



Language

A series of major popular unarmed protests across North Africa and the Middle East in 2019 led some journalists and scholars of the area to speculate about a 'second wave' of the 2011 Arab Spring, or the reappearance of a longer term movement for major social change. The countries where the most significant popular uprisings occurred - Algeria, Iraq, Lebanon and Sudan - had not played a prominent role in the 2011 wave of unrest. As in 2011, more minor political demonstrations occurred in the monarchies of Jordan and Morocco. There were also protests in Tunisia, which despite its relatively successful democratization since 2011 has major economic and continuing political difficulties. Attempts to protest in Egypt were quickly crushed. One other country which experienced significant public unrest in 2019 (but not 2011) was Iran, which has also experienced a very distinct political evolution and emergence of resistance since the overthrow of the Shah in 1979.

Two particularly impressive examples of people power led in April 2019 to the ousting of autocratic presidents after a prolonged period in office: in Algeria and Sudan. Both movements maintained sustained pressure to consolidate moves towards greater democracy. In Algeria the Hirak (movement) prevented elections in April, in which the aged and ailing President Boutefleka was planning to stand for a fifth term in office. Further weekly demonstrations to challenge the military-backed regime continued up to March 2020. The movement vowed to revert to open resistance once Covid-19 restrictions were lifted. In Sudan the movement ensured, after the fall of the military dictator Bashir, an agreement on a three year transition to democratic elections. Neither country had joined in the 2011 political uprisings. Despite significant protests in Algeria in December 2010 and January 2011, the regime prevented a political insurrection through a mixture of economic concessions and a show of force. The people in both Algeria and the Sudan were probably also deterred by their recent experience of dislocating political violence. In Algeria the rise of Islamic extremism had led to a military coup in 1992, and subsequent civil war against Islamists in the 1990s, which caused an estimated 200,000 deaths. Boutefleka came to power in 1999 and did play a role in ending the civil war. In Sudan the people had suffered brutal suppression of regions seeking to break away, and a civil war which led to the independence of South Sudan in 2011. Sudan had also experienced its own distinct historical cycle of revolution and repression since it gained independence.

Similar considerations apply to two other countries where major resistance occurred in October 2019: Iraq and Lebanon. In Iraq the US-led invasion of 2003 toppled the dictator Saddam Hussein and imposed new political institutions, designed to ensure power-sharing between Shia and Sunni representatives. But this political structure intensified, rather than mitigating, divisions. Iraq also suffered from intervention by extreme jihadi forces, especially the alarmingly successful attempt by ISIS in 2014 to take control of key cities and impose its own fanatical version of Islamic rule, before the slow fight back by the government (with external military aid) in 2015-17. There had, nevertheless, been evolving protest since 2011 about corruption and poor services, but the 2019 protests were different because many demonstrators came from Shia provinces and because of the scale of the spontaneous popular revolt. The government responded with a violent crackdown.

The people of Lebanon, with its own complex history of internal violence, and its own cycle of popular resistance, did not take part in 2011. The uprising which began in October 2019, however, seemed to promise a real potential for regime change. But in 2020 the impact of Covid-19, followed by the huge explosion in early August of a stockpile of 2,750 tons of ammonium nitrate that destroyed lives, homes, hospitals, tower blocks and other buildings and businesses, as well as the port of Beirut itself, revealed the prolonged criminal negligence of the governing authorities, led to a sense of popular despair. (See [E.V.A. 2. Lebanon, 2b](#). [1])

In Iran resistance to the regime, in which the rigid Shia religious establishment played a dominant role, achieved significant support in the 'Green Movement' of 2009-10, but was crushed. The surge of protest in November 2019, which spread from the provinces to Teheran, had been preceded by large demonstrations in 2017. These demonstrations also starting in provincial cities, and primarily reflected economic distress, but were also linked to political frustration. But in 2019 some protesters also indicated their support for other popular uprisings in the region. The November 2019 demonstrations were suppressed with extreme force, culminating in hundreds being shot. (For the more politically motivated demonstrations of January 2020, in response to the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps shooting down a civilian Ukrainian passenger jet by mistake, and for references on Iranian resistance see [E.V.A. 1. Iran, 1.c](#). [2])



Parallels and Differences between 2011 and 2019

As in 2011, economic hardship and youth unemployment were major reasons for rebellion, but, as already noted, desire for fundamental political change motivated the 2019 uprisings not only in the dictatorships of Algeria and Sudan, but also in the dysfunctional civilian regimes of Iraq and Lebanon. The uprisings also drew inspiration from 2011 in some of their slogans and tactics: for example Iraqi protesters set up tents in Tahrir Square in Baghdad. Initially they also stressed (as their predecessors had in 2011) their commitment to act peacefully, although regime violence (as in Iraq after hundreds were shot) sometimes precipitated an angry and violent response. As in 2011, students and other young people (who predominate in the general population) have been at the forefront demanding radical change. Women were active in the movements of 2011, but in 2019 their role both in the demonstrations and in the leadership has been much more prominent, especially in Sudan, Algeria and Lebanon. Workers have taken part in many of the major demonstrations (especially where economic causes are a major factor) as have the unemployed. The specific involvement of trade unions in strikes has varied, but unions of health and educational professionals have often been active, as have other professional associations. The role of social media in promoting and publicizing protest, and also in organizing it, was important in 2011 and central in 2019, and has also encouraged informal and horizontal forms of organization.

The activists of 2019 have, however, also drawn lessons from failures in and after 2011. Both in Algeria and Sudan the movements knew better (after observing developments in Egypt from 2011-13) than to trust the military to deliver democratic civilian government, and organized for a long period of pressing for real change. The regional context in which they operate has also become more difficult as autocratic regimes, which have suppressed, or so far avoided political uprisings, notably Saudi Arabia, have cooperated to adopt measures to prevent independent reporting and to try to suppress the potential for revolt throughout North Africa and the Middle East. The continuities and the differences between 2011 and 2019 are addressed in the references below, which adopt a comparative perspective on the 2019 protests. The readings include some comparisons between specific countries.

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