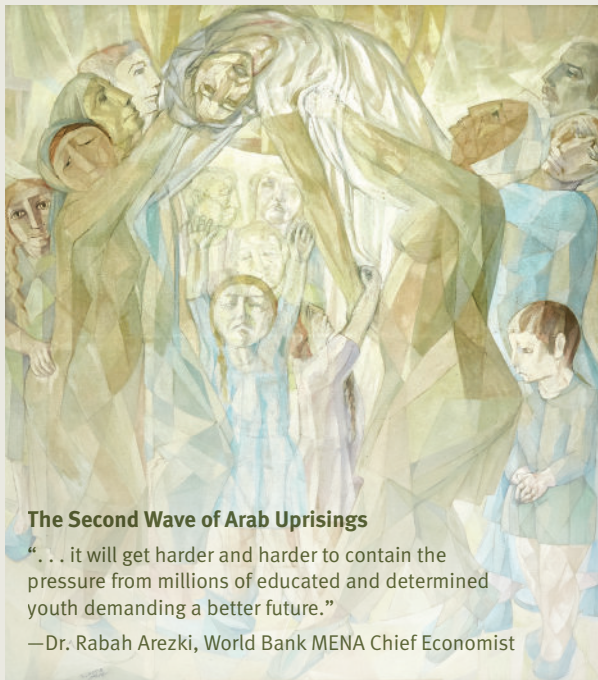


# Journal of Middle Eastern Politics and Policy

*A Harvard Kennedy School student publication*



## **The Second Wave of Arab Uprisings**

“... it will get harder and harder to contain the pressure from millions of educated and determined youth demanding a better future.”

—Dr. Rabah Arezki, World Bank MENA Chief Economist

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# **Journal of Middle Eastern Politics and Policy**

Spring 2020

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# Acknowledgements

The *Journal of Middle Eastern Politics and Policy* would like to thank a number of individuals and institutions whose support proved invaluable to the production of this edition. These include Martha Foley, publisher; Richard Parker, faculty advisor; and the HKS Journals Office, without whose patient guidance none of this would have been possible. Additionally, we would like to thank the entire Middle East Initiative staff for their generous contributions to the journal's long-term sustainability and strategic vision. We would especially like to thank our staff for their commitment, hard work, and attentiveness to detail, consistently demonstrated throughout the editing process.

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## Letter from the Editors

We are pleased to present the sixth edition of the *Harvard Journal of Middle Eastern Politics and Policy* (JMEPP). JMEPP's mission is to offer analysis of current political and policy developments through the lens of the region's decision makers and intellectual influencers. The Spring 2020 edition, *The Second Wave of the Arab Uprisings*, allows us to reflect upon a decade of popular protests that have come to define the contemporary Arab world.

The lessons of this decade are critical as we welcome a new one, during which we hope that governments will show responsiveness to popular demands for political and economic emancipation. *World Bank MENA Chief Economist for the Middle East and North Africa region Dr. Rabah Arezki* projects that in the coming decade, popular protests—not geopolitics—will be a defining force in the Middle East. “The new generation is united against bad governance,” he notes. *International journalist Rami Khouri* reminds us that Arab populations have been raising political grievances for decades, in “an epic battle that has been brewing for a century.” The fearlessness of Arab citizens, Khouri says, is reflective of historically accumulated stresses across all facets of life. Contemporary protests depart from the past in their call for a complete overhaul of the system, in what Khouri predicts will be an ongoing struggle.

*Researcher Sadiq Saffarini* takes us to a popular struggle that has not slept for decades. While some have identified the “Deal of the Century” as a departure from American policy on Israel–Palestine, Saffarini calls it simply a continuation of US policy that has persistently denied Palestinians their basic rights.

By referencing Arab art through the decades, *Barjeel Art Foundation founder Sultan Sooud Al Qassemi* at once highlights the theme of a bitter history of popular protest as well as the “creativity, hope, and perseverance” of the people of the region. *Blogger Joey Ayoub* reveals artistic contributions to ongoing protests

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in Lebanon in the form of memes and jokes. These take on a symbolic role in breaking fear barriers.

*Researcher and JMEPP Editor Dr. Mounir Mahmalat* brings us to a decades-long debate over macroeconomic policy. He questions the conventional wisdom of fiscal austerity as the answer to economic woes, calling instead for reform plans that are attune to popular demands. *Harvard Kennedy School MPP candidate Nourhan Shaaban* sits with *Advisor to the Minister of Education of Egypt Nelly ElZayat* and takes us behind the scenes of education policymaking in Egypt, reminding us of the breadth of challenges and complexity of creating homegrown reform.

*Executive Director of MIT's Legatum Center Dina Sherif and Ahead of the Curve Senior Analyst Salma El Sayeh* spotlight the revolution that never died in the aftermath of 2011: Arab entrepreneurship. The rise of entrepreneurship, region-wide, is a success attributed to the Arab uprisings. It remains a form of protest in and of itself, by directly contributing to creating the social and economic change envisioned by popular movements.

On Lebanon, *Researcher Dr. George Namur and JMEPP Editor Cristophe Nassif* offer insights into unfolding uprisings. Both contribute to a discussion that is of great consequence, as Lebanon's population seeks to reshape its status quo.

We at JMEPP embrace the opportunity to serve as a platform that contributes to discourse on popular change in the Middle East. We invite you to read, comment, and contribute in the coming weeks, months, and years. Only through discussion, criticism, and focused engagement will the region reshape its own future for the better. Please join the conversation.

Sarah S. Mousa and Reilly Barry

*Editors-in-Chief*

*Journal of Middle Eastern Politics and Policy*

Spring 2020

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## **Protests, Not Geopolitics, Will Shape the Middle East in the New Decade**

However unsurmountable geopolitical crises may seem today, it will be domestic protests that determine the social and economic landscape in the Middle East in the coming years.

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**Dr. Rabah Arezki**

The Middle East has been plunged into turmoil. The killing of Iranian Major General Qassem Soleimani by the United States on 3 January 2020 created a tense military and political situation in the region. In response, Tehran said it would abandon the 2015 accord under which it agreed to restrictions on its nuclear program and fired rockets at bases housing the US military in Iraq. Washington has sent more troops to the region and imposed new economic sanctions on Iran. However, further escalation seems to have been avoided—at least so far.

Geopolitical crises such as the one between the United States and Iran are not new to the region, although they may vary in intensity. For decades, the Middle East has experienced tensions that have often culminated in wars, drawing in many parties from within and outside the region. But while the Middle East may have been largely shaped by geopolitics in the past, homegrown discontent of the type that bubbled up in 2011 and again in 2019 is likely to be the main determinant of conditions in the coming years. The Arab Spring that began in 2011, and the fall of dictators that ensued, led to renewed tensions and proxy wars and created failing states in the

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region, including Syria, Yemen, and Libya. The increased economic and political uncertainty that followed the 2011 Arab uprisings reduced the flow of foreign exchange to the region, whether from direct investment, aid, tourism, or remittances. The persistent fall in oil prices that started in 2014 resulted in a sustained reduction in the level of economic growth, adding to the tensions, despite inadequate attempts at economic reforms.

The fundamental dynamics of these economies—trapped in rentier models with entrenched private sector incumbents and an oversized state—have not changed. The economies remain sluggish, which has caused steady deterioration of living standards, especially among the middle class.

Now an already burdened region confronts a fresh set of protests—in Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Kuwait, Lebanon, and Sudan—triggered largely by frustrated youth. The rising aspirations of relatively highly educated young people, many of them women who have attained higher educational levels than men, have collided with moribund economies that provide few good jobs.

But the discontent goes beyond the economy. Millennials in the region are learning from their peers in different countries and no longer are falling for the official rhetoric that says nations must choose between dictatorship and religious extremism. The focus of their frustration is firmly on governments, of which they have a profound distrust. The new generation is united against bad governance. The protests have been restrained and mature in the face of official intimidation, recognizing that they have been severely repressed in some countries.

These protests have contributed to a bottom-up renewal of societies in which top-down approaches have been the rule. That renewal is likely to have a lasting impact on these societies as more and more individuals discover they share both a distrust of states that govern poorly and opaquely and a constructive commitment to fixing the system. Social media has played a



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critical role by not only facilitating the expression of discontent but also making it easier for protestors to organize. Moreover, a safety valve that authorities could rely on in the past to tamp down broad discontent no longer exists. Migration to Europe and the rest of the Western world has virtually ended, the result of growing populism and restrictive immigration policies. The lack of an exit ramp is likely to enhance the resolve of protestors.

But will these protests eventually transform the polity of their countries? So far, there seems to be little impact from the street protests on structural changes in political systems. The powers that be have so far resisted a true opening of the political arena to new voices that could force more accountability. The interplay between politics and economics might, however, offer some clue of what is to come. The region is in the middle of both political and economic transitions. Limited political openness mirrors the limited economic openness of many Middle East countries, where ownership structures are blurry. The barriers to firms entering or leaving key markets—as economists say, the lack of contestability—is at the core of the economic woes that long have plagued the region. In the past, societal peace was largely ensured by a social contract in which citizens tolerated a lack of political voice and an absence of government accountability in exchange for subsidies and public jobs. That social contract is being torn apart by empty government coffers and the coming of age of a new generation. The continued protests and the pressure they generate could help speed up significant economic opening and government accountability.

While geopolitical issues might temporarily derail the renewal of Middle Eastern societies, governments in the region are in protestors' line of sight. The staying power of that new generation, coupled with the empty government coffers, suggest it will get harder and harder to contain the pressure from millions of educated and determined youth demanding a

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better future. Repression, the tactic governments used to rely on, might simply strengthen the conviction that governments are the root cause of their troubles and further their determination to change those governments. The ball is now in the governments' courts to ensure they gain new credence of accountability. Geopolitical developments will not derail the economic and political emancipation sought by protesters toward economic and political emancipation.

