

# More than just a “Spring”: the Arab region’s long-term revolution

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**The Arab region is immersed in a long-term revolutionary process that pits youth-led movements against authoritarian rulers and neoliberal capitalism.**

When in late 2018 the people of Sudan took to the streets demanding an end to Omar al-Bashir’s authoritarian rule, this immediately triggered memories of 2010, when Mohamed Bouazizi’s self-immolation in protest against the Tunisian regime set in motion a process of popular uprisings and revolutions across the region that have since become known as the Arab Spring. Were the protests in Sudan going to set in motion a similar process?

Since then, massive protest movements have taken shape in Algeria, Egypt, Lebanon and Iraq, each with their own specific triggers and dynamics, and with different degrees of success: whereas in Sudan and Algeria the people managed to rid themselves of their respective authoritarian rulers and in Lebanon the government was forced to resign, the uprising in Egypt was short-lived and violently repressed and the violent crackdown in Iraq already has cost the lives of hundreds of protesters.

ROAR editor Joris Leverink spoke with Gilbert Achcar, Professor of Development Studies and International Relations at SOAS, University of London and author of many books on the Arab Spring and the geopolitics of the region, to try to make sense of it all.

How are we to understand and frame this current wave of uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa and what is their historical relevance? What are the unique dynamics of each uprising, and what are some characteristics they have in common? Why have some protest movements booked historical victories, while others were violently crushed? In this in-depth interview, Gilbert Achcar responds to these, and other, questions.

**Joris Leverink: Earlier this year, when the people of Sudan and Algeria took to the streets en masse, the question was raised whether what we were seeing was the beginning of a “Second Arab Spring.” Since then, mass revolts have erupted in Egypt, Lebanon and Iraq — each with different outcomes, and the latter two still very much developing stories. You have pointed out that the terminology of an Arab “Spring” was misleading to begin with, that the revolts of 2011-13 were not a come-and-go seasonal event, but rather the beginning of a long-term revolutionary process. Could you explain this?**

Gilbert Achcar: The events we see happening now across the globe occur at two different levels. One is a general crisis of neoliberal capitalism, which was exacerbated with the Great Recession of 2008. This triggered a number of social protests across the globe, and caused a political polarization expressed in the rise of the far right, on the one hand, and fortunately, on the other hand, significant developments of the radical left in some countries, including most surprisingly the United States and the United Kingdom.

Within that global framework, the most spectacular chain of events is that which started in Tunisia

in December 2010 and spread to the whole Arabic-speaking region in 2011, becoming known as the “Arab Spring.” My point has been that there is something specific about the revolutionary shockwave in the Arab region — the Arabic-speaking countries of the Middle East and North Africa — which reached very spectacular proportions. The year 2011 saw major uprisings in six of the region’s countries, with all the others witnessing a very sharp rise in social protests. The general crisis of neoliberalism revealed in the Arab region a very deep structural crisis related to the specific nature of its state system.

The region’s developmental blockage was exacerbated by the prevalence of rentier patrimonial states, “patrimonial” in the sense that they are dealt with by ruling families as their private property in the region’s eight monarchies as well as in some of its so-called republics. The developmental blockage — whose most striking consequence is the fact that for decades the Arab region has had the highest rates of youth unemployment in the world — caused a gigantic explosion of social unrest across the region, which can only be overcome by a radical change encompassing its political, social and economic structures.

That is why I emphasized from the start in 2011 that this was only the beginning of a long-term revolutionary process that will carry on for years and decades with an alternation of upsurges and backlashes. It will carry on as long as no radical change has occurred in the region. The year 2013 saw a shift from the initial revolutionary wave into a counter-revolutionary backlash with old regime’s men on the offensive in Syria, Egypt, Tunisia, Yemen and Libya. From then on, the euphoria of 2011 gave way to gloom.

At the time of euphoria, I warned against the illusion that the region’s transformation will be fast and smooth, and at the time of gloom I kept asserting that there will be other uprisings, other “springs” to come.

