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ESSAYS ON U.S. POLICY IN THE MIDDLE EAST



Washington and the Next Arab Spring

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Ten years after the Arab Spring, conditions fueling the original protests persist in most of the states that witnessed them—and in many instances, those conditions have worsened.

As a result, the last decade has seen a steady drumbeat of demonstrations across the region, suggesting that even milder forms of unrest have become the “new normal” in the Middle East and North Africa. In some cases—most prominently in 2011 and again in 2019—the protests swelled to the point of becoming politically salient events capable of toppling leaders.

Since early 2021, deteriorating economic circumstances exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic and abysmal governance have once again spurred rising frustrations, and the Middle East today is seeing a resurgence of protest activity. Perhaps most poignantly, in the very birthplace of the Arab Spring, such protests in July went so far as to prompt the Tunisian president to take extraordinary measures and suspend parliament, raising concerns of a regression in the country's democratic experiment.

Notwithstanding a desire in Washington to continue rebalancing military resources away from the Middle East and toward theaters such as East Asia—a desire articulated by both Democratic and Republican administrations in recent years—the persistent threat of social and political unrest in the broader Middle East challenges core U.S. interests. Peaceful protests in themselves certainly are not a threat, and they often reflect popular aspirations shared by Washington for greater economic prosperity, better governance, and political freedom. But because instability offers bad actors an opportunity to advance goals decidedly not in the U.S. interest, Washington must continue seeking to prevent such instability, counter the malign activities of actors like Iran that exploit it for their own ends, and encourage friendlier states to adopt much-needed economic and political reforms. Sustained protests, especially if they morph into large-scale events, embody these policy challenges.

In January 2011, Washington was caught off guard when an isolated act of self-immolation ignited a political revolution in Tunisia that triggered mass protests against authoritarian governments across the region. In the ensuing months and years, the Obama administration was perceived by many as failing to demonstrate a coherent response to the demonstrations, drawing heavy criticism from the policy community. For Washington, meanwhile, there was a “damned if you do, damned if you don’t” quality to the policy options presented when protests erupted. Both action and inaction carried attendant risks and consequences.

In the case of Libya, for example, where the United States—with United Nations approval—deployed fighter jets to defend former protestors from the Qadhafi regime after the demonstrations escalated into a civil war, the administration was disparaged by some for doing too much early on, and then not doing enough after Qadhafi was removed from the scene. American military action had an undeniable impact on the war, with U.S. warplanes eventually used in contravention of UN Security Council Resolution 1973—which had established a no-fly zone—to target Qadhafi's forces, resulting in his regime's defeat. The removal of Qadhafi, a brutal, terrorist-supporting dictator, was surely a good deed. But a decade on, with Libya mired in a civil war that has involved Russia, Turkey, and at times the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Egypt, Qatar, and France, it is unclear that the ultimate outcome of the U.S. intervention can be regarded as positive. What is certain is that the lack of a persistent engagement since 2012 has failed to engender a positive result.

Meanwhile, observers have also criticized U.S. inaction in Syria, where following a brief period of tepid support for Syrian rebels fighting the Assad regime in 2011 and 2012, the Obama administration largely stood back—a response explained at least in part by the ambivalent outcome of America’s involvement in Libya. The hundreds of millions of dollars spent in clandestine support of the opposition was a feint from the real U.S. policy to avoid entanglement in Syria’s internal morass, the result of which was to remain idle as the Assad regime perpetrated mass atrocities against Syria’s predominantly Sunni Muslim population, while in the process opening the door to Russian intervention. Or consider Egypt, where Washington’s approach in 2011 was perhaps the most harshly judged as different sets of critics pilloried the administration for abandoning a longtime U.S ally and for not sufficiently backing the legitimate grievances of the protestors.

Although predicting a tipping point in Middle East protests is near impossible, as attested by the recent developments in Tunisia, should the current unrest snowball into a larger phenomenon, Washington will be compelled to deliver a response. This paper aims to inform that response, reviewing emerging trends in the protest movements, assessing past and potential government responses, outlining ideas for policy coordination with America’s European allies, and offering recommendations for the Biden administration as it seeks to balance global priorities with Middle East realities.

// The Promise and Perils of Demonstrations Across the Region

Every single Arab state has experienced some form of social protest over the last decade. While unrest has been a common feature of certain regional states, it took on political salience in three larger waves during this period: the first in 2011–12; a second in 2019, largely halted by the onset of the Covid pandemic; and a third beginning in late 2020, which in the most prominent cases of Algeria, Iraq, and Lebanon might best be understood as a continuation of the interrupted wave of 2019. Reviewing the features of each wave sheds light on evolving patterns and likely trajectories in store for the region and, by extension, for the Biden administration and its European allies.

In the first wave, beginning in 2011, the mildest cases involved petitions to the government, as in the UAE, while the most turbulent instances began as peaceful demonstrations that elicited harsh state responses, with the ensuing confrontations ultimately descending into war, as in Libya, Syria, and Yemen. (The variation in state responses to protests is addressed in the next section.) Broadly speaking, the principal cries heard throughout the 2011 protests were for jobs, economic improvements, an end to corruption, and democracy—even as the demonstrations remained largely leaderless.¹

The leaderless nature of the 2011 protests

stemmed partly from a lack of prior citizen experience in mobilizing the public—the key exceptions being the Muslim Brotherhood and affiliated entities, which for decades had been granted varying degrees of space to organize and could thus more easily galvanize their supporters when the opportunity arose—and partly from a concern to deprive the leaderships of identifiable opposition figures to target. But this absence of leaders likely undermined the demonstrators' ability to demand a more concrete set of policy changes and transform what were essentially street-centered social movements into political forces that might have ultimately brought about more tangible structural changes.

A similar absence of leadership characterized the second wave of protests, in 2019, this time predominantly—and tellingly—in countries that had been largely spared the initial upheaval, such as Sudan, Algeria, Iraq, and Lebanon. Smaller-scale protests also broke out in Jordan and Egypt. In Sudan, as in Tunisia eight years prior, preexisting—and, notably, non-Islamist—civil society organizations did muster enough clout to direct a political transition away from authoritarianism, but even this relatively promising transition remains fragile and far from assured.