*Rabah Arezki is the chief economist for Middle East and North Africa Region (MNA) at the World Bank and a senior fellow at the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University. Previously, Rabah Arezki was the chief of the commodities unit in the research department at the International Monetary Fund and a non-resident fellow at the Brookings Institution. He is also an external research associate at the University of Oxford, a resource person for the African Economic Research Consortium, and a research fellow at the Economic Research Forum.*

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

## Some Observations on the 2010–2020 Arab Uprisings

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**Rami G. Khouri**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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who should serve them.

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

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

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

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

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

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

The transitional sovereign council in Sudan is an important precedent that

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

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

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



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

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

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

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## Endnotes

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# Trump's "Deal of the Century" Is Not the Reversal of US Policy toward Israel–Palestine –The Reversal Is What We Need

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Sadiq Saffarini

## ABSTRACT

The article analyzes President Trump's vision for a comprehensive peace agreement between Israel and Palestine, the so-called Deal of the Century announced on January 28. While the proposal uses the language of hope and prosperity and expresses support for the two-state solution, its provisions actually render the Palestinian "state" inviable. The plan does not empower the Palestinian state with full sovereignty over its territory nor does it recognize its internationally accepted borders, while at the same time nullifying the Palestinian right of return. In short, the plan seeks to legalize and legitimize the status quo by enabling Israeli expansionism and the systemic denial of Palestinian rights, which is a flagrant violation of international law and has no legal validity.

On 28 January 2020, the White House published its new plan for the solution to the conflict between Israel and Palestine. The proposal was given a bold informal title: "Deal of the Century." The Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, has welcomed the proposal despite the objection of the extreme right wingers in Israel.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, the Arab League has issued a statement calling the deal "a setback to peace."<sup>2</sup> Meanwhile, thousands of people



**Racial Concentrations and Homelands**

Racial concentrations of 90% or more by regional states.

NOTE: Percentages of 90% or more indicate a high concentration of a single racial group. Percentages of 80% or more indicate a high concentration of a single racial group. Percentages of 70% or more indicate a high concentration of a single racial group. Percentages of 60% or more indicate a high concentration of a single racial group. Percentages of 50% or more indicate a high concentration of a single racial group. Percentages of 40% or more indicate a high concentration of a single racial group. Percentages of 30% or more indicate a high concentration of a single racial group. Percentages of 20% or more indicate a high concentration of a single racial group. Percentages of 10% or more indicate a high concentration of a single racial group.



gathered in Amman, Jordan, to protest the plan, shouting “Palestine is not for sale,” alluding to Trump’s insistence on tying peace to economic prosperity.<sup>3</sup>

While it is presented as an honest attempt to help both Israelis and Palestinians, president Trump’s Deal of the Century is simply a statement of commitment to codify and entrench Israel’s domination over Palestinians and its denial of their basic rights. Further, in spite of the view of many liberals that this deal represents a U-turn in American policy toward Israel and Palestine, the historical record leaves no doubt that the Deal of the Century is a culmination of America’s long-standing determination to legalize Israel’s occupation of the West Bank and subjugation of Palestinians, which spans numerous administrations, both Republican and Democrat. In that sense, a U-turn in the American policy toward the Israeli–Palestinian conflict away from denying the basic rights of Palestinians and toward international law is actually what is needed in order to secure lasting peace and prosperity.

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President Trump's Deal of the Century is framed in the language of hope, prosperity, peace, and cooperation. It promises to ensure lasting peace, restore the national dignity of Palestinians, and create conditions for economic development. The suffering of many generations of Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza leaves no doubt that peace, dignity, and prosperity are desperately needed and well deserved, on their part. However, president Trump's Vision, as this deal is also referred to in the text itself, does not spend a lot of words on the suffering of Palestinians. Meanwhile, there are a lot of references to how corrupt their leaders are and how dangerous Palestinian organizations are for the national security of Israel. By the same token, there is no mention of Israeli war crimes against the civilian population in the West Bank and Gaza that are too numerous to count, while there is no shortage of praise for Israel's commitment to peace. This praise sometimes acquires a somewhat tragi-comical dimension.<sup>4</sup> For example, the Vision states that "the State of Israel has also exchanged sizeable territories for the sake of peace, as it did when it withdrew from the Sinai Peninsula in exchange for peace with the Arab Republic of Egypt." However, it fails to mention that the same Sinai Peninsula had previously been occupied by Israel in a war of aggression.

In terms of the Vision expressed in the Deal of the Century, there is very little for Palestinian's to look forward to and a lot of support for the Israeli cause. The two-state solution is embraced in the text but with a qualifier: "realistic." What this qualifier entails is basically little more autonomy for Palestine, although nothing on the order of what is necessary for an entity to be considered a state, and a full annexation of Jerusalem and the illegal settlements in the West Bank including the Jordan Valley. The Vision is placed in the framework of the proposals of Yitzchak Rabin, a former Prime Minister of Israel and a staunch Zionist, who envisioned a solution for the Israeli–Palestinian conflict in the form of a settlement that would include

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“something less than a state for Palestinians” accompanied by the legalization of the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and significant degree of control over Gaza.<sup>5</sup> President Trump’s Vision echoes this proposal by supporting the incorporation of the entire city of Jerusalem and the illegal settlements into Israel on the one hand and a semi autonomy for Palestinian authorities on the other, while allowing Israel to retain control over the airspace over Gaza and have access to defend all territory west of the Jordan River.<sup>6</sup> Israel will retain control of “air, sea, land and electromagnetic fields.” Therefore, once all the details are considered, “realistic” leaves the entire phrase “two-state solution” virtually devoid of any substance.

The lack of concern for the basic rights of Palestinians that characterizes this plan has been criticized as the betrayal of the two-state solution by many of president Trump’s opponents. Mainstream Democrats have correctly pointed out that the Deal of the Century does not amount to anything but the legalization of the Israeli Occupation and the creation of a defective Palestinian state without the basic components of national sovereignty such as the control of its airspace and borders.

While this criticism is essentially correct in exposing president Trump’s plan for what it is, the idea that it represents a betrayal of American foreign policy toward Israel and Palestine is an illusion. The Vision expressed in this text is perfectly in line with the spirit of Oslo Accords sponsored by then-president of the United States, Bill Clinton. The Oslo Accords paved the path for the legalization of the Israeli Occupation by recognizing the Gaza Strip and the West Bank as Palestinian territories and establishing Palestinian control over these areas. However, Israel did not cede control over the Palestinian territories it had occupied for more than two decades and where it had established illegal settlements. Nonetheless, the Oslo Accords did not give Palestinians full statehood. In effect, then, these agreements laid

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out the groundwork for the legalization of the illegal Israeli settlements in the West Bank and their incorporation into the state of Israel. Meanwhile, Palestine became a discontinuous pseudo-state. President Clinton led another initiative toward the legalization of the status quo in Israel–Palestine when he was leaving office in 2000, thereby demonstrating his disregard for the international law and the fact that Palestinians have the right to their own state, part of which territory had been illegally occupied by the state of Israel.<sup>7</sup>

It is a dangerous illusion to think that president Trump's plan is an aberration from mainstream US foreign policy when it comes to the conflict between Israel and Palestine. The United States has isolated itself from the rest of the world in terms of its support for Israel's violations of international law and the war crimes it has committed against the civilian population of the West Bank and Gaza. While president Trump's Vision aims at making the status quo permanent, previous administrations have also done their part in perpetuating it and creating the conditions for their legalization. The most alarming aspect of this approach is that both the Republicans and the Democrats are ignoring the reality on the ground, which is that Palestinians are living in dire poverty with no prospect of ensuring decent lives and futures for their children. It is difficult to accept that president Trump's administration genuinely believes that a lasting peace and prosperity can be built on the basis of a plan that neglects that basic reality.

Adding insult to injury, the Deal of the Century simply ignores the consequences of Israel's ethnic cleansing of Palestinians from large swathes of the territories that are legally designated as Palestine. The plan expects Palestinians to forfeit refugees' right of return to the lands they were expelled from.<sup>8</sup> In return, they are promised a proto-state that not only lacks control over its airspace but will also be dependent on Israel for crucial resources such as water.<sup>9</sup> On top of this, the precarious state of Palestine would have

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to refrain from any attempt to join any international organizations without the consent of the state of Israel.<sup>10</sup> It is hard to fathom how an entity without coherent territory, internal and external sovereignty, or control over essential resources could be considered a viable state.

A U-turn in American foreign policy toward Israel–Palestine is indeed necessary, and it has to start with the United States joining the rest of the world in accepting the fact that the human rights of Palestinians have to be protected and that Israel cannot be exempt from international law with impunity. To be clear, this is not just about Palestine but about international legal order as we understand it—as Israel pushes ahead with the annexation of the West Bank and the Jordan Valley, it will compound its existing violation of international law and commit a flagrant violation of United Nations Security Council resolutions, preventing the emergence of Palestinian statehood, which would deal a death blow to the prospect of a two-state solution. Nevertheless, the Palestinians will abandon neither their inalienable right of return, equality, and freedom nor their demand for self-determination. The Palestinian cause is not a struggle to be liquidated by lucrative foreign investments or promises of economic development. A solution or a plan that fails to encompass fundamental human rights, and dismisses a generational aspiration for a sovereign national homeland for the Palestinian people, would be deemed unworthy and stillborn.