Indeed, social eruptions have kept occurring in one country after the other since 2013: Tunisia, Morocco, Jordan, Iraq, Sudan were the most affected. And then, starting from December 2018 — eight years exactly after the start of the first wave of uprisings back in 2010 — the Sudanese protest movement shifted into uprising mode, followed by Algeria in February, with now, since October, Iraq reaching the boiling point followed by Lebanon. The global media started speaking of a “New Arab Spring.”

What is now unfolding in the Arab region proves that it is indeed a revolutionary process for the long haul that began in 2011.

**This specific long-term revolutionary process in the Arab region, could you provide a few of its characteristics? What is common to all these different revolts?**

What they have in common is a rejection of political regimes held responsible for increasingly intolerable social and economic conditions. Youth unemployment in the Arab region affects young graduates disproportionately in this part of the Global South, characterized by a relatively high rate of enrollment in tertiary education. The connection between this fact and uprisings that are mostly youth rebellions in which educated young people play a leading role is obvious.

Beyond the natural difference in the specific issues affecting each country, several themes are common to all the regional revolts: a longing for social equality — what the protesters call “social justice” — and for a radical change in economic conditions. They want the means to lead a dignified life, starting with a decent job.

Another common theme is freedom and democracy: political and cultural freedoms and the people’s

sovereignty. The protests and uprisings have displayed a lot of cultural creativity, as happens normally with revolutionary processes — at least in their peaceful phases. I recently quoted Jean-Paul Sartre's phrase about the May '68 protests in France: "Imagination in power." These are some of the common aspirations and features of the region's struggles spearheaded by the new generation.

**The recent revolts in Sudan and Algeria have both achieved significant successes — the removal of their respective long-term authoritarian leaders and a push towards the democratization of their political systems. Although it remains to be seen, of course, how these short-term victories will play out in the long term, what they have achieved thus far is remarkable. What has been the secret to the success of the uprisings in Sudan and Algeria? And what are the challenges that lie ahead for the movements in both countries in the next few months and perhaps even years?**

The uprisings in Algeria and Sudan are the two larger events of the ongoing second wave of the regional revolutionary process. They have obvious similarities, but they are different in one key respect: leadership of the struggle. This difference determined different outcomes beyond toppling the president that was achieved in each country. In Sudan, Omar al-Bashir presided over a military dictatorship that worked in close alliance with Islamic fundamentalists since 1989, the year of the coup led by al-Bashir. In Algeria, the military had coopted in 1999 a civilian, Abdelaziz Bouteflika, in the role of president. In both countries, the mass uprising prompted the military to remove the president.

But these are not exceptional victories. Similar ones happened in 2011 in Tunisia, where the president was removed by the security-military complex. In Egypt, a month later, the president was removed by the military in a way very similar to what has occurred recently in Sudan and Algeria.

However, the popular movements of the latter two countries have learned the lesson of the Egyptian events. Protracted revolutionary processes are also learning curves: popular movements learn the lessons of previous revolutionary experiences and take special care not to repeat their errors. The Sudanese and the Algerians avoided the trap in which the Egyptians had fallen when they bought into illusions about the military's democratic intentions. When Egypt's military removed Hosni Mubarak from power in February 2011 and again when they toppled his successor Mohamed Morsi in July 2013, this was greeted by masses who were fooled into believing that the military were going to bring about democracy.

The masses in Sudan and Algeria had no such illusions. In both countries, the uprisings remained defiant of the military. They understood that the army, in removing the president, only sought to preserve its dictatorial power. These were conservative coups, not even reformist coups. The Sudanese and the Algerians understood that and kept their movement going. For several months now, it has become a tradition in Algeria to hold huge popular demonstrations every Friday, explicitly rejecting whatever the army proposes as a way out of the crisis.

But the key difference between the two movements — a hugely important difference indeed — is that there is no recognized leadership of the mass movement in Algeria, whereas there is very clearly one in Sudan. In Algeria, the army command is therefore behaving as if it could ignore the popular movement. They have set a date for a new presidential election in December, even though the mass movement is rejecting that unambiguously. The military are showing determination to go ahead with the election nonetheless, but it is not sure that they will manage to achieve that. The point is, however, that there is no representative counter-demand on the table: no group of people can speak in the name of the mass movement.