Beyond their shared absence of leadership figures, the 2011 and 2019 protest waves differed in key respects. Whereas the 2011 protests included explicit calls for political liberalization and democracy, such themes were largely absent from the 2019 events. Instead, the latter prioritized the fight against corruption and other governance-related grievances over more grandiose political aims like democracy. Additionally, the protestors in 2019 were more focused on what they opposed rather than what they advocated, likely reflecting a sense that their predecessors had been too quick to accept government proposals for reforms that ultimately disappointed or failed to materialize altogether.

The 2019 demonstrators were also more sweeping in their demands. No longer content to see particular leaders go, they now sought the wholesale replacement of political systems along with the economic and security foundations that had nourished those systems for decades. This “anti-system” quality to the protests was especially evident in Algeria, Iraq, and Lebanon, where calls like “*Kelun yani kelun!*” (“All of them means all of them!”) were pervasive, implying that the ubiquitous “fall of the regime” demanded by protestors in 2011 had only partially come to pass, if at all.

In Iraq, “*Nurid watan*” (“We want a homeland”) became the slogan of the 2019 protests, signaling the public's disappointment with the country's sectarian and kleptocratic system of patronage. But just as the absence of protest leaders carried certain downsides, the emphasis on uprooting deeper structural foundations—while entirely understandable—arguably worked against the protestors' ultimate aim of effecting change. As a call to action, such sweeping demands were powerful, but they often came in lieu of more concrete, achievable road maps that might have broken national impasses. Neither in Iraq nor in Lebanon did the protest movements support an existing viable opposition or manage to become one. The Hirak movement in Algeria was another case in point: calls for canceling numerous rounds of elections, replacing the “military state” with a “civilian” one, and evicting the entire political elite proved so all-encompassing as to be impractical and, as of yet anyway, unachievable.²

Another notable difference between the 2011 and 2019 waves was the anti-Iran sentiment characterizing certain cases in the latter. In Iraq, this was reflected in widespread chants by young Shia of “Iran out!” and the burning of the Iranian consulate in Karbala, a city considered holy to Shia Muslims and a bastion of Iranian influence since Saddam Hussein's fall in 2003. Iraq's young, predominantly Shia

protestors had evidently woken up to Tehran's overreach, and perceived that the regime had exploited their sectarian affinity and encouraged Iranian proxies to increase friction on Iraqi soil. Meanwhile, as Iraqi youth sought jobs, Iran dumped its cheaper products into the Iraqi market, to the detriment of local Iraqi enterprises, stunting competition and siphoning off Iraqi wealth through its political leverage over the Iraqi government. Iran saw Iraq's Shia protests against a Shia-led government as a challenge not only to Tehran's regional hegemony but also to its internal legitimacy; thus, the Supreme Leader described the Iraqi protests as "riots...that need to be dealt with."³ Qasem Soleimani, the late head of Iran's IRGC Qods Force, personally directed the crackdown supported by Shia politicians in Baghdad and enforced by the militias, and by November 2019 the death toll had exceeded six hundred, with thousands injured.⁴ Nonetheless, even as only a small proportion of Iraqi youth had taken part in the protests, 89 percent surveyed said they supported them.⁵

In Lebanon, the anti-Iran (and anti-Hezbollah) rhetoric in 2019 initially was not as clearly articulated as in Iraq. But the mere participation of Shia in these protests—both in the larger events in Beirut and in smaller ones in their hometowns—indicated Shia discontent with Hezbollah. In 2018, the previous year, Hezbollah's success in the parliamentary elections had enabled the group to form its government of choice and place Michel Aoun, Hezbollah's main Christian ally, into the role of Lebanon's president. The group had also secured a majority in parliament, and in all Shia municipalities at the city, town, and village levels. For the Shia, therefore, blaming the authorities in 2019 meant blaming Hezbollah, and the group understood the implications.

In 2019, from the outset of the protests, the Lebanese street was clearly unified over general demands for reform and was determined to uphold the protests' anti-sectarian narrative.

Divisions soon emerged, however, over priorities and strategies. For example, some groups considered the October 2019 resignation of Prime Minister Saad Hariri a success, while others wanted the protests to compel President Aoun's resignation and a corresponding round of early elections. Some wanted Hezbollah—as part of the system—to be held responsible for the crisis; others emphasized reforms of the banking sector and the central bank in particular. Eventually, the protestors split into two main groups: one focused on the economy and the banking sector, and another highlighting the political dysfunction linked to Iranian hegemony via Hezbollah. The use of excessive force by Lebanese security forces and Hezbollah against protestors deterred some demonstrators from taking to the streets.⁶ The pandemic further emptied the streets of Lebanon.

Indeed, across the region, the Covid pandemic dramatically reduced the potency of protests, forcing demonstrators to stay home. But the virus also introduced a paradox. On the one hand, the quieter streets gave leaders a reprieve and thus a chance to consolidate power; but on the other hand, the economic damage wreaked by the pandemic and the measures imposed to contain its spread only deepened the very problems fueling protests to begin with, likely challenging the longer-term stability of these leaders. And while the number of people protesting dropped substantially in 2020, countries such as Tunisia and Algeria actually registered an increase in overall protests following the initial months of the pandemic, reflecting both the negative economic impact of the virus and frustration stemming from measures implemented to curb it (for protests in Tunisia and Algeria, see figures 1 and 2).

A year and a half has passed since the pandemic's arrival in the Middle East, and while the Delta variant has driven rising infection rates, and vaccination levels remain inadequate,