*Sadiq is a Harvard alumnus and is currently a research assistant at the Center for Strategic and International Studies for Middle East policy studies. His work focuses on human rights, conflict resolution, and the drivers of change in the Mideast region.*

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## Interview with Sultan Sooud Al Qassemi

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Sarah Mousa

Sultan Sooud Al Qassemi is a United Arab Emirates–based columnist and researcher of social, political, and cultural affairs in the Arab Gulf States. Sultan rose in prominence during the Arab Spring when his tweets became a major news source, rivaling news networks at the time, until TIME Magazine listed him in the “140 Best Twitter Feeds of 2011.” In 2018, Sultan ranked 19th on the Arabic Thought Leader Index by Swiss think-tank Gottlieb Duttweiler Institute. Sultan was an MIT Media Lab Director’s fellow from 2014 to 2016, and in the spring of 2017, he was a practitioner in residence at the Hagop Kevorkian Center of Near East Studies at New York University, where he offered a special course on politics of Middle Eastern art. Sultan is currently conducting research for a book that documents the modern architecture of the city of Sharjah in the UAE. In 2010, Sultan established the Barjeel Art Foundation that aims to contribute to the intellectual development of the art scene in the Arab region by building an extensive and publicly accessible art collection. In 2018, 100 works from the collection were hosted on a long-term basis at the Sharjah Art Museum.

**You first became known to many in the region, especially younger generations, for your commentary on the 2011 uprisings. Why did you feel compelled to lend your voice to the movements?**

During the momentous events of the Arab Spring almost a decade ago,



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**Leila Nseir** (Syria, b.1941)  
The Nation, 1978, oil on canvas, 160 x 140 cm.  
Collection of Barjeel Art Foundation, Sharjah.  
Image courtesy of Barjeel Art Foundation, Sharjah.

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I felt compelled to step up and fill a communications gap that existed and arguably still exists between the Arab world and the West. At that time, for instance, speeches by Arab leaders like Husni Mubarak and Muammar Gaddafi would only be reported on in broad terms, while many across the world wanted more details about their plans and even thought processes.

**Nine years on, can you share reflections on that experience? If you had the benefit of hindsight, how would your commentary have changed at that time?**

I was certainly caught in the moment. I was also on the side of the protesters and remain so to this day. Sadly there is an attempt to re-rewrite the events of the Arab Spring and cast them in a negative light, while in reality, the negative aspect was the violence that was meted upon the protesters. In



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**Moataz Nasr** (Egypt, b.1961)

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hindsight, I would not have changed my commentary, but perhaps I would have added more cautionary notes about the dangers of not compromising with the members of other camps that I don't necessarily agree with.

**Can you tell us the story behind Barjeel Art Foundation? When and why did you create it? Is there a connection between your focus on art and the 2011 uprisings?**

The Barjeel Art Foundation is an initiative that predates the Arab Spring as it was launched with an exhibition in February 2010. There is perhaps a connection between both my activism during the heyday of the Arab Spring and the launch of Barjeel, which is to expand the understanding of the Arab World using alternative methods whether it was art or new technologies.

**You have said that “Arab art is our way of telling our story”; what is that story, and why do you think it is important to tell it?**

The story of the Arab world is one of great complexity—yes, it includes sad and unfortunate chapters, but it also is full of creativity, hope, and perseverance. I teach a 13-week class on creativity in the Arab world and the Middle East, and my only regret is that I don't have enough time to explore all the different facets of this creativity as well as all the countries in the region. When the world is better acquainted with our human story, I believe that will contribute to a greater understanding, appreciation, and respect for my region.

**Barjeel, in part, fills an important gap in that it serves as a historical repository of art from across the Arab world; why do you think this gap existed?**

While the Arab world has had many collectors dating back over a century,



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such as Egyptian Mohamed Mahmoud Khalil (1876–1953), much of the works concentrated on either Western or local artists, and very few collectors acquired art from across the region. This started changing in the second half of the 20th century with major collectors such as Qatar’s Sheikh Hassan Al Thani and Saudi Arabia’s Adel Al Mandil along with Lebanese architect Assem Salam and American Louis A. McMillen who collected art in the 1960s from countries as varied as Iraq, Kuwait, Lebanon, and Sudan.

**Arab art, historically, has not necessarily taken the form of a painting; rather, it is dynamically embedded in surroundings from architecture to furniture to clothing. When selecting an art form, why did you choose to focus specifically on paintings?**

Arab art, like other global modernities, developed over many decades and across different genres. Modern Arab painting can be traced back to the mid-19th century in many parts of the Arab world, including Egypt and Lebanon, and is one of the lesser-documented Arab art forms, although one could argue that we still lack enough books on the history of embroidery, tapestry, architecture, furniture design, and other crafts.

**What mediums do you use to make art pieces and the stories surrounding them accessible? What do you hope your audiences will take away?**

I feel I have unleashed an Arab modern art onslaught upon the world with whatever avenue available to me. For instance, Barjeel’s presence

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◀ **Left Hamed Ewais** (Egypt, 1919–2011)

The Guardian of Life, 1967–8, oil on canvas, 132 x 100 cm.

Collection of Barjeel Art Foundation, Sharjah.

Image courtesy of Barjeel Art Foundation, Sharjah.

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extends across numerous social media platforms, and I have worked on an online program for AJ Plus that showcased modern Arab art over one- and two-minute “bite-size” episodes. We have made the 1,000-strong Barjeel collection available to museums around the world, including a major exhibition of Arab abstract art that is now touring five US university museums (and coming to the McMullen Museum in Boston in spring 2021). I have also taught art of the Arab world at four US universities (New York University, Yale, Georgetown University, and Boston College) in an academic attempt to introduce Arab and Middle Eastern art into US institutions that have not offered such a class before. It’s been a great journey of discovery for me perhaps more than anyone else.

**How do you see themes tied to social movements expressed in art from across countries and decades? What lessons do these works leave for contemporary societies in the region?**

Modern Arab art very much mirrored modern Arab world history with its social and political causes. In the mid-20th century, labor rights featured heavily in paintings such as Egyptian Gazbia Sirri’s student and about protests painting in Al Mahallah of 1947. The rise of Gamal Abdel Nasser was reflected in art as well with pan-Arabist themes. Other themes include nationalism and Palestinian rights all the way to the Arab Spring. In the past year with uprisings in Lebanon, Iraq, Sudan, and Algeria, we once again see themes of human rights, democracy, people power, and martyrdom and reflections of the brighter future that all Arabs and human beings aspire to.

*Sarah Mousa is a current editor in chief of JMEPP. She is an MPP candidate at the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University, focused on economic development, labor markets, and social policy in Middle East countries.*

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# Memes and Collapse

## An Alternative View of Lebanon's October 17 Protests

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Joey Ayoub

### ABSTRACT

In the postwar era, residents of Lebanon have been heavily impacted by what Sami Hermez called the “anticipation of violence” or, in other words, being stuck between past violence and perceived future violence. This has notably encouraged sectarianism, localism, and regionalism at the expense of any trans-sectarian identities. As the anti-government protests enter their fourth month, this piece looks at some of the attempts to address this widespread feeling of inevitable collapse. Memes and jokes are being deployed by anti-government and anti-sectarian activists to rebel against the fear and fearmongering that benefit the ruling sectarian class.

Of all the countless memes and jokes that have come out of Lebanon since the start of the uprising on 17 October 2019, one in particular speaks volumes. It starts with an assertion commonplace in political and media circles: “Mom, the country will collapse” (*Mama rayhin aal inhyar*). Referring to the ongoing political and economic crisis brought on by decades of corruption, this sentence can often be heard, in various formats, in everyday conversation. But because *rayhin* can also mean “we are going” (to a location), *mama rayhin aal inhyar* can be followed by a number of joke responses: “Ask your mom first (if you can go),” “Where is *inhyar*? Is it in our region?,” “Okay, but please



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stand up straight," "Our neighbor's kids would stay at home."

This meme's transformation of alarmism into humor illustrates the ways in which Millennials and Gen-Zers are rebelling against the fear and fearmongering of the wider population. This feeling that "we" are going toward some state of collapse reflects a normalized anticipation of violence in Lebanon, particularly by the generations who experienced the Lebanese Civil War (1975–1990) firsthand. The term "anticipation of violence" was coined by anthropologist Sami Hermez, who made the case in 2012 that Lebanon's residents are stuck between past violence and perceived future violence. With the wounds of the past unresolved, the collective imagination became restricted in the postwar era. Given that the only manifestation of the collective "we" in Lebanon is associated with collective destruction, negative sectarianism, localism, and regionalism are thus encouraged at the expense of any positive collective identity.

Hermez's research can help explain why so many Lebanese had stopped expecting the possibility of a mass civic uprising. Although the underlying tensions that built up to the ongoing protests had already been fomenting—expressed for example in the 2015 "You Stink!" movement and several smaller protests before that—the lack of concrete positive change to come out of earlier protests or the 2016 and 2018 elections left many people feeling doubtful that the corrupt system could be overthrown. In addition, the 2018 elections were the first elections that many Millennials could vote in, since parliament had illegally extended its term three times, in 2013, 2014, and 2017. Meanwhile, many Gen-Zers are still not of voting age. In a society where freedom is constrained by erratic elections designed to limit the available options through a sectarian quota system, perceived civic failures have accelerated a sense of hopelessness.

Thus, the overtly anti-sectarian nature of the October 17 protests

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revealed a level of political engagement among young people that seemed to take almost everyone by surprise, especially in light of out-migration trends among recent university graduates. Confronted with widespread hopelessness and little opportunity, many students relocate to Western or Gulf countries upon graduation.