In Sudan, by contrast, the driving force of the movement is the Sudanese Professionals Association (SPA) which was formed in 2016 as an underground network of associations of teachers, journalists, doctors, lawyers and other professions. The SPA was decisive in laying the ground for what eventually led to the popular uprising. They then convened a coalition of forces that included, along their association, feminist groups, a few political parties and some of the armed groups waging ethnic struggles against the regime. This coalition became the recognized leadership of the uprising and the military had no choice but to negotiate with them.

After months of struggle, including some tragic episodes when a section of the military tried to repress the movement bloodily, both sides reached a compromise, which can only be provisional. It characterized the situation as one of dual power — they formed a governing body in which the two opposite powers are represented: the military and the popular movement. How long they will coexist is difficult to tell, but what is certain is that they cannot coexist forever. One of the two will eventually prevail decisively over the other.

Nevertheless, the movement in Sudan has already achieved much more and gone far beyond what has been achieved in Algeria, where the military are just ignoring — or pretending to ignore — the popular movement. The grassroots social organization that the SPA constituted in Sudan grew massively when the uprising started: it was joined by independent unions sprouting up in various sectors until it ended up organizing the bulk of the country's working class. This kind of leadership, this coordinated network of unions and associations, has been the most advanced type of leadership to emerge in the region since 2011. And it has become a model: in both Iraq and Lebanon, there are ongoing efforts at grassroots organizing inspired by the Sudanese model.

**In late September protesters across Egypt took to the streets demanding the resignation of President Sisi. This time around, unlike 2011, the movement failed to mobilize the numbers needed to bring about any kind of political change. It was quickly and violently crushed by Sisi's security forces. Looking at Egypt, what is the difference between 2011 and 2019? And why did the people of Sudan and Algeria succeed in occupying the streets whereas their Egyptian brothers and sisters failed? What is different in Egypt this time around?**

I have already mentioned the illusions that the Egyptian people held about the army when it toppled Mubarak in 2011. These illusions did not last long. But in 2012, the Muslim Brotherhood came to power through the election of Mohamed Morsi as president. One year later, against the background of a gigantic popular mobilization against his rule, it was Morsi's turn to be toppled by the army, with a renewal of popular illusions about the military as a force for progressive change. The illusions were even stronger this time, because of the big scare created by the way the Muslim Brotherhood behaved in power. This resulted eventually in Abdel Fattah el-Sisi's election as president in 2014, with high popular expectations. He quickly turned out to be much worse than any of his predecessors.

Sisi has created the most repressive regime Egypt has seen in decades, a dictatorial neoliberal regime that implemented most brutally the full range of IMF's austerity recommendations, leading to massive impoverishment and huge inflation. The prices of food, basic staples, fuel, transport — all basic needs — have risen massively. Normally, people would have taken to the streets in great numbers to demand that these measures be repealed, but they were deterred by the repressive context.

Since the bloody repression of the Muslim Brotherhood that followed the second coup of 2013, a climate of terror has descended over Egypt. Add to it the fact that the population can't see an alternative to the regime at present. That's a crucial part of the problem indeed. And it brings us

back to the question of popular alternatives represented by groups, organizations and associations — the problem of leadership. The recent attempts at mobilizing against Sisi in September were significant, but they failed in reaching the level required to take down a dictatorial government. It would need something on the scale of what happened in 2011 at the very least.

The recent protests were triggered by a young entrepreneur who used to do business with the military, including Sisi's entourage. For some reason, he got alienated from them and took refuge in Spain from where he started calling for an uprising through social media. That proved not enough to create the huge popular mobilization required to get rid of Sisi.

Another factor of weakness is the legacy created by massive errors of the Egyptian left, the bulk of whom supported the coup in 2013, contributing thus to fostering illusions about the military and discrediting themselves. Egypt will need something like what we have seen in Sudan; that is, the formation of a grassroots network capable of mobilizing the population and providing an alternative in its eyes. Only if something like that emerges will there be a mass movement powerful enough to bring Sisi down.