Figure 1. Tunisia: Total Number of Protests, 2019 vs. 2020

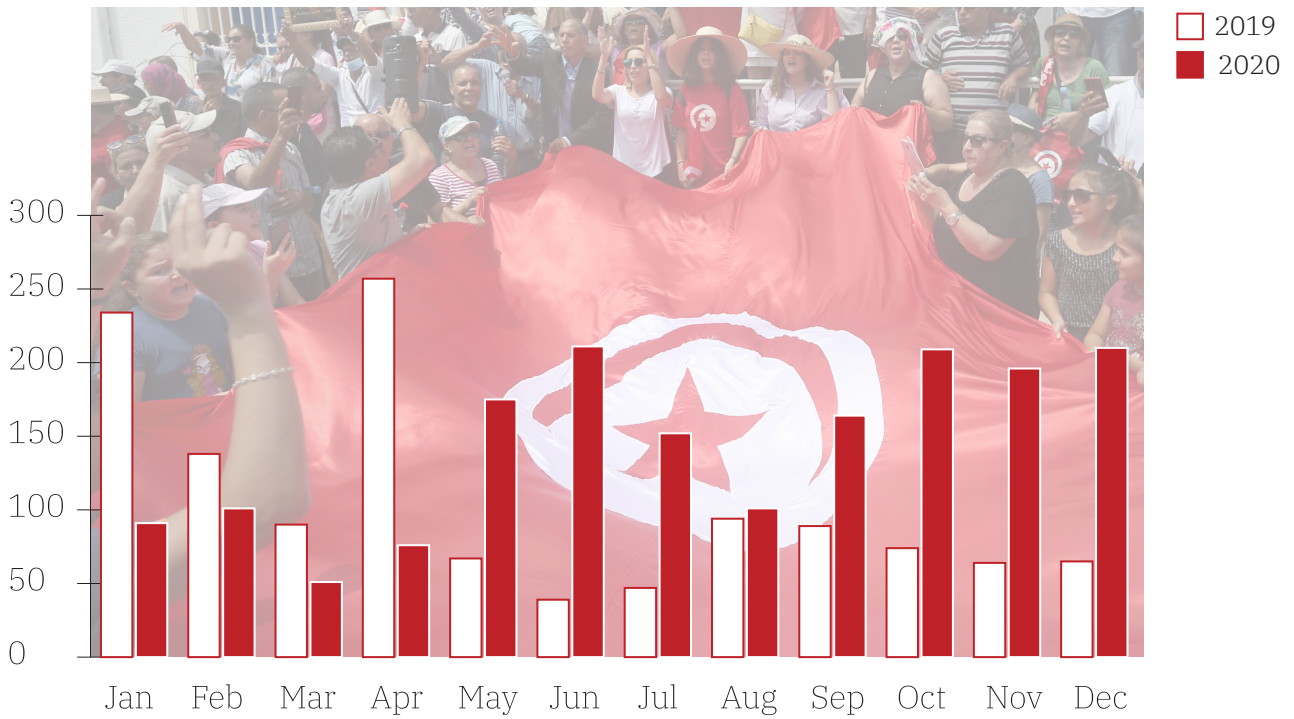
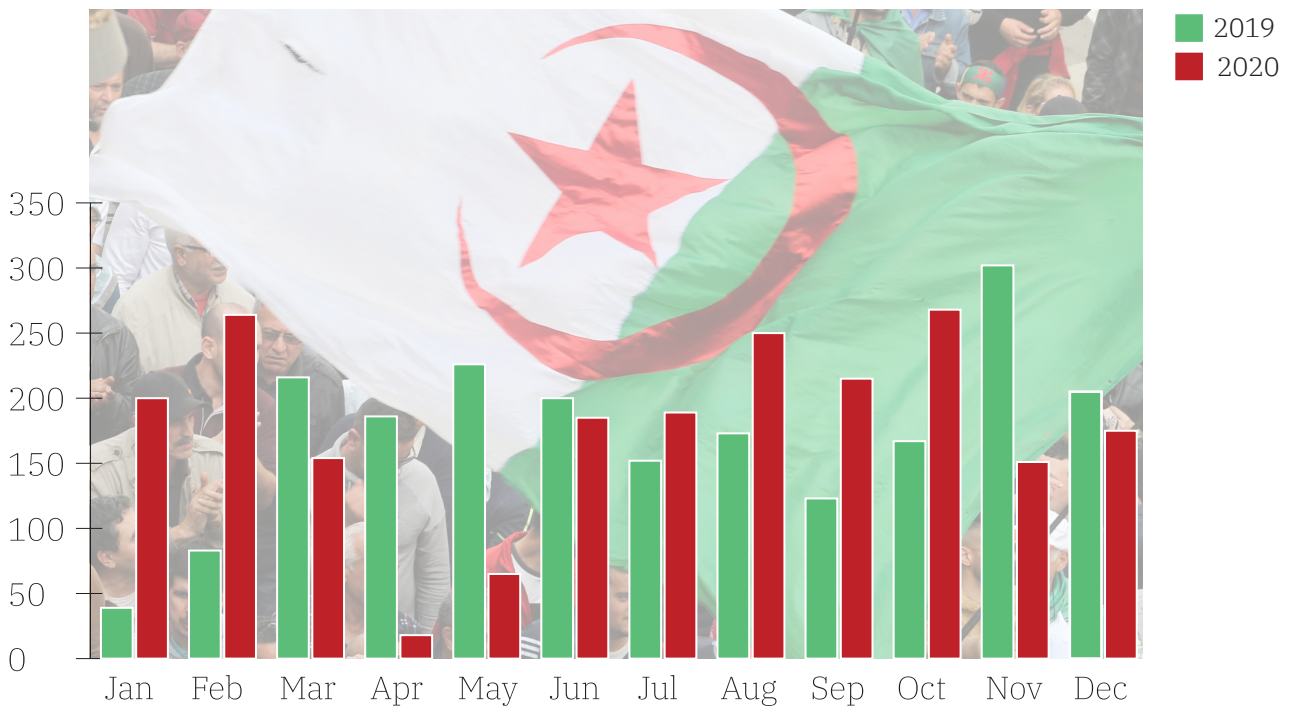


Figure 2. Algeria: Total Number of Protests, 2019 vs. 2020



Source: Data presented in figures 1 and 2 is drawn from the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project, available at <https://acleddata.com/#/dashboard>.

large-scale protests have nonetheless resumed in places like Iraq, Lebanon, and Algeria. And in countries such as Tunisia, Morocco, Bahrain, and Oman, smaller-scale protests have arisen in response to triggers such as the arrest of journalists, police brutality, and the government's mishandling of the pandemic.

Two Types of Protests During the Covid Era

Two broad types of Middle East demonstrations have characterized the latter months of the pandemic period: those that focus on specific grievances but do not aspire (and in some instances may actively refuse) to enter the political system, as in Algeria's HIRAK and the Tunisia protests, and those wherein protest groups aspire to become political parties, as in Lebanon and Iraq.

