many more), at least 2,000 were wounded, and 7,000 detained (Mackintosh, 2020). In the southwest city of Mahshahr alone, which saw some of the largest protests and whose population is ethnic Arab, a reported 130 were killed, including between 40 and 100 killed in a 'massacre' when they tried to seek refuge from the security forces in a marsh (Mackintosh, 2020). The bodies were only returned to the families after five days, after they signed paperwork promising not to hold funerals or memorial services and not to give interviews to the media (Mackintosh, 2020). A human rights group asserted, 'The recent use of lethal force against people throughout the country is unprecedented, even for the Islamic Republic and its record of violence' (Centre for Human Rights in Iran, cited in Mackintosh, 2020). The violent repression of the protests by the authorities was accompanied by an internet blackout that lasted five days. One analyst summed up: 'The government's response was uncompromising, brutal and rapid' (Henry Rome, cited in Mackintosh, 2020).

What was worrying for the government was that the November 2019 protests didn't just involve the 'usual suspects' – young, educated, liberal people from the urban middle classes. Rather the **unrest was concentrated in neighbourhoods and cities populated by low-income and working class families – traditionally conservative and loyal to the Islamist government** (Mackintosh, 2020; Wright, 2020). Equally significant was that the **protesters' hostility and anger was targeted directly at Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei.** He responded by calling the government's crackdown a justified response to a plot by Iran's enemies at home and abroad (Mackintosh, 2020).

In January mass protests erupted again, this time after the government finally admitted it was responsible for the downing of a Ukrainian passenger plane on 8 January. For three days the authorities tried to cover up the fact that an Iranian missile had hit the plane, and instead blamed

the crash on technical faults. Iranians were angry both at the shooting down of the plane – most of the passengers were Iranians – and, even more, at the government's lies. Demonstrations started on university campuses in Tehran but soon spread to at least a dozen cities (Wright, 2020). This time the **protesters were even more direct in their attacks,** with chants of, 'Death to the liars!', 'Clerics, get lost!' and 'The Supreme Leader is a murderer!' (Wright, 2020).

The response by the government was a mixture of repression, but also some attempts to placate the public. Thus, the security forces were deployed to break up protests: tear gas and live ammunition were reportedly used, and riot police beat people with batons (Nada & Stephan, 2020). In addition, the authorities cut off internet connections around key hotspots (e.g. universities) in an attempt to contain the protests (Nada & Stephan, 2020). But the judiciary also announced the arrest of people linked to the shooting down of the Ukrainian plane – though they didn't give names or numbers (Wright, 2020). President Rouhani promised that those responsible would be punished (Mackintosh, 2020).

As with the November 2019 protests, what was significant about those in January was that they **involved those who would not traditionally have criticized the regime** (Hincks, 2020; Mackintosh, 2020). Resigning from the state broadcaster, popular host and journalist Gelare Jabbari asked viewers to forgive her for the '13 years I told you lies', and the editor-in-chief of the right-wing Tasnim news agency, tied to the Islamic Revolutionary Guards, tweeted, 'We are all ashamed before the people' (cited in Hincks, 2020).

Outcomes

In all three waves of protests detailed above, the Iranian government was able to suppress them with force. However, Iran is far from stable. The spontaneity and speed with which Iranians came out in protest at the gas price increase and the shooting down of the Ukrainian plane, and the anger they showed, reflects the country's dire economic and political situation. Despite having the world's fourth-largest oil and second-largest gas reserves, poverty rates in Iran have been on the rise since 2013 (Nada & Stephan, 2020). The reimposition of sanctions by the Trump administration in 2018 placed Iran back under huge economic pressure, unable to earn revenue from oil exports. In the past year, Iran's economy has contracted according to the IMF; prices for basic necessities have soared; unemployment is high, and underemployment chronic (Wright, 2020). The gas price rise was designed to help fill Iran's 'yawning budget gap' (Mackintosh, 2020). Iranians acknowledge the role of sanctions, but also blame government corruption and mismanagement (Wright, 2020).

On top of this are the obvious restrictions on freedom of the press, freedom of expression and dissent in the country (Manfreda, 2020). Electoral candidates are rigorously vetted so that elections are essentially a contest between hardline and moderate supporters of the regime. Journalists and bloggers are frequently arrested and sentenced to prison. Numerous websites are blocked.

Internationally, as well as pressure from the US, Iran faces increasing hostility from its neighbours in the Middle East (Iraqis, for example, as seen above). Iranians are frustrated that their government is so focused on pursuing its foreign policy agenda, when there are so many domestic problems. 'Most Iranians are more concerned with stagnant living standards rather than foreign policy. The economy can't flourish in a constant state of confrontation with the outside world' (Manfreda, 2020). Moreover, Manfreda (2020) claims many Iranians believe those in

power 'deliberately perpetuate tensions with the West to distract the public from domestic problems'.

Prospects

There is consensus in the literature that Iran is likely to continue seeing mass protests:

> **The pace of protests is now more frequent, the tone more anti-establishment**, and the government's reaction more violent. The leadership's abject failure to allow any serious reforms has brought the system to a dead-end. It is unlikely to regain the trust and support of the middle class and is increasingly losing the support of its own more pious/poorer constituents (Vaez cited in Wright, 2020).

At the same time, there is **no indication that the government will change its response, which to date has been one of brutal repression.** Ayatollah Khamenei is the only person with the authority to bring about real change, but he has consistently ordered a repressive response to public protests. In the tussle between protesters and government in Iran, analysts do not see the former succeeding. Emmanuel Karagiannis, a London academic, explains that for an uprising to become a revolution, the opposition needs its own leadership and a shared ideology – Iranian protests have neither (cited in Mackintosh, 2020). Another analyst draws the same conclusion: 'The Iranian regime has been in power for over 40 years. Of course, it could collapse but it's hard to see that happening without the elements that would need to be in place….an organized and united opposition' (Vakil, cited in Mackintosh, 2020).

Role of international actors

The role of international actors in Iran is complex, making it difficult to focus specifically on their role in government responses to violent protests in the country. The United States is probably the most important member of the international community, in terms of the impact of its policies and actions on Iran. After decades of hostility, relations between the two countries improved sufficiently to allow signing of a deal in 2015 between the US, European and other allies, and Iran, whereby the latter agreed to end its nuclear programme and the former agreed to ease sanctions restricting Iran's ability to trade (Manfreda, 2020). However, the election of President Trump in 2018 reversed that approach and relations have deteriorated so much that the two countries were considered to be on the brink of war in early 2020.

Iranian hostility to the US and the West, and the hardships caused in Iran as a result of Western sanctions, mean that international actors have to be very careful about intervening in the country's domestic protests. Too vocal support for protesters by Washington and others would feed into the narrative already often used by the Iranian government that the protesters are acting at the behest of foreign powers, who want to undermine the Islamic Republic. This concern was evident in President Obama's response to the 2009 post-election protests in Iran. While saying he was 'deeply troubled' by the violence, Obama said: 'It is up to Iranians to make decisions about who Iran's leaders will be. We respect Iranian sovereignty and want to avoid the United States being the issue inside of Iran'.[5] A consistent message from the West to Tehran has been that the eyes of the international

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[5] Black, I. & Deghan, S. (2009), 'Iran uprising turns bloody', *The Guardian*, 16 June 2009. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2009/jun/15/iran-elections-protests-mousavi-attacks

community are on the country – with the hope that this will deter the regime from using violent repression. As seen, the effectiveness of that has been limited at best. It is beyond the scope of this review to examine the history of Iran's relations with the West, but it is a moot point whether more could have been done by the international community to encourage reformist movements in Iran.

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