The anticipation of violence translates into an inability to view long-term commitments to the country as worthwhile, because it is assumed that “the situation” can always descend into what anthropologist and filmmaker Joanne Nucho called “wartime.” In other words, even in times of “peace,” conflict is never far away. Whether the source of disillusionment is the geopolitical realities of a Middle Eastern country whose only two land borders are Israel and Syria and whose government is often entangled in the political priorities of the West, Saudi Arabia, and Iran or whether it is the sectarian system itself, it is not difficult to understand why generations of students are raised to believe that the most prized possession a Lebanese citizen can have is a foreign passport.

This anticipation of violence has been regularly vindicated in the postwar era, from Prime Minister Rafik Hariri’s assassination in 2005 and the multiple car bombs in the years that followed to the 2006 Israeli war on Lebanon, the 7 May 2008 conflict that saw Hezbollah and its allies militarily take over large parts of Beirut and Mount Lebanon, and the post-2011 repressions in the Middle East and North Africa. Since October 17 alone, the sectarian system’s representatives—from the *shabitha* (sectarian thugs) affiliated with Hezbollah and Amal to the government’s multiple security forces—have left hundreds injured and at least three persons killed. One of the most vivid evocations of the anticipation of violence has been the chants by Hezbollah and Amal supporters calling for “another May 7th.”<sup>1</sup>

In other words, violence, however diffuse, is never far away from daily life

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in Lebanon. It permeates expectations of what one can expect from the near future. Furthermore, the feeling of collapse is often accelerated by its physical manifestations: in the weeks following the protests, various roads were flooded<sup>2</sup> due to the heavy rainfall, and some even collapsed,<sup>3</sup> highlighting, once again, the country's notoriously poor infrastructure. The floods were also turned into memes by protesters who used the opportunity to argue for strategic roadblocks. The argument put forward was that roads are regularly closed due to weak infrastructure, so roadblocks, believed to be a comparatively effective form of protest, are at least purposeful. These arguments were imbued with humor and sarcasm, along the lines of "why do you complain when we [protestors] block the roads and not when the rain does?"

To put it differently, the metaphorical collapse of the country is manifesting itself through a series of physical collapses accompanied by the structural inability, or unwillingness, of the sectarian system to save itself from an inevitable end. At the same time, this collapse is being utilized by groups of protesters who see no other means of resistance than trying to persuade "the other"—anyone from sectarian loyalists to their own family members—to join the cause.

The *mama rayhin aal inhyar* meme is an expression of a widespread desire in the country to utilize the "energy of hopelessness," to use Lebanese-British scholar Andrew Arsan's words, and transform it into something more hopeful. It is the cynicism of the sectarian system that is being rejected by creative protesters who seem increasingly aware that its rejection requires more effort than previously believed. As one protester participating in Beirut's Martyrs' Square told Lebanese journalist Kareem Chehayeb, "We need to believe it's important to be happy, not just to survive."<sup>4</sup>

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Joey Ayoub is currently doing a PhD in cultural analysis at the University of Zurich. Until recently he was the MENA editor at Global Voices and IFEX, and he currently runs the blog and podcast Hummus For Thought. His writings primarily focus on Lebanon, Syria, and Israel–Palestine.

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# Why a Traditional Austerity Plan Would Exacerbate Lebanon's Woes

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Mounir Mahmalat

## ABSTRACT

Following the eruption of mass protests in autumn 2019, Lebanon's economy slid into a deep financial and economic crisis. Given the magnitude of Lebanon's contemporary economic woes, a bailout program with participation by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) appears unavoidable. However, while a bailout program could avoid formal default and cushion the immediate effects of financial impasse, the austerity measures that will come attached are unlikely to achieve their goals. This article argues that in clientelist polities with weak states such as Lebanon's, austerity programs carry the risk of leaving unaddressed the underlying inefficiencies that led to economic decline in the first place. Instead of prioritizing budgetary measures and spending cuts in a conditional reform program, international donors should seize this novel window of opportunity to legitimize a reform plan with popular demands. Measures to increase judiciary independence and political accountability in particular bear a larger potential than austerity measures alone to change politics and finally create a sustainable economic model.

Virtually every contemporary analysis of Lebanon's perennial economic woes focuses on its high level of government debt. Currently amounting to more than 150% of GDP, interest payments consume more than a third of

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the public budget each year.<sup>1</sup> Such high levels of debt crowd out important investments in social services and infrastructure and eventually risk default when financial conditions deteriorate and tax revenues drop.

Today, this risk is greater than ever. The accelerating deterioration of economic activity and governmental tax revenue combined with declining external support start to cast doubts on the treasury's ability to repay maturing Eurobonds. Fearing a formal default and its unpredictable political and economic repercussions, former prime minister Saad Hariri turned to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to explore options of "technical assistance."<sup>2</sup> Although no official request is yet pending, any bailout program without the IMF seems unlikely. Such programs grant assistance in the form of concessional loans and similar financial instruments in return for the implementation of "structural adjustment policies," which include measures such as austerity and fiscal adjustments through reduction of government spending, privatizations, and debt restructuring programs.

But while a traditional bailout program based on austerity measures might save the country from formal default and cushion the immediate effects of financial impasse, the austerity measures attached to it are unlikely to achieve its targets. Instead, they will exacerbate the country's political and economic challenges.

Because, at the end of day, the problem is not borrowing itself. The problem lies in what is being done with the money.

Although recent IMF strategy papers<sup>3</sup> indicate a shift toward granting social spending higher priority, recent programs in Egypt, Jordan, and Tunisia exemplify that IMF programs in the Middle East still follow the old neoliberal textbook of prioritizing austerity measures to salvage public budgets.<sup>4</sup> Not only is this philosophy criticized for a number of important normative reasons, in clientelist polities with weak states such as Lebanon's,

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austerity measures—including major budget cuts in public administration and on state personnel whose details are left at the discretion of elites, the reduction in government spending on social services and infrastructure, or the further privatization of state assets such as the telecommunication sector—carry the risk of leaving unaddressed the underlying inefficiencies that led to the dilapidated state of state finances in the first place.

For one, austerity would further depress economic activity. Government spending on personnel,<sup>5</sup> comprising roughly a third of governmental expenditures as well as the fastest rising expenditure item over time, constitutes a major contribution to aggregate economic activity, of which roughly three-quarters relies on consumption and services. Rural areas in particular, largely deprived of the few remaining companies contributing to productive industrial activity, heavily rely on government spending for policemen, teachers, and other state personnel.

Cuts to their salaries and pensions, let alone layoffs, would thereby further contract the purchasing power of thousands of Lebanese, many of whom are located in areas void of alternative sources of income. The absence of a productive base that could sustainably finance imports via non-remittance foreign currency (or reduce the reliance on imports all together) will come to exacerbate this trend should the lira continue its devaluation and make imports more expensive. The result would be a significant reduction in consumption expenditure, which will put additional pressure on companies' already heavily strained balance sheets as well as the large informal sector, which contributes roughly 30 percent to national GDP and comprises more than half of total employment and to a large extent depends on spending on consumption.<sup>6</sup>

In the absence of functioning social-protection mechanisms, cutting the salaries of public employees would therefore expose many Lebanese to

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further economic vulnerability. With people unable to repay housing and business loans or the education of their children, inconsiderate austerity has the potential to accelerate the development of a contemporary financial impasse into an intergenerational disaster. Tens of thousands of families have already been forced to take their kids out of private schools,<sup>7</sup> while universities face financial pressures arising from their students being unable to pay their tuition fees.

Furthermore, budget targets that are externally imposed and unspecific tend to fail to generate the necessary ownership in politicians to implement reform.<sup>8</sup> Lebanon's experiences with past reform programs<sup>9</sup> are a striking example. Such ownership, however, is a central prerequisite to structural reform and to realize the much-needed efficiency gains in service provisioning in particular, a central reason for the ongoing protests. If the quality of the public administration and the services it offers would be commensurate to the size of the public sector, high personnel costs would not be problematic per se. However, Lebanon's elites have proven to be remarkably resilient to induce efficiency gains, as the size of most public institutions reflects purely clientelist considerations. To get a job in the government, sectarian affiliation trumps merit.<sup>10</sup> Any meaningful way to improve the efficiency of the public service must therefore start with reviewing hiring procedures, rather than simply cutting expenditures on public administration,<sup>11</sup> to ameliorate the ratio of public expenditures to the quality of services they offer.

Even more importantly, however, further austerity would increase both economic and political inequality in a country that already exhibits one of the highest rates of income inequality worldwide.<sup>12</sup> Privatization of, for example, the telecommunication sector would further concentrate economic wealth in the hands of few. Moreover, a reduction of purchasing power, as outlined above, would foremost hit those sectors of the economy in which political



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elites have little to lose. Recent research with LCPS<sup>13</sup> shows that elites gain their economic wealth and, subsequently, political power from connections to companies in sectors that are relatively protected from economic downturn. Combined with the low quality of public services and social protection, these patterns will further exacerbate the dependency of the poor—and increasingly, the vulnerable middle class—on their communal elites for the provision of jobs, health care, and education.

That way, such a program would not only fail to deliver on its targets. It will facilitate the game of the elites.

Besides, it is these ingredients—increasing inequality, dependency on elites that aim to maintain their popular support, and decreased opportunity costs of violence due to economic vulnerability as well as a reduction of purchasing power—that generally fuel violent opposition and possibly armed conflict.<sup>14</sup>

Instead, and despite all the legitimate reasons to lose trust in the ability of Lebanese elites to deliver on their promises, Lebanon's donors and partners should concentrate on formulating a set of conditions that give room for a positive economic shock for the economy. Such a positive shock could prevent businesses from shutting down, retirement plans being cut, and public employees being laid off in the absence of functioning social-protection mechanisms. Granted, the Capital Investment Plan attached to the CEDRE conference was meant to provide precisely that: an investment program<sup>15</sup> into Lebanon's dilapidated public infrastructure that could have generated thousands of jobs<sup>16</sup> and other efficiency gains.