In Algeria, in February 2021, protests resumed to mark the two-year anniversary of the country's protest movement. The thousands who took to the streets were far fewer than in the pre-pandemic iteration, but the outpouring still served as a reminder that President Abdelmejid Tebboune, elected in December 2019, had failed to win over a sizable segment of the opposition, despite a new constitution in November 2020 that—while praising the movement—had offered little in the way of deeper structural reforms. But the many months indoors had not evidently produced a change in strategy for the HIRAK, which remained leaderless and continued to insist on ousting the country's political elite and eliminating the military's involvement in the political system before considering any participation therein. Thus, for example, the HIRAK, along with a number of traditional opposition parties, boycotted the June 12 legislative elections, which the national leadership had billed as the final stage in its reform process.

In Tunisia, steady protests since early 2021 over deteriorating conditions stemming from the virus and longstanding economic grievances led to the arrest of several hundred individuals.⁷ Anti-government demonstrations, which had remained largely leaderless and focused on economic conditions, policy brutality, and corruption, ultimately prompted President Kais Saied to declare on July 25 that he was suspending parliament, dismissing the prime minister, and taking additional extraordinary measures for a thirty-day period to begin repairing the country's dire situation. The protests in Tunisia resembled the anti-system protests seen elsewhere in the region in 2019, insofar as they reflected widespread disillusionment with the entire political class and a sense among much of the population that conditions had worsened relative to the pre-2011 period. A December 2020 poll conducted by the International Republican Institute found that 87 percent of Tunisian citizens believed their country was headed in the wrong direction.⁸ In the context of deep frustration with political polarization and legislative gridlock over the last several years, Saied's move was greeted by a sizable segment of the population with cautious acceptance, even as many questioned the constitutionality of his decision and expressed concern about the country's democratic trajectory.⁹ Still, the initial thirty-day period came and went without Saied's promised appointment of a prime minister. In recent days, the president announced plans to replace the constitution through a referendum, a move opposed by key civil society organizations and one likely to fuel additional concerns about the viability of Tunisian democracy.

In Iraq, meanwhile, the path from public protest to a political platform has been both tortuous and tortured. Despite the pandemic, protestors successfully ousted Prime Minister Adil Abdulmahdi in May 2020 and helped install Mustafa al-Kadhimi as a transitional prime minister with the promise of holding early

elections in October 2021, following reforms to the electoral system. Still, the protestors are far from united, and the prospect of elections has ultimately been less a motivator for unity than an opportunity to focus displeasure on government corruption and Iran's interference in the country. Protestors disagree on how to approach the upcoming elections: some have registered electoral blocs, while others fielded and plan to rally around independent candidates. But given the prevalent violence, government weakness, and an uneven political-financial playing field between newcomers and the entrenched political class, voices calling for an election boycott are rising. With the path to political organization effectively blocked for many, protests have resumed.

In Lebanon, protest narratives have focused increasingly on accountability for the August 4, 2020, Beirut port explosion and the February 8, 2021, assassination of Lokman Slim, a Shia activist who cohosted frequent dialogues in Beirut's Martyrs Square covering the political and economic factors leading to the state's collapse—discussions that pointed to both central bank governor Riad Salameh and Hezbollah as culprits. With the slow and fraudulent internal investigation of the port explosion,¹⁰ some groups began raising new demands for an international

inquiry aimed at holding the responsible parties to account. Despite the pandemic and Lebanon's deteriorating health system, people returned to the streets for a few days after the blast. They ceremonially hanged cardboard cutouts of the country's political leaders, including Hezbollah secretary-general Hassan Nasrallah. The cry "Iran out! Out!"—heard earlier in Iraqi demonstrations—sounded for the first time in Beirut. While these protests have largely centered on the port disaster, they have also focused on the corruption and mismanagement that led to the blast, as well as the socioeconomic collapse of the state.

From the standpoint of many Lebanese, the legislative elections scheduled for May 2022 are the only remaining chance to alter the status quo and address the country's economic and political breakdown, as well as its systemic structural problems. If those elections take place as planned, supported by a new, more representative electoral law (superseding the flawed 2016 act) and international supervision, some civil society representatives might be able to enter parliament. Such an outcome, however, is contingent on a unified opposition front with a long-term vision and strategy, a scenario not yet in evidence.



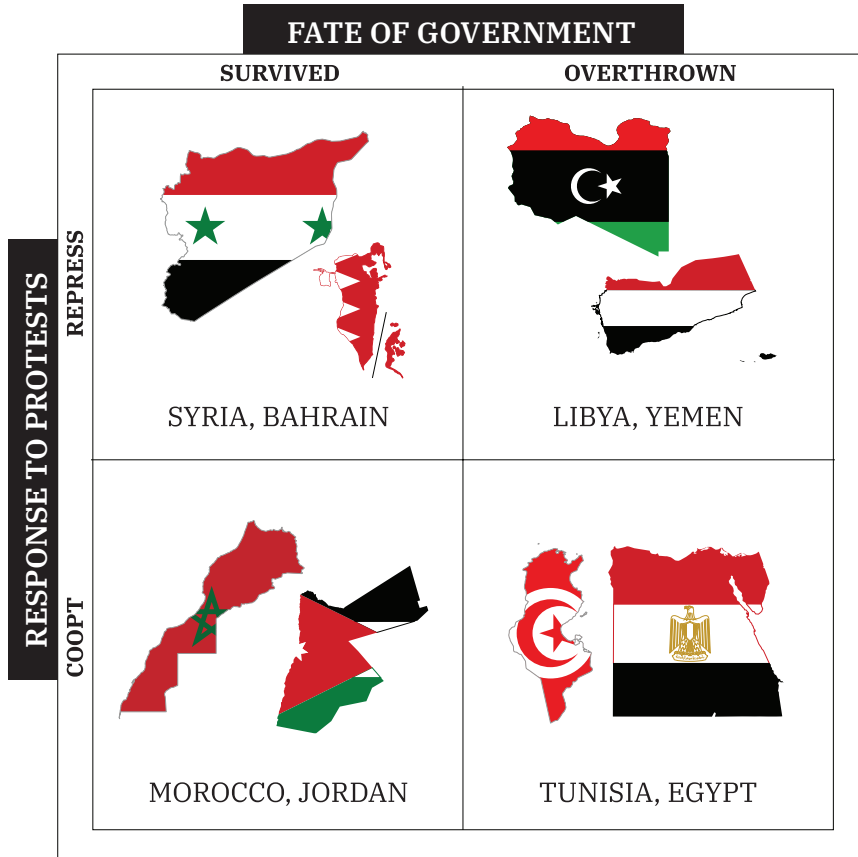
The latest wave of Middle East protests, then, suggests that demonstrators, while fewer in number than in earlier rounds, have become bolder in their rhetorical confrontation against national leaders or dominant military or militia actors. The boldness is all the more remarkable given that in many cases, tolerance for such protests by governments or affiliated militias has declined in recent years.