**Your home country, Lebanon, is currently witnessing what is probably the biggest popular uprising in its history. The movement has already forced the government to revoke some of the regressive taxes that it was planning to implement, and which sparked the initial protests. Prime Minister Hariri announced his resignation. These are significant successes, but the movement shows no signs of slowing down and keeps demanding the removal of the entire ruling class. What is the historic relevance of the current protests and how should we understand them in the context of the long-term revolutionary process unfolding in the region?**

First, I must point to the fact that the ongoing mass movement is not the largest that Lebanon has seen in recent history. In 2005, you had a huge mobilization against Syrian domination of the country and the presence of Syrian troops, which took more impressive dimensions in the capital city Beirut. But at that time, the country was divided along sectarian lines: a mass counter-mobilization of mostly Shia people took place in support of the Syrian regime.

This time, what has been most impressive about the movement is that it has spread all over the country. It is the first time, indeed, that an uprising is not restricted to one part or one half of the country. The whole country is involved: all regions, and — most importantly, given the sectarian nature of Lebanon's political system — people belonging to all religious sects. That is hugely important.

Sectarianism is the key tool through which Lebanon's ruling class has traditionally controlled society and prevented the rise of social struggles. Previous waves of social struggle were nipped in the bud by whipping up sectarian divisions. What is most important about the ongoing movement and allows to create horizontal solidarity is that it is rising up against very crude neoliberal policies in a country with very high degrees of corruption and social inequality. The population simply got fed up of all that.

The movement encompasses various social groups: the poor, the unemployed, workers and the middle-class. The Lebanese state has been so deplorably dysfunctional over so many years that even people from the middle classes are fed up with the ruling system, they all want this to change. Against that, there have been attempts at countering the social mobilization with sectarian mobilization. Most prominent behind such efforts is Hezbollah, which is part of Lebanon's governmental coalition. It has come forward as a prominent reactionary force, threatening the demonstrators with thugs and defending the existing structures of power.

That the uprising managed to obtain the resignation of the prime minister in this context has been perceived as a key victory. But that is only one first step; they are demanding the organization of new elections to be prepared by a government that is not another coalition of the parliamentary political parties, but by what they call a “government of experts.” However, in Lebanon, as in Algeria, there is not yet a recognized leadership of the movement, which started as a truly spontaneous uprising. Important steps have been taken towards organizing in recent days, inspired by the Sudanese experience.

“Leaderless movements” are fine in the early phase of an uprising, but to go forward, the movement must organize in some form. Leadership is needed — not in the sense of some charismatic leader or “vanguard party,” but in the sense of a network of grassroots organizations that can coordinate and steer the movement towards fulfilling its aspirations. From this angle, I do not expect any radical change to occur in Lebanon soon. The best that I hope for, at this still initial stage, is that this first countrywide mass uprising results in the build-up of organizational structures able to play a leading role in a future wave of popular struggle with clear and radical goals.

**In Lebanon there have been groups of people, mainly supporters of Hezbollah, attacking protesters and burning down protest camps. In Iraq, Iran-backed militias have been responsible for most of the killings. We know the Iranian regime’s involvement and connections in Lebanon, Iraq and Syria. Why is Iran keen on suppressing the protest movements in both Iraq and Lebanon, and how do you see that developing?**

Iran is a theocratic government — the only theocratic state in the world if you leave aside the Vatican. It is a clerical government, a sort of regime that can only be deeply reactionary. The fact that this government is opposed to the United States and to Israel does not mean that it is progressive as some people wrongly assume following the very flawed rule that “the enemy of my enemy is my friend.” If you are truly progressive, the Iranian regime cannot be your friend even though it is at odds with Israel and US imperialism.

Iran’s regime is not motivated by anti-imperialism; actually, they do not even use that term. They refer to the US with a religious phrase — “the great Satan.” The regime has its own expansionist agenda and spreads its influence through the build-up of sectarian paramilitary forces in neighboring Iraq, Syria and Lebanon, and in Yemen as well despite the lack of territorial continuity between Iran and that country.

In spreading its influence by such means, Tehran is not pursuing some progressive agenda but it is building up a regional empire that is as neoliberal and corrupt as the Iranian regime is. In Syria, they intervened on behalf of the regime against the revolution that started in 2011. Iran and its regional proxies have been crucial in enabling the Syrian regime to turn the uprising into a civil war, and to eventually win that war with its help and that of Russia. This was a blatant counter-revolutionary intervention that those who support it try to portray as part of an anti-Israel and anti-US strategic design. But that is not true: neither Israel nor the US wanted the overthrow of the Syrian regime. What Obama called for was a compromise between the regime and the opposition with the president stepping down to make it possible.