Yet, political bickering and inertia<sup>17</sup> have prevented the Lebanese from realizing the program's potential. By adopting a more long-term vision, conditional assistance programs, if led by the IMF or other donors, should nevertheless seize this novel window of opportunity with a new government and a vigilant civil society and prioritize reforms that can eventually facilitate

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a qualitatively different formation of political will in the future. For economics to improve, politics must change. These measures include some of present days' central popular demands, in particular a reform of the judiciary to ensure its independence as well as other accountability-enhancing mechanisms that increase politicians' exposure to their citizens' demands. Such reforms would change the game of elites much more than any austerity plan could.

All of this is not to say that structural reforms would be dispensable. There is no way that Lebanon can avoid adjusting its fiscal policy and restructuring its inefficient public sector<sup>18</sup>—a sector that drains on public resources, crowds out necessary investments, and still fails to deliver essential services<sup>19</sup>—if it ever wants to escape the vicious cycle of debt and confessional politics and therefore adopt a sustainable and prosperous growth path. Yet, reforming the public sector and cutting back expenditures should not be dominated by austerity but emanate from a positive idea for Lebanon's future and a larger plan to restructure the economy to make it sustainable.

To legitimize these reforms and increase political pressure on elites, international assistance programs should seize present days' window of opportunity and make financial assistance conditional on a reform program that reflects citizens' demands. It should abstain from prioritizing to salvage budgets above measures to increase political accountability, electoral incentives, and administrative productivity to restructure political life. Because if these underlying inefficiencies are not addressed, no austerity program will achieve its targets. Instead, it will exacerbate Lebanon's woes.

This article has previously been published by *Le Commerce du Levant*<sup>20</sup> and the Lebanese Center for Policy Studies.<sup>21</sup>

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## **Education in Egypt:** A Conversation with Nelly ElZayat

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**Nourhan Shaaban**

Nelly El Zayat is the co-founder and CEO of Newton Education Services and an advisor to the Minister of Education in Egypt on early childhood education and education policy. Nelly has been working in international education for the past 21 years, specifically in student advising, scholarship management, admissions, curriculum design, e-learning, learner-centered teaching, and student recruitment and on bridging the gap between education and the job market. She has held positions in several organizations including America Mideast Educational and Training Services (AMIDEAST), the International Institute of Education (IIE), and the Georgetown University School of Foreign Service. She is specifically interested in education reform and development in Egypt and the Middle East and the role technology plays in education. Nelly holds a master's degree in international education policy from Harvard University and a master of arts in Middle East studies and a bachelor of arts in economics from American University in Cairo. She is an alumni ambassador and member of the International Peer Advisory Program of the Harvard Graduate School of Education.

**In your view, what are the most pressing challenges facing the education system in Egypt today?**

It is no secret that there is a long list of challenges on both the access and quality fronts, starting with class density to teacher training and teacher

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remuneration all the way to a common understanding of what comprises a successful education system.

**What are the Ministry of Education's current priorities? How do you decide what is important?**

Ideally, I would like to see all of Egypt involved in the reform; it has to become a nationwide priority, starting with believing that it is absolutely necessary, and frankly, our only hope. The Ministry has prioritized the youngest students in the system; the reform began with Early Childhood Education in KG1, KG2, and Primary One. The Ministry has also given priority to teaching for understanding and not for memorization and rote learning.

**This Ministry of Education has established internal research units—can you tell us more about the role of research in the work of the Ministry? Can you give an example of a policy or program that has been shaped by evidence?**

There are three important centers that fall under the Ministry of Education: the Center for Curriculum and Instructional Materials Development (CCIMD), the National Center for Education Evaluation and Examinations (NCEEE), and the National Center for Educational Research and Development (NCERD). NCERD has, so far, been leading the research effort in the Ministry. However, there has not been a clear link between research and policy. The Ministry is now in the process of establishing a new research and documentation project that will be a three-way partnership between the Ministry, NCERD, and the Social Research Center at the American University in Cairo.

**In Egypt, unemployment is highest among more educated youth, with**

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**tertiary degree holders exhibiting the highest rates. Why do you think the labor market doesn't absorb educated youth, and how does the work of the MoE touch on these challenges? How is Egypt preparing its youth for jobs in the 21st century?**

Higher education is a totally different story. As you already know, the process by which students enter public universities in Egypt depends on their high school grades and the cutoffs that the different faculties decide on. It has nothing to do with the characters of the students, their true preferences, or their potential. All this definitely reflects in the labor market. In our new curriculum, we expose students at an early age to areas that have been neglected for many years: arts, PE, music, and others. We teach students about different jobs and skills that are not typical of the usual doctor or engineer that many families are after. The entire curriculum is built on the UNICEF's Life Skills and Citizenship Education framework, which includes all the usual 21st-century skills such as critical thinking, problem solving, empathy, resilience, and others. We have also added two skills that are relevant to our Egyptian context: accountability and productivity.

**There is an argument to be made for the role of technology in educational reform. You wrote an article titled "Trading a Tweet for Your GPA," in which you urged schools to incorporate digital literacy into their curriculum. How has technology been incorporated in education reform initiatives in Egypt?**

Technology has definitely been a key dimension in the reform, but I should emphasize that it has been a tool and not a goal in itself. The Egyptian Knowledge Bank (EKB), for example, is now home to hundreds of interactive videos that have the secondary school curriculum mapped out lesson by lesson. This mapping and the videos were made by partners such

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as Britannica, Discovery, Ureka, and others. In addition, there is a wealth of knowledge on the EKB accessible to every single Egyptian. For the younger students, technology is made more available for the teachers, who can access endless resources at the tips of their fingers via EKB. Technology for students will not be introduced before Primary Four to make sure students' motor skills are well developed first. Of course, the main technology-related tool that most families in Egypt have heard of are the tablets that were given to secondary students. The tablets, which many mistake for the epitome of the reform, are but a tool to allow for a new type of test in the secondary grades and take away the human factor when it comes to marking and grading the tests. The tests that secondary school students sit for now test their real understanding and require higher-order thinking, as opposed to tests that ask students to re-produce what they memorized on a piece of paper.

**In 2014, you interviewed Pasi Sahlberg, a Finnish educator and scholar. You specifically asked him about lessons that Arab countries could learn from Finland. Did you see any of these recommendations transferred into the Egyptian education system? Can you us give an example?**

In my conversations with Pasi Sahlberg during this interview and in class, I learned that context really matters and that there is no way you could transfer an education system and transplant it somewhere else. We kept that in mind during our work on this transformation. While we looked at examples and success stories from around the world, and while we sought help from international partners, we still made sure that this was a homegrown reform that kept the Egyptian context in mind. This is the only way to ensure the sustainability of this huge transformation. I would say that what we do now have in common with Finland and other successful education systems is that we no longer have exams in the younger years and assessment takes other forms.



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**The education system is part of a larger economic, social, and political ecosystem. How much collaboration happens across different stakeholders to ensure that education reform remains prioritized?**

There have been several forms of collaboration across stakeholders, but we always strive for more. For example, there is an ongoing conversation between the Ministry of Social Solidarity and the Ministry of Education to ensure that the pre-school experience is similar and follows the same philosophy as the new system, Education 2.0, and that the children's transition from one system to another is seamless. There have been many development partners both locally and internationally who have supported and contributed to Education 2.0. We have also engaged the private sector and collaborated with them on several fronts, from creating learning objects to teacher professional development. Nahdet Misr, for example, were the ones who worked on the new Arabic textbooks.

**In your role as advisor to the Minister of Education, what initiative or program are you most proud of and why? How does it affect students/teachers in their daily lives?**

I am most proud of the creation of a comprehensive curriculum framework that began with the ideal student profile in mind and then went backwards to the life skills the students need to acquire and the issues that matter to the Egyptian context that are woven in the curriculum. This is the first time in a very long time that we have a complete vision of the inputs and outputs of the system and how the curriculum unfolds throughout the 14 years of education. I am also proud that this is all happening nationwide at the same time.

**Throughout your career, and now as founder and CEO of Newton**

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**Education, you developed, advised, and managed many scholarship initiatives. Why is this work important? What role can scholarships play in reforming education? How do you assess impact?**

Once international students ourselves, my partners and I see the value of the work we do. People need help and support when it comes to higher education, especially if it is abroad. Where to start, how would they choose the right school for them, how would they fund their studies? So many questions that our work helps answer. I was a scholarship recipient myself, and it was a very generous scholarship, and so again, I know, firsthand, how valuable a scholarship is and how scholarships help educate those who otherwise would not have been able to get an education.

**Many smart people are not trained in education but deeply care about it. What are key metrics an intelligent citizen should monitor to assess educational reform?**

That's a great question. First, they need to know that they would not see results overnight and that it would take years for us to see evidence of the success or failure of the reform. I would say one of the metrics would be seeing that teaching has been brought back to the classroom and that students are enjoying being in school and do not need to follow a parallel system through private tutoring.

**What message do you have for those interested in improving the education system in Egypt and beyond?**

I would say we still have a very long way to go, but we are finally on the right track—where the student is now at the center of the education system and where we are emphasizing learning and understanding. I would also say: we need all your support!