// Riding or Crushing the Wave? Government Responses to the Unrest

Faced with the mass mobilization of 2011, leaders sought either to repress the protests, usually by force, or to coopt and steer them in a more advantageous direction, in both cases with varying success. By 2012, the tally of states that had experienced the most serious unrest looked something like that conveyed in figure 3.

In seeking to understand the differing outcomes of the uprisings—in particular, why they successfully toppled leaders in some cases and failed in others—scholars have highlighted the role of the security apparatuses. A general finding suggests that in cases where the military, police, or other security bodies remained loyal to the

Figure 3. Fate of Arab Governments, 2011–12



governing authorities, leaders survived—as in Jordan, Morocco, and Bahrain. By contrast, where security forces broke from the incumbent, the leader was overthrown—as in Tunisia and Egypt. And in states where security forces split, the result was most often civil war—as in Libya, Syria, and Yemen.¹¹

The Arab leaders targeted by the 2011–12 unrest internalized their own lessons, as did the protesters. With the events of that period seared into their memories, such leaders became acutely concerned for their own survival and aware that publics possessed at least the potential to take to the streets in massive numbers. Both the heightened preoccupation with self-preservation and a perception that the initial uprisings had unleashed chaos and granted space for the rise of unsavory actors (e.g., the Muslim Brotherhood) undoubtedly informed leaders' responses to successive waves of protest. Thus, in 2019 and again in the post-pandemic wave, leaders moved swiftly to either demonstrate a commitment to reform, preemptively blunt the momentum of such protests by arresting activists, suppress the protests by force, or carry out some combination of all three.

In Algeria, for example, President Abdelaziz Bouteflika's inner circle quickly scheduled new elections and outlined a plan for rewriting the national constitution, and the military generals who ultimately took over moved precipitously to lock up former officials who had benefited from the country's corrupt patronage system, even as police arrested protestors and popular figures associated with the previous century's independence movement. The pandemic offered some breathing room for the Tebboune government, which took office in December 2019, as the HIRAK largely stayed home during the initial months, returning to the streets only in February 2021 to mark the second anniversary of the demonstrations. In May 2021, the Tebboune government announced a ban on unauthorized protests,

widely seen as an effort to stymie further mobilization of the HIRAK in the run-up to the June 12 legislative elections. With a heavier police presence dissuading demonstrations, arrests of activists have had the desired repressive effect, and weekly protests have largely come to a halt.¹² Meanwhile, dismal voter turnout on June 12 produced a parliament dominated by old guard nationalist parties and Islamists, hardly a win for the HIRAK.

Egypt, too, applied lessons learned when protests erupted in September 2019. That fall, the combination of inflation, currency devaluation, decreases in government food subsidies, and rising poverty levels contributed to a spike in popular discontent. Mohamed Ali, an Egyptian expatriate contractor residing in Spain—who at one time had built palaces for President Abdul Fattah al-Sisi—effectively channeled this frustration by posting online content critical of government corruption and calling for protests against the president.¹³ Thousands of Egyptians reportedly came out in several cities on September 20 to participate in the so-called Mohamed Ali demonstrations. Concerned about growing numbers of demonstrators and calls from the expat Ali for an additional rally with a million attendees, the government closed all roads to Tahrir Square and, in the aftermath of the initial protest, arrested more than 4,400 people.¹⁴ The *New York Times* described the roundup as “one of the largest waves of arrests in Egypt in decades.”¹⁵ At the same time, Sisi reinstated food subsidies for 1.8 million Egyptians who had been excluded from the largesse as a consequence of recent economic reforms. The demonstrations lasted a few weeks but eventually petered out in the face of increasingly severe repression.

In Iraq, the government in 2019 announced a reform package promising greater access to affordable housing, interest-free loans, job creation, and the creation of a high court to handle corruption cases. But despite agreeing

two years ago to the ascension of Prime Minister Kadhimi and early elections scheduled for October 2021 under public and international pressure, the established Iraqi parties continue to resist any meaningful changes to the political system. In November 2020, the parliament passed an electoral law that favors large, well-oiled parties, while targeted assassinations by militias replaced shootings in public squares emptied by the pandemic. Indeed, when the pandemic hit and prompted restrictions on public movement, Iran-backed Shia militias embarked on a campaign of assassinations against local protest leaders, activists, and outspoken journalists to fence off the political system from protestors morphing into organized political parties.

Between October 2019 and May 2021, thirty-four activists were killed in eighty-one assassination attempts.¹⁶ Among those killed in the early days of the Kadhimi government was his unofficial security advisor Hisham al-Hashimi, in a clear message intended to blunt any dissenting political voices. Such assassinations are expected to rise as the October elections near, especially since the Iraqi government is unable to deter or prosecute anyone for these killings. For instance, it took the government a year to arrest Hashimi's murderer. Against such impunity, "Who killed me?" has become a popular slogan in 2021 protests. The Iraqi Shia politician and militia leader Muqtada al-Sadr, meanwhile, initially tried to coopt the protests by offering his militiamen as protectors, but he ultimately turned on the demonstrators when he saw he could not gain control of their movement.¹⁷ For their part, the militias staged counterprotests, initially attempting to storm the U.S. embassy in February 2020 after a U.S. drone killed strike Force commander Qasem Soleimani and his Iraqi protégé Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, and thereafter showcasing their intimidation of the state and the public through military parades across major Iraqi cities.

In Lebanon, the government held an emergency session in October 2019, a mere four days after protests began, and then proposed reforms aimed at reducing the national deficit, assisting the poor, slashing politicians' wages, and cleaning up a dysfunctional system of electricity provision that resulted in near-daylong blackouts and exorbitant prices. Concomitantly, divisions among the protestors permitted the authorities to engage in wedge politics and eventually undermine the unity of the opposition. Political parties—mainly Hezbollah and its Christian coalition partner, the Free Patriotic Movement, or FPM—infiltrated the streets early on and claimed their own spaces within the main squares (e.g., Martyrs and Riad al-Solh) in an attempt to shift the street narrative from anti-Hezbollah/anti-Iran to an interrogation of the banking system and its head, Riad Salameh.