The counter-revolutionary character of the Iranian regime is also obvious in the way it repressed mass protests in Iran itself. One major wave of protests in 2009 was brutally repressed; it was followed by big social protests in 2018 and early 2019 that were put down in the same manner. Likewise, the Iranian regime, through paramilitary forces connected to it, has been engaged in the repression of the Iraqi people’s uprising. A similar attempt occurred in Lebanon, albeit at a more modest scale for now. Iran is thus definitely part of the regional counter-revolution. Along with the Saudi kingdom, they constitute two rival counter-revolutionary poles at the regional level, as both

Russia and the US are at the global level.

**Do you think it is part of Iran's strategy to provoke popular uprisings into taking up arms in response to an extremely violent repression, so that it has an excuse to intervene militarily? Are they purposefully pushing the protesters to respond in a violent way, especially in Iraq?**

The situation in Iraq is complicated by the fact that protesters there are essentially Shia until now. That is the very community that Iran is keen on keeping under its control. It is a fact of utmost importance that the uprising in Iraq involves the Shia population in open opposition to Iran's domination. Tehran cannot afford to alienate these masses completely, which is why it is now trying to defuse tensions and find a compromise. In Lebanon, the uprising is cross-sectarian. It involves people from all sects and communities. Hezbollah's repressive intervention led for a short while to a reduction in the participation of Shias in the protests in parts of the country controlled by Hezbollah. But the continuation of the uprising has emboldened Shias to join it again.

An important difference between Lebanon and Iraq is that, in the latter country, the Sunnis have mostly stayed aloof — not because they disapprove the movement but because they do not dare yet to join it. Arab Sunnis have become a repressed minority in Iraq since the overthrow of Saddam Hussein's regime, oppressed first at the hands of US occupation forces and then at the hands of Shia sectarian forces dominant in government. That is why Arab Sunni regions have been receptive successively to Al-Qaeda and ISIS. The present uprising there has therefore been essentially restricted to Shias until now, whereas in Lebanon it has been cross-sectarian from the very start.

The fact that the anti-Iran character of the uprising in Iraq is much more pronounced than in Lebanon, where Iran's direct interference is less prominent, is one reason of the harsher repression in Iraq where a high number of people have been killed already. On the other hand, the protesters are very keen on sticking to nonviolent forms of protest — especially in Lebanon, where the movement resembles those of Algeria and Sudan in that regard. That is because they know that if they fall in the trap and allow violence to escalate, it will provide the reactionary forces with the opportunity to crush the movement and deter it from carrying on.

**Regarding international solidarity, it is clear that what is happening in the Arab region is not solely happening there. We are now talking about Chile, Ecuador, Haiti, Hong Kong, Catalonia: it is all connected. For people outside those countries, what is the best way to engage with the protests in your view? What is the best way to show international solidarity in confronting the system against which people are revolting globally? The struggle needs to be global as well. How do you see the best way for this to take shape?**

The best way to be in solidarity with an uprising in another country is to do one in your own. That's obviously the best support. The global spread of uprisings and revolts creates a dynamic that benefits all of them. It is very clear now. The conversation has shifted globally from talking about the far-right to talking about global anti-neoliberal revolts, which are essentially progressive revolts. But it is also important, of course, to express cross-border solidarity with the uprisings, with their progressive goals and their progressive demands.

It is also crucial to condemn any reactionary attempts at putting the revolts down. Any forces that try to repress the uprisings, whether frontally or through manipulative stratagems, must be denounced. In the future, one hopes that — with a maturation of grassroots organizations — there will be more direct connections between local organizations than the little that exists now. There has been a lot of talk since the 2011 "Arab Spring" about the role of social media and new communication technologies in facilitating the coordination of local struggles. The same goes for

solidarity between the movements of various countries. At both levels, the national and the global, it is imperative to build real physical networks to carry the struggle to a higher stage.

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- Roar Mag, November 8, 2019:  
<https://roarmag.org/essays/arab-spring-achcar-interview/>



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