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## **Back to Economics:**

# How Socially Innovative Business Models Can Be a Pathway to Jobs and Stability in the Middle East

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**Dina H. Sherif  
and Salma El Sayeh**

### **The Eve of the Arab Uprisings**

In 2010, the Arab region was regarded as having very little potential for serious political transformation. The outside world perceived “stable” authoritarian regimes with iron-fist control over citizens who would surely never demand drastic change. Amal Ghadour described the regional landscape best: “These are the lifeless landscapes you are sure to behold if you were standing and peering down. Crouch and you begin to brush against the faint gusts of wind delicately working their way through them.”<sup>1</sup>

Engagement comes in many forms besides political, and in 2010, countries like Egypt, Tunisia, Jordan, and Syria were seeing significant increases in the number of NGOs, private sector engagement in social development, philanthropy, and youth volunteerism. None of these was viewed as a threat to the existing regimes at the time, but they represented a new coalescence of power amid increasing human rights abuses, youth exclusion, unemployment rates, and social inequity. The ingredients for change were there and finally ignited by the self-immolation of street vendor Mohamed Bouazizi on 17 December 2010 in Tunisia, which launched the cycle of mass uprisings and

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the falling of dictators in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya in 2011.

***Reality Check: Youth Economic Empowerment Is Core, Not Periphery, and the Private Sector Has a Role to Play***

This new era for the Arab region is not only defined by democratic transitions and political unrest but also by an unprecedented demographic transition that has resulted in the largest youth (aged 15–29) population of its modern history. Unemployment rates in the Middle East and North Africa average above 25 percent, and according to 2009 estimates,<sup>2</sup> the region's economies need to create 51 million jobs by 2020 to accommodate the total currently unemployed plus those entering the work force. While an inclusive and democratic system of government is what citizens are pushing for, we must remember that these youth—what Navtej Dhillon and Tarik Yousef call the “generation in waiting”<sup>3</sup>—should not be put aside or be dealt with after the pressing issues of political stability and national security are resolved. In other words, youth economic empowerment is a core element of Middle East stability.

The generation that hit the streets demanding an end to harsh dictatorships is also a generation demanding jobs and better livelihoods. Bouazizi's dramatic act was largely motivated by his economic exclusion by the state. Political reform that is not accompanied by a renewed focus on youth economic empowerment and a redistribution of economic power will not broker the stability and positive transformation that the region desperately needs moving ahead.

Moreover, a sustainable economy that empowers the “generation in waiting” cannot be the sole responsibility of policy makers and donors. The Arab private sector represents a vital opportunity of a paradoxical sort. On one hand, it is despised by many for always being intertwined with the state apparatus

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and corrupt practice. On the other hand, private sector development is one of the most important aspects of reform and empowerment. Both within the Arab region and beyond, the private sector has a significant role to play, and they must be brought to the table with policy makers and civil society in the transition process.

## **The Need for Market Expansion**

For decades, Arab economies have been dependent on oil revenues, aid, and remittances. While the importance of generating alternative revenue streams and expanding markets in the region has been well argued, not enough has been done to support this expansion. In *The Economics of the Arab Spring*, Malik and Awadallah state, “A singular failure of the Arab world is that it has been unsuccessful in developing a vibrant private sector that survives without state crutches, is connected with global markets, and generates productive employment for its young.”<sup>4</sup>

Intra-Arab trade remains as low as 10 percent due to strict protectionist principles that result primarily in the preservation of defective quality. As Aramex founder Fadi Ghandour often says, “it is time to upgrade.” Another key to economic stability is enterprise development. Less than 8 percent of loans in the region goes to small- and medium-sized businesses, although that is where the bulk of jobs are created. The entrepreneurial spirit among youth in the region must be nourished and supported through access to capital, mentorship, capacity building, and supportive legal and regulatory frameworks.

## ***The Region’s Youth Are an Optimistic and Entrepreneurial Resource***

According to serial entrepreneur Christopher Schroeder, another revolution

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has been taking place: the Start-Up Revolution<sup>5</sup> or what I refer to as the birth of the Middle East's new "start-up" culture. While pre-2011 youth channeled their energy into supporting or launching NGOs, today's youth look increasingly toward the private sector. According to Silatech, just before the uprisings, 26 percent of youth in the Arab world were planning to open their own business within the next 12 months versus 4 percent in the United States. Moreover, the latest 2013 Arab Youth Survey conducted by Asda'a Burson-Marsteller's revealed that the majority of Arab youth remain optimistic about the region and believe their best days are ahead of them.<sup>6</sup> According to Ahmed Alfi, the CEO of Sawari Ventures, who has invested over 5 million USD in developing Egypt's start-up scene through Flat6Labs, that optimism has only served to accelerate the willingness among youth to take the risk of starting their own businesses despite political instabilities.

### **Are Socially Innovative Business Models an Answer?**

It is clear that the Middle East has very little time to waste in its attempt to achieve both stability and growth. Job creation is not the only pressing issue facing Arab countries. Challenges starting from the quality of education to the pressing issues related to environmental degradation, as often discussed by Thomas Friedman, are of paramount importance to building a sustainable and stable Middle East. Neither traditional capitalism nor traditional development paradigms is an answer anymore. The Arab region needs to see a proliferation of scalable and innovative business models that are inclusive of the millions at the base of the pyramid, both as consumers and producers, and that solve imminent societal challenges.

In the face of political systems and traditional development models that have failed to produce desired results, Arab youth as mentioned before are turning to the private sector and are starting businesses to solve the very

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challenges that governments and donor aid have failed to resolve, including the creation of needed jobs.

### ***Who Are Social Entrepreneurs?***

Since the first definition of the term “entrepreneur” by Jean-Baptiste Say in 1803,<sup>7</sup> numerous other definitions have emerged, but by and large, they involve the two core elements of value creation (at least the potential) and risk taking. Defining social entrepreneurship is a muddier affair. While a wide definition might be argued to be helpful as a start, deeper study warrants a somewhat narrower definition.<sup>8</sup> Ashoka defines social entrepreneurs as “individuals with innovative solutions to society’s most pressing social problems.”<sup>9</sup> The Skoll Foundation defines them as “society’s change agents, creators of innovations that disrupt the status quo and change our world for the better.”<sup>10</sup> The Schwab Foundation defines a social entrepreneur as “a leader or pragmatic visionary who achieves large scale, systemic and sustainable social change through a new invention, a different approach, a more rigorous application of known technologies or strategies, or a combination of these . . . .”<sup>11</sup>

### **The Existing Ecosystem**

Several initiatives already exist in the Arab region to support social entrepreneurship in general. Examples of these include, but are not limited to, Egypt-based Nahdet El Mahroussa, GESR, and Ahead of the Curve; UAE-based CCC; and Tunisia-based TCSE, among others. These initiatives offer an array of support mechanisms including linking new businesses with angel investors and offering them incubation, elongated technical support, and capacity development.

The current initiatives are divided into four main categories:

\* Competitions at the conclusion of which winners receive a financial prize



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and some technical assistance

- \* Incubators that offer social enterprises with a legal umbrella and seed funding as well as technical assistance
- \* Initiatives purely focused on technical assistance
- \* Impact investment opportunities

The Arab social entrepreneurship sector, however, is held back by several shortcomings and gaps in the existing ecosystem. Gaps within the current ecosystem include:

- \* **Size:** A low overall count of initiatives supporting social entrepreneurship in the region, relative to the size of the region's population and challenges.
- \* **Focus:** A focus on social-value creation, while ignoring economic value creation, which limits the ability to foster scalable sustainable solutions.
- \* **Accessibility and Inclusion:** information about the overwhelming majority of existing initiatives can only be accessed online and in English. This limits the accessibility of such opportunities to those who are university educated and, more often than not, elite segments of the population. Marginalized (even if educated) segments are therefore often excluded from participating and utilizing such opportunities. Consequently, the primary stakeholders (marginalized communities) are excluded from the design of solutions to their challenges. Such exclusion means that local knowledge and wisdom of challenges is disregarded, limiting the innovativeness, relevance, and ownership of designed solutions to their primary stakeholders. The current ecosystem also implies that existing initiatives focus on existing social entrepreneurs or at least those who have already been exposed to what social entrepreneurship is about and ignore a huge segment with tremendous potential that is simply not exposed or given an opportunity to create social enterprises.

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## ***Social Entrepreneurship Post Arab Spring***

While there is no formal count of the number of social enterprises in the region, regardless of the definition used, qualitative research efforts point to an increase in the number of entrepreneurs. More and more support opportunities are emerging across the region; these range from short training programs to, in limited cases, financial investment opportunities.

Young people attempting to offer market-based solutions to pressing challenges do not necessarily identify as social entrepreneurs. According to a Wamda report<sup>12</sup> on the topic, some simply identify as a business, since capitalism should be about solving real problems and addressing consumers' needs. Similar to youth who are civically engaged, many are driven by the desire to address a deeply personal issue or an issue that they are personally impacted by or are passionate about. The report also points to the fact that the majority of these entrepreneurs come from affluent backgrounds. They are highly educated and often from urban centers.

Upon reflecting on the current ecosystem, one cannot deny that more entrepreneurs are emerging, more familiarity with the concept is evolving, and more interest is being garnered from “foundations” and “development” agencies.

This does not deny the fact that not enough interest has been garnered from the “traditional” entrepreneurship ecosystem. Investors still shy away from social enterprises, as their returns may be lower or slower.

The question becomes: are social entrepreneurs really (s)lower? Or is the kind of ecosystem that we are building around these entrepreneurs the reason behind this lack of interest from traditional investors? Would not the current social enterprise scene look different if we were intentionally designing and investing in the creation of an ecosystem that fosters collaboration, innovation that is based on needs, and business models that are solid and financially viable? We would argue, yes.