The groups trying to hold both sets of actors accountable, such as those congregating around Lokman Slim, were targeted most intensely by the authorities, given that this discourse highlighted the corruption links between the central bank and Hezbollah.¹⁸ Shia activists and protests bore the brunt of the most aggressive Hezbollah attacks in response. Despite the resignation of the Hariri government in 2019, nationwide protests, and pressure from the international community—including sanctions against political figures and the French "government formation" initiative¹⁹—the political class ultimately rejected the implementation of required reforms in favor of the status quo. Meanwhile, the economic crisis was exacerbated by Hezbollah's smuggling of Lebanon's subsidized fuel, wheat, and other foodstuffs to Syria, a situation likely to become more acute since the central bank stopped subsidies in early August 2021.²⁰ Continued inflation, inadequate state institutions, medicine shortages, desperate fuel and other essential needs—in addition to a collapsed banking system and the associated loss of depositors' money—could well lead to a social

explosion expressed in widespread protests. In such a scenario, violence from Hezbollah and security forces would confront a public feeling it had nothing left to lose.

In this sort of crisis, the Lebanese army will find itself caught between its responsibility to

the state and its sympathy for protestors. As of July 2021, Lebanese Armed Forces troops had deployed to Tripoli, the country's second largest city, to quell unrest.²¹ A rise in political assassinations could likewise occur as the Lebanese establishment and opposition prepare for May 2022 parliamentary elections.

Endemic economic and structural deficiencies, poor governance, determined (if divided) opposition movements, and governments preoccupied with their survival—these are the conditions the Biden administration will face in the Middle East and North Africa for the foreseeable future. As such, protests are likely to remain a persistent feature of the region's landscape. More pressing global and domestic priorities will necessarily reduce the bandwidth available to the administration in seeking to ameliorate the deeper structural problems plaguing the region. Still, given the core U.S. interests at stake, the Biden administration can take steps to minimize instability, while devising a longer-term strategy to address the region's core problems. Both tracks would benefit from greater coordination and cooperation with America's European allies, and insofar as the Biden administration has prioritized the rehabilitation of the transatlantic relationship in its foreign policy agenda, Washington should be thinking creatively about how to leverage that relationship toward constructive policies in the Middle East.

// Transatlantic Tools

The Obama administration was not the only actor caught off guard by the 2011 Arab uprisings; the upheaval similarly surprised Europe and disrupted old European relationships with Arab rulers. That year, the EU was slated to renew its Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), a toolkit for assistance and cooperation projects in the Mediterranean and the Caucasus, by reimagining the mechanism with a greater emphasis on values as opposed to merely technical aid. Yet ultimately, the Union failed to make the ENP more amenable to new

governments dominated by Islamists, who neither trusted nor were trusted by Europeans.²² And while the continent supported the uprisings politically, EU capitals, with the exception of Paris and London, remained more risk averse regarding direct intervention. For Europe today, the main drivers of policy appear to be managing relationships with volatile interlocutors and contending with multiple threats simultaneously. Among these threats are migration and jihadism emanating from northwest Syria and Libya in particular.

Popular protest itself can challenge U.S. and European institutional relationships in the region, reinforcing the need for Western capitals to address the governance crisis in many Middle East states. Given the likelihood of reduced Western external assistance funding amid the continuing Covid pandemic—Britain, e.g., slashed its overseas aid budget from 0.7 percent to 0.5 percent of gross national income for 2021²³—a U.S.-EU dialogue on joint priorities to support economic opportunities in Middle East countries could meaningfully assist multilateral institutions with programs in the region while also fostering relations between civil societies.

The United States and EU could similarly work together to reassess their tools of humanitarian assistance, stabilization, and socioeconomic support. A renewed transatlantic consensus and road map on these issues would have a powerful effect on the NGOs and international institutions funded by European capitals and Washington. Namely, while peacemaking can still be shaped at the UN Security Council, the United States, European countries, and other actors can collaborate with equal impact on the IMF and World Bank boards to shape criteria for international assistance.

Further, a practical consequence of the region's fragmentation and the collapse of state structures is that external actors lack traditional diplomatic partners. Classical cooperation between governments is still the best option wherever possible, but it becomes less relevant when state structures are dysfunctional and the real drivers for growth and jobs dwell within very different layers of the private sector, from warlord to well-intentioned businessperson. At the same time, the absence of cooperative investment in these state structures weakens them even more. This paradox in the search for local partners, faced by Europe and the United States alike, requires a wide-ranging

reassessment of policy tools, including how humanitarian assistance funds are provisioned. In many cases, for example, direct cash transfers to local communities through the diaspora are considerably more effective than expensive and heavy multilateral programs. As one insightful report on the matter noted, "Moving to a coordinated system of cash transfers is also an opportunity for broader reform of the humanitarian system, so that aid providers of the future can work in a more complementary way to maximize their impact."²⁴ The process of vetting partners or engaging with nonstate actors on the ground will also constitute a more acute challenge for Western diplomacy moving forward.

Ultimately, effective trilateral diplomacy with the Middle East depends not just on European and U.S. willpower but also on the regional states themselves. Numerous political forces in the Middle East may have to abandon their usual rhetoric if the "West" cannot be blamed anymore. For instance, the traditional discourse of the "axis of resistance," from the IRGC to Lebanese Hezbollah, will lose its main target, and local actors will have to speak more about domestic governance issues rather than "fighting imperialism." This shift could potentially refocus the Arab discussion on Arab solutions, even as such a shift may not yield immediate solutions. Certainly, the structural crises initially behind the Arab Spring uprisings—steep unemployment, staggering inequality, water shortages, and uncontrolled and unregulated urbanization—have no obvious or easy answers. Here, general calls to support civil society and better governance are entirely legitimate but insufficient, and corrupt officials and patronage networks maintain the ability to obstruct the efforts of international institutions. Ultimately, international institutions have partnered with the local authorities at the heart of the governance crisis that requires redress.

// Policy Recommendations

Given that protests have become a persistent feature of the Middle East landscape and are unlikely to dissipate any time soon, the Biden administration faces two key questions: (1) how to make use of available policy tools to minimize unrest and even possibly ameliorate some of the underlying conditions fueling it; and (2) how to prepare for the possibility that such protests will morph into more destabilizing events, as occurred in 2011, 2019, and—for Tunisia—2021. In other words, should the protests evolve into political game changers, how should the Biden administration respond?

While there is no “one size fits all” policy response to what assuredly will be distinct events representing the particular political dynamics and actors of individual states, broadly speaking, the U.S. response to protests will need to consider at least four key factors: (1) the nature of the bilateral relationship, (2) the likely impact of the response on the protest movement, (3) the potential impact of an American response on leadership behavior and regional alliances more generally, and (4) the likely impact of the response on Russian and Chinese involvement in the state in question.

The standard maxim for U.S. foreign policy analysts and practitioners has long been to “do no harm.” But even the connotations of this anodyne guidance are not without controversy. As one critic of the Obama administration’s response to the revolt in Egypt explained:

Where exactly is the line between inaction and complicity? The notion of neutrality, for a country as powerful as the United States, is illusory. Doing

nothing or “doing no harm” means maintaining or reverting to the status quo, which in the Middle East is never neutral, due to America’s longstanding relationships with regional actors.²⁵

At a minimum, consistent with U.S. values, Washington should engage with foreign governments to ensure that peaceful protests are not met with violence. This simple recommendation, however, is also more complicated than it would seem. For example, should this message be conveyed privately or from the podium of the State Department spokesperson—or from the White House briefing room? And what if governments face protests that are largely peaceful but also contain elements of extremist or even violent extremist participation? Urging governments not to fire on nonviolent protestors is one thing, but the reality is often murkier than this. Depending on the state and how egregious the violation of human rights, Washington has the option of suspending foreign assistance dollars; or if a state does not receive U.S. financial largesse, sanctions may be more appropriate.

Beyond conditioning funds or leveling sanctions, Washington has other options. In 2013, *Washington Post* columnist Jackson Diehl called for more robust U.S. actions—military and otherwise—to affect the trajectories of the popular revolts in the Middle East. “The Arab revolutions,” he wrote, “demand bold initiatives from the United States and any other outside power seeking to influence their outcome.”²⁶ At the time, Diehl, like many other analysts, advocated U.S. military involvement in Syria, but he also pushed for going beyond canceling a “pointless” military exercise with Egypt and

instead for cutting U.S. defense assistance dollars in the aftermath of the coup against Mohamed Morsi.

The efficacy of conditioning U.S. foreign assistance on the human rights practices of recipient states has long been debated in Washington, especially with regard to Egypt. While conditionality has periodically convinced Egypt to shift its positions on discrete issues—such as helping to liberate wrongly detained dual U.S.-Egyptian nationals—it is inconceivable that such conditionality would have persuaded a government like that of Hosni Mubarak to cede power under pressure from protestors back in 2011, just as it is highly unlikely that threats of withholding military assistance would have caused the generals to reverse the 2013 coup that brought President Sisi to power. This is not to suggest that the United States should refrain from considering steps when faced with gross violations of human rights, but it must consider the risk of doing so even as it assesses that such conditionality will not be effective.

How Washington would handle a new explosion of popular protest in the Arab states should depend greatly on how the administration assesses the U.S. ability to impact domestic politics in the Middle East. No doubt, teetering dictatorships with which the United States already has little sway will be unlikely to heed Washington's advice or pressure. (On the other hand, conceivably leaders in such a position could view the opportunity to get in Washington's good graces as a last resort worth pursuing.) And traditionally, friendlier states may not be any more susceptible to U.S. persuasion. There are numerous ways Washington can weigh in on regional demonstrations, but at the end of the day, it is worth asking whether the United States would wield significant impact.

Moreover, governments in the region often find ways to exploit mere rhetorical foreign backing

as a pretext for repressing protest movements. These governments are more than happy to use any U.S.—indeed any foreign—statement to discredit the legitimacy of protests and justify harsh crackdowns. Yet the so-called kiss of death of Washington's imprimatur does not exist as such. Indeed, protestors in the region frequently seek out U.S. support as a form of protection against state violence. Still, insufficient support for demonstrators or ambiguous messaging can result in a backlash. To wit: French president Emmanuel Macron's November 2020 comments both supporting ailing Algerian president Abdelmajid Tebboune and urging protestors to be patient were seen as patronizing, colonialist, and tone-deaf, prompting near universal Algerian condemnation.²⁷

Beyond the questionable effectiveness of these interventions, Washington should assess the potential impact of its actions on its regional alliances. If the United States appears to back protestors in friendly states equally or more than demonstrators in adversarial states, it may damage bilateral ties with longstanding partners or reduce precisely the leverage such bilateral ties afford to Washington. Where possible, then, peaceful protests erupting in friendly states should be met by private, but firm, insistence from Washington that governments allow demonstrations to proceed while working to enact meaningful reforms that address the protesters' grievances. Given the likely lack of U.S. influence on the trajectory of events, more robust—i.e., public—U.S. rhetorical support for protestors may be merited in unfriendly states.

Along these lines, Washington must consider the most appropriate approach toward states that have signed normalization agreements with Israel. Signatory states to the Abraham Accords—the umbrella name for deals reached between Israel and UAE, Bahrain, and Sudan, as well as the separate but parallel Israel-Morocco

agreement—have periodically engaged in various degrees of repression of political dissent. What policy should Washington adopt toward these states? In answering this question, it bears keeping in mind that U.S. interests would not be served by the fall of these governments. In addition to weighing the importance of upholding the normalization agreements, policymakers must recall that other equities need to be preserved, including, for example, the base for the U.S. Fifth Fleet port in Manama, where in 2011–12 Bahrain brutally repressed a mostly Shia-led rebellion. At the very least, should major protests break out in these states, Washington will need to privately convey the expectation that peaceful demonstrations be permitted, even as it works with these governments to nurture the normalization deals and ensure they can be leveraged to bring greater economic prosperity to the region.

In any event, since the aftermath of the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq, even neoconservative interventionists have started questioning Washington's ability to influence developments in Arab states. In recent decades, for example, U.S. taxpayers have spent hundreds of millions of dollars via the U.S. Agency for International Development in Egypt, Jordan, Yemen, Syria, the West Bank, and Gaza, while these areas have made little progress on improving governance, growing democracy, and fighting corruption. The U.S. stance on a particular demonstration may sway European policies, but transatlantic consensus is unlikely to sufficiently shape events on the ground, especially if Russia and China provide political cover and materiel assistance in opposition to the West. Moreover, local and regional actors maintain significant agency, a fact often overlooked in discussions of the Western response to unrest. And for all the examples of international actors affecting the trajectory of events—as in the U.S. intervention in Libya in 2011, or Russia's game-changing intervention in Syria in 2015—the last decade has also demonstrated the import

of regional actors' interventions beyond their borders—as in Saudi Arabia's intervention in Bahrain, the UAE's financial support for the Sisi government, and Turkey's deployment of troops in Libya.