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Those concerned with this exciting sphere of doing business that is more about value creation and impact should take a step back and reflect on the long-term intentions of the work that they are doing. It is important that ecosystem players carefully think about their blind spots (whether they lie in how we design, announce, or implement our contributions to this sector) and how they can collectively work toward a better reality for ourselves and for future generations.

The Arab region has incredible potential to be a global leader when it comes to impact-driven innovation and entrepreneurship. In a way, this can be credited to the awakening that happened during the Arab Spring—the belief that every individual has agency and can make a difference. It would be unfortunate if the right ecosystem required to harness this potential, was not cultivated.

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# The Eye of the Storm

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Dr. George G. Namur

## ABSTRACT

Lebanon is in the throes of an unprecedented crisis in its modern history. Starting 17 October 2019, the people of Lebanon have been protesting in the streets in a broad-based uprising. This paper highlights key post-civil war realities and practices that led to the country teetering and proposes a solution package to what ails the country and threatens its future.

Lebanese citizens are now facing arbitrary capital controls and cash withdrawal restrictions imposed by banks. They are witnessing a divergence between the official currency exchange rate, pegged by the Lebanese central bank (Banque du Liban or BDL) since 1997, and the real market exchange rate.

In Lebanon, the political class is often indistinguishable from the government because, unlike most parliamentary democracies, postwar Lebanon is not about the majority governing and the minority opposing. Rather, most parties in parliament are represented in the cabinet, rendering it a microcosm of the assembly. Something that takes precedence over the composition of parliament is the power-sharing between sects, often represented by former warlords. The latter have control over their ministries, which explains why a certain cabinet position is kept with the same party and/or sect when ministers change. Senior public servants wield a lot of power and constitute a serious Deep State that also includes senior employees of government-controlled enterprises. The system that controls Lebanon includes, besides politicians, the central bank and the banking system as well as big money consisting of

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large contractors for the state.

The sectarian system in place is essential to the perpetuation of the dominating oligarchic kleptocracy. Without sectarianism, it would have been virtually impossible for warlords to endure the way they did. Sectarian leaders are indeed very apt at fanning sectarian insecurities among their people. It feels that, when it comes to sects, there is a general abdication of reasoned thinking.

The ill-advised currency peg that is now collapsing has historically created a riskless way of making money. An individual can borrow dollars, exchange them for liras, and deposit the latter at a much higher rate than the borrowing rate. Because of the pegged exchange rate, the currency exchange risk is removed, but the inflated profit kept whole, making wealthy individuals with access, namely the ruling class, wealthier at people's expense.

There are several costs to this peg, the first being the amount of dollars that the BDL needs to sell periodically to defend it. This requires a constant flow of dollars into Lebanon. The second cost is economic. The LBP being highly inflated at its pegged level, imports seem cheap, so the economy relies a lot on the latter, and producers, mainly in the fields of agriculture and industry, find it uneconomical to actually produce. It makes more sense for them to deposit their money rather than invest it given the high deposit rates. Even non-residents, mostly the diaspora who send remittances to Lebanon, prefer to deposit their savings rather than invest in anything.

This policy has crowded out investments and led to an unproductive, rent-seeking economy. The dependency on imports and the fact that most exports would not be economical have led to a current account and balance of payment deficit. Also, due to rampant corruption and the government's inability to effectively collect taxes and duties, the country has run a budget deficit that the BDL has helped fund. The latter therefore needs a constant

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inflow of dollars to defend the peg *and* cover the twin deficits. However, much more significantly, the central bank needs dollars to pay the interest on liabilities, since the money raised from depositors and investors in certificate of deposits and treasury bonds is not invested but rather spent to cover the expenses of the government amidst a spiraling increase in public debt. That is the definition of a Ponzi scheme: design and run a system that depends on enough foreign currency inflows to keep the country from grinding to a halt.

And despite the fact that the scheme engineered to perpetuate the rule of the oligarchs went through hiccups when not enough dollars were flowing, it somehow managed to subsist. The remedy was usually foreign aid from donor countries through international conferences like Paris I (2001), Paris II (2002), Stockholm (2006), Paris III (2007), and more recently, the yet-to-be-implemented Paris IV or CEDRE (2018).

Nevertheless, things took a turn for the worse starting in 2016. A combination of developments constituted the perfect storm that put the whole Ponzi scheme in jeopardy. Remittances from the Lebanese diaspora in Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries started to fall as many Lebanese lost their jobs. Also, many wealthy GCC nationals stopped investing in high-end Lebanese real estate, in part because the relationship between Lebanon and GCC countries soured over Hezbollah's role in the Syrian war and also because the real estate market in Lebanon was stagnant. Furthermore, the presence of about 1.5 million Syrian refugees<sup>1</sup> was seriously straining the Lebanese government's budget. The Syrian war also made it impossible for a lot of Lebanese exports (mostly agricultural) to make their way by land to GCC countries as the border between Syria and Jordan was closed. To make things worse, in 2017, parliament passed a public sector salary raise costing \$917 million.<sup>2</sup> Finally, in 2018, to garner as many votes as possible in the legislative elections, cabinet ministers hired over 5,000 people into

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an already bloated and ineffectual public sector.<sup>3</sup>

As early as 2016, it became obvious to BDL Governor Riad Salame that he needed to find new ways to bring dollars into the system. At the same time, two of the largest banks in Lebanon were in trouble over bad investments they had made outside the country. Salame offered these two banks initially, then any bank that was interested, a convoluted scheme consisting of double swaps, which he dubbed “financial engineering.” The essence of the deal was to purchase from banks their local currency treasury bonds at a huge premium (using a discount rate of 0 percent) in return for fresh dollars that the banks would invest in certificates of deposit with BDL. As dollar interest rates offered were very high, banks offered very tempting deals to customers for fresh dollars, including paying interest on the money in advance. Also, the LBP that banks received from BDL in return for the local currency treasuries were invested at very generous interest rates at BDL. The financial engineering deals unfolded in waves between 2016 and 2018 and have led to riskless profits, or a wealth transfer to participating banks exceeding \$5 billion.

As per its website, BDL’s dollar assets today are worth \$30 billion. When compared to the \$70 billion that BDL borrowed from banks, we see a deficit of \$40 billion in hard currency. By this arithmetic, \$40 billion of depositors’ money is gone, ill spent. I am not including local currency losses because BDL can always print liras. It is increasingly clear that the ad hoc capital controls and the haircuts in disguise applied by banks as well as the loss of value in the local currency are here to stay.

As we look ahead, several steps are required to address the decaying financial, monetary, and fiscal situation that has resulted from decades of mismanagement and incompetence.

\* **Capital controls:** Capital controls should be made official and for a



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- predetermined period of time (18 months) that may be extended if needed.
- \* **Financial statements auditing for BDL and all banks according to IFRS9 standards:** Before losses of depositors' money can be distributed, these need to be assessed.
  - \* **Bank insolvency:** Banks that are found insolvent will be required to be recapitalized by current shareholders or put in receivership.
  - \* **Profits from "financial engineering":** Banks will be required to disgorge the profits from the financial engineering deals they struck with BDL, failing which, the state will get a stake in banks in proportion to the profits they made.
  - \* **Interest rates:** BDL has lowered interest rates on deposits but has not matched them with a reduction of rates on consumer or business loans. This step only served to beef up banks' profits by reducing the amount of interest they paid. Rates on deposits and loans should be lowered dramatically. That includes interest paid by BDL to banks on their deposits.
  - \* **Haircuts:** Haircuts should be applied to bank accounts above a certain threshold (say, \$1 million), in proportion to the interest earned on these accounts over a certain period (say, the last five years). Depositors subject to haircuts will be compensated with shares (new shares, post-recapitalization) in proportion to the amount cut from their deposits.
  - \* **The peg:** The peg should be ended gradually. In a first stage, the exchange rate could be set to 2,250 LBP to the dollar. A gradual floating thereafter will limit the social ramifications of an immediate float.
  - \* **Sovereign debt:** The state should hold off on servicing existing sovereign debt or retiring maturing debt, at least to internal debtholders. A restructuring of the debt should include a drastic reduction of both the coupon payments and the principal as well as the lengthening of Eurobonds' maturities.
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- \* **Audit of bank accounts of politically exposed people:** recuperating the ill-gotten wealth of politicians, public servants, and major providers of services to the state starts with an audit of their bank accounts before and after 17 October 2019.
  - \* **Independent judiciary:** The successful prosecution of corruption cases (among others) requires a strong judiciary that is not susceptible to political pressure.
  - \* **Electricity:** The IMF would require the immediate end of EDL (national electricity company) subsidies as one of the conditions to aiding Lebanon. This will lead to either an increase in outages—leading citizens to buy more power from operators of generators—or an increase in electricity tariffs. Buyers will be put under financial pressure either way. Instead, it makes more sense to contract out the building of two new power plants via BOT contracts.
  - \* **Balance of payment (BOP):** To reduce the BOP deficit, it is important to import less and export more. An adjustment in the exchange rate of the lira will help as would increases in tariffs on imports of luxuries. However, it is important that the government provides help, land grants, and tax incentives to the agricultural and industrial sectors.
  - \* **Fiscal deficit reduction:** The public sector is bloated, but laying off public employees at this stage will only lead to further unrest, as would increasing the value-added tax (VAT) from 11 to 15 percent. Headcounts should instead go down by attrition. The same applies to public sector retirement packages. The latter are generous but cannot be curtailed for retirees. Instead, they could be for public sector employees who will retire starting several years from now.
  - \* **Privatization:** Although state-owned assets are very poorly managed, selling them off now at rock-bottom valuations is both unwise and

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immoral. Nevertheless, that should not preclude taking the national airline public (priority to domestic shareholders) or exploring public-private partnerships for the other assets.

- \* **Oil and gas resources:** Most importantly, the government should avoid selling Lebanon's oil and gas production forward as it is unfair to deprive future generations from revenues to pay for the theft and mismanagement of the current leadership.

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# Making Sure the Lebanese Revolution Does Not Devour Its Own Children

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Christophe Abi Nassif

## ABSTRACT

When protests broke out across Lebanon on 17 October 2019, very few people anticipated the political, economic, and financial consequences that the country finds itself facing today. In an unprecedented buildup of events, a government resigned, a monetary crisis sharply accelerated, and uncertainty about the future of a nation spiked. And while the first few weeks have been particularly raging, a relative status quo between protesters and the government seems to have prevailed. This article makes the case for four essential changes that the Lebanese revolution may want to consider to avoid stagnation and potential decay and ultimately achieve results and a significant breakthrough in political representation.

Revolutions can often linger and slowly fade away because of street fatigue, government counter-insurgency, internal schisms, or lack of vision, and this is exactly what the Lebanese revolution cannot afford to do.

Despite ebbs and flows in scale and intensity, one ought to recognize the material changes that a hundred days of relentless protests have already brought about. Dismissing the latter as dull, ineffective, or unsuccessful is a judgmental oversimplification of the magnitude of what has been achieved thus far regardless of some setbacks.

Citizens of all regions, religions, political affiliations, and socioeconomic

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backgrounds have come together to denounce decades of kleptocracy, incompetence, and clientelism. The Hariri government, a landmark of the broken model of consensual democracy that has plagued the country for 30 years, has fallen, leaving the political establishment scrambling and exposed. Decentralized protests have reached regions and targeted political figures once considered untouchable. For the first time, the need for accountability and proper governance are headlining any plausible path forward.

But the establishment has fought back. It has regenerated itself under its own auspices in a government of so-called independent technocrats primarily appointed by Hezbollah and Amal—the Shiite duet—with the cover of the Free Patriotic Movement, the main Christian bloc. It has tapped into its carefully crafted security apparatus to deter, arrest, and harass protesters. It has flexed its central and commercial banking muscles to put immense financial pressure on the day-to-day life of citizens and businesses through informal capital controls, cash-withdrawal restrictions, and two de facto parallel black markets for foreign currency, making them believe that the acute financial crisis had hit *as a result* of the protests. In times of existential threat, the political-security-banking troika consolidates and retaliates.

At the end of the day, the question is not whether or not the Lebanese revolution—because it is, after all, a revolution that is forcing change and awareness and not a sheer movement, as many detractors have called it—has succeeded or failed, because one can spin it either way one wants.

The question is how to build on the momentum that protesters have garnered to date and on the proven vulnerability of the political establishment to transform the revolution and take it forward. Indeed, a static revolution in the presence of a shrewd, determined establishment devours its own children. A dynamic and adaptive revolution delivers actionable results. I can think of four main changes that have become essential at this stage of the game.

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**First, protesters should consider dropping the leaderless, it-is-not-our-job-to-come-up-with-plans approach and start proposing visions for the future of the country's political, economic, and financial systems.**

Despite the impromptu and leaderless nature of the protests being successful and necessary at the early stages of the revolution, they now need a vision and ideas and faces behind that vision. It is critical to understand and explain to the masses that whoever steps up to the plate is by no means speaking *for* the people but is instead proposing a vision that people could either dismiss or choose to rally behind.

Such visions will have to touch upon vital issues including which form of government to adopt (e.g., secular-sectarian bicameral legislature), which productive industries to prioritize, how to fairly address the debt burden, how to design tax incidence, and how to smartly structure foreign policy, to name a few. Work is already underway on platforms such as Lebanocracia at the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University to help identify high-priority dimensions of potential visions and engage the public in designing policy and data-based solutions.<sup>1</sup>

As it stands, previous governments have not answered any of these questions convincingly (if at all), but neither have protesters. Distraught and angry rhetoric will only take the revolution so far. There is a need to design and communicate one or more convincing visions and detailed road maps that will give the Lebanese people a concrete alternative to what is currently in place—hope is an emotional parasite and can no longer be a strategy.

**Second, protesters should reconsider the timeline of their demand for early elections.** There is no doubt that protests have served their purpose in generating internal pressure and attracting international attention: the world is now watching, albeit potentially for the wrong reasons, as several bond payments to international creditors are due as of March.

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The truth is, nevertheless, that people can take to the streets all they want, but within the confines of avoiding severe bloodshed and a potential civil war, legitimate and recognizable change will have to come through the ballot box. And it is exactly at the latter that the revolution is likely to get crushed should early elections take place in the coming few months.

Set aside an unfavorable electoral law and gerrymandering, established political parties have ample funding and decades of experience running for elections, managing campaigns, and mobilizing people—two critical assets that the protesters currently lack.

**Therefore, third, and most importantly, protesters should begin organizing as soon as possible to design and launch a structured, nationwide, grassroots movement with arms and legs to rally people behind the visions they are offering.** Protesters will indeed benefit from more time to crystallize electoral programs, find the right people to run, organize on the ground, and build a network of activists and volunteers.

Some may understandably argue that more pressing priorities such as the country's approach to debt restructuring or its strategy to alleviate the cash crunch warrant more urgent attention. This nevertheless brings about the notion of decision making and control: your average protester—be they an army retiree, a university student, or a grandmother of eight—can engage effectively immediately in building such a grassroots movement. They cannot call the shots, at least for now, on whether to seek support from the IMF or default on the debt. They can, however, start or join their local chapter, knock on doors, engage in the conversation, and influence their networks.

The closest thing to a successful grassroots movement the country has witnessed was the Beirut Madinati municipal elections campaign in 2016, which despite a very short runway and humble resources, managed to garner 40 percent of the vote in the capital.<sup>2</sup> Although municipal and

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parliamentary elections differ in nature and significance, there is room to build on the experience of organizing and scaling such a campaign as well as on the lessons learned from the 2018 parliamentary elections disillusion.

New tactics such as the ones deployed by French President Emmanuel Macron's En Marche! party in the 2017 legislative elections to source, filter, and train qualified candidates are worth considering and adapting to the Lebanese model.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, nascent youth-led advocacy organizations such as the Sunrise Movement have proven very effective at rallying people nationwide, setting up local hubs rapidly and organizing town halls and targeted sit-ins similar to the ones several public entities have witnessed in major Lebanese cities. Here again, leveraging commonalities and success stories could help deploy strategies that the current establishment might not be familiar with and will hence struggle to take down.

According to the International Foundation for Electoral Systems, there were 3.75 million registered voters in the 2018 elections, 49.7 percent of whom actually voted.<sup>4</sup> Even under the significantly flawed 2018 electoral law, convincing and mobilizing less than a million people would have yielded a parliamentary majority. Lebanon is small and changeable. An ambitious and structured nationwide sweep coupled with a sustained memory of the fragility of the establishment may turn the table on election day.

**Fourth, activists should now take the conversation to the right forums—white papers, journal articles (including this one), and elitist intellectual conversations behind closed doors are important but are barely scratching the surface of the target popular base.** Indeed, protesters may be spending too much time convincing the segment of the population that does not need to be convinced and are overlooking the importance of engaging whoever they perceive as “the others,” namely avid supporters of current political parties.



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An essential battle separating the Lebanese revolution from wide-ranging parliamentary representation is its ability to attract demographic tranches once considered beyond reach. A method seemingly untested in Lebanon is what Stanford sociologist Robb Willer and University of Toronto social psychologist Mathew Feinberg describe as persuasion by reframing political arguments in terms of the moral values of the target audiences.<sup>5</sup>

What this could mean on the ground, for example, is that what was once delivered as “your political leader is corrupt and should be prosecuted”—which is probably true—could be positioned as “we both believe in the need for honesty and the supremacy of the law to build a fair and functioning country, so we should actively investigate, denounce, and penalize whoever is hindering that effort and is proven guilty.” This may sound trivial and idealistic, but winning back parliament under the current circumstances may need to find its roots in political psychology, a field that the Lebanese protests have not yet incorporated into their planning and outreach activities.

The coming months promise to be tough and draining for all Lebanese citizens. The fight, nevertheless, is one for dignity, justice, and prosperity. Taking down what I often refer to as the ingrained paper cantons of sectarianism, lawlessness, and subordination is not an overnight undertaking. Mistakes will be made along the way. What matters, however, is the unrelenting willingness to keep adapting the revolution and acting upon changes when strategies begin to stall. In this existential game of political Pac-Man we are all in, this seems to be the only way forward.

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## **Endnote**

- 1 Paul de Coustin, "Liban: Libanocracia: une plateforme qui hiérarchise les mesures urgentes souhaitées par le peuple," *Le Figaro*, 22 November 2019, <https://www.lefigaro.fr/international/liban-libanocracia-une-plateforme-qui-hierarchise-les-mesures-urgentes-souhaitees-par-le-peuple-20191122>.
- 2 Jad Chaaban et al., *Beirut's 2016 Municipal Elections: Did Beirut Madinati Permanently Change Lebanon's Electoral Scene?* (Doha, Qatar: Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 2016) [PDF file].
- 3 William Galibert, "Élections législatives: un comité d'investiture déjà à l'oeuvre dans le camp d'En Marche!," *Europe 1*, 26 April 2017, <https://www.europe1.fr/politique/elections-legislatives-un-comite-dinvestiture-deja-a-loeuvre-dans-le-camp-den-marche-3311846>.
- 4 International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES), Election Guide, Lebanese Republic, June 2018.
- 5 Robb Willer and Matthew Feinberg, "The Key to Political Persuasion," *The New York Times*, 13 November 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/15/opinion/sunday/the-key-to-political-persuasion.html>.