Another potential consideration with regard to the U.S. disposition toward demonstrations is the likely outcome. While authoritarian leaders in the region are problematic—they may be fueling popular radicalization and a backlash toward the United States, which partly underwrites the leaders' continued rule—many maintain good relationships with Washington and are helpful in advancing various broader U.S. interests. The wisdom of an approach backing demonstrations led by Muslim Brotherhood members, who espouse (often illiberal) democracy while adhering to a theocratic ideology that is both autocratic and hostile to Israel and broader U.S. interests, is also questionable.

Beyond the stick of conditionality—i.e., the withholding of U.S. military and economic funding for gross human rights abuses—Washington can try to positively incentivize behavior and proactively shape developments in the aftermath of demonstrations by delivering financial assistance. After long-serving Tunisian strongman Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali was deposed in 2011, Washington significantly increased its assistance to Tunis, for example. Yet administrations do not necessarily have great flexibility in allocating large sums of money mid-cycle, making it difficult to seize the moment and support positive change on the fly.

Furthermore, when it comes to foreign assistance, the scene in 2021 somewhat resembles that from a decade ago. Whereas during the former period Washington was still dealing with the consequences of the global financial meltdown, today the pandemic and associated March 2021 relief package will likely curb congressional willingness to extend

significant foreign assistance should Middle East demonstrations erupt this year. As one analyst correctly observed in 2012—a sentiment applicable as well to the current climate—“Neither the U.S. nor Europe has the great financial resources needed to shape prospects in the Arab Spring countries other than marginally.”²⁸

Given the challenge demonstrations pose for Washington and the particularities for each state involved, policymakers will need to remain attuned to the developments unfolding in individual countries. What follow are a number of general suggestions for defining U.S. policy in response to mass protest in Arab countries.

Prepare for the long haul. An imperative for the Biden administration, as well as for its European allies, is to reframe the understanding of protests from exceptional occurrences to a staple feature of the Middle East. Rather than conceive of protests as accidental or unusual developments, they are instead best understood today as the “new normal,” and as such, Washington will need to develop a higher tolerance for protest movements and prepare for the long term.

Condemn violence. While intuitive, it bears repeating that Washington should be clear in all cases that peaceful protests must not be met with violence. This articulation of U.S. policy should be made at the highest level in private, but also in public statements. Privately conveyed should be warnings about implications for disbursement of foreign assistance. Meanwhile, Washington should publicly voice expectations that protest movements must themselves remain peaceful, and rally its European partners to make the denunciation of associated violence even louder. In some countries, governments infiltrate protests with provocateurs whose recourse to violence legitimizes a tough crackdown. At the same time, fringe groups often

do latch onto generally peaceful protests. The situation can be quite blurry, and Washington should acknowledge as much. The murky reality requires an intelligence and analytical focus on what is actually happening on the ground.

Identify and support promising civil society groups. Although Washington may be limited in the direct assistance it can offer to opposition groups in some countries, the Biden administration should continue to identify and help emerging groups in places such as Algeria, Lebanon, and Iraq more clearly articulate their demands and develop the organizational structures needed to effect change. One perennial issue is the vetting of such local groups. Different agencies conduct such vetting according to different criteria, so given a shortage of resources today, it makes sense to coordinate—both among U.S. agencies and between the U.S. government and European partners—in identifying potential beneficiaries.

Avoid unforced errors and knee-jerk responses. Washington can and should rhetorically support the legitimate demands of demonstrators, particularly on matters of anti-corruption, human rights, governance, and reform. At the same time, the United States should be cautious to avoid being perceived as supporting protestors who may be attempting to topple their governments in friendly states. Should such demonstrations fail, relations with the prevailing leaderships will undoubtedly suffer. Relatedly, given the likelihood that unrest will remain a core feature of the region, Washington should avoid making hasty decisions about military assistance and other longer-term policies in the event protests break out, since such decisions would likely benefit America’s Great Power competitors even more than in previous periods.

Optics matter. In 2011, the French parliament approved tear gas exports to Tunisia two days

prior to Ben Ali's fall. That same day, as protesters were being killed, then foreign minister Michèle Alliot-Marie announced that Paris was offering Tunisia the "crowd control know-how of French security forces."²⁹ While these sales are difficult to time—and prior sales cannot be undone—Washington should be paying close attention to preclude the appearance of active collusion in human rights abuses.

Coordinate with allies. Europe has significant influence in many Middle East states, but Brussels frequently waits for Washington to move. Washington should seek consensus with its European partners on future coordination in the region. Europe likely will not provide substantial funding, but the continent can be an important voice alongside America in advocating common interests during protests. The recent developments in Tunisia are a case in point: Washington rightly joined its fellow G7 countries in issuing a strong call for Saïed to return to the democratic fold; moving forward, Washington should be coordinating with its European partners on ways to bolster the North African country's stability in the face of both economic and Covid-related challenges.

Don't lose sight of Great Power dynamics.

Although there may be circumstances in which U.S. interests align with those of Russia

and China, Washington should beware of cooperation offers with the two powers when it comes to engagement in the Arab world, not least when seeking to stave off or respond to instability. Washington should avoid unforced errors that provide easy wins to China and Russia in the region.

Focus on the intersection of U.S. interests and values. Absent significant investment, Washington's chances of having a real and positive impact on Middle East demonstrations are limited. Should the region witness a return of mass protests, Washington will necessarily have to prioritize. In so doing, policymakers should always be clear to oppose unprovoked violence against peaceful protests. Still, the United States has broader security interests it must consider when responding to mass protests, and those broader interests may dictate varying responses to situations in which protests break out, depending on whether the country in question is an ally or an adversary. Thus, while the administration's efforts, interventions, and engagements should focus, whenever possible, on protecting and promoting human rights and other American values, policymakers should be more forward-leaning—and devote more resources—in cases where other U.S. interests might also be advanced should demonstrations succeed. ❖

NOTES

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