



# Diwan

*Inquiring Minds*

## What Will the Attention of Carnegie Middle East Scholars Be Focused On in 2020?

Michael Young

A regular survey of experts on matters relating to Middle Eastern and North African politics and security.

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Comments (+)

**Frances Z. Brown** | Fellow in the Democracy, Conflict, and Governance Program at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace

In 2020, I will be watching whether U.S. policy toward Syria at last matches ends to means. The year 2019 featured profoundly mixed messages from the Trump administration on the country: After U.S. officials spent most of the year proclaiming maximalist goals of defeating the Islamic State, countering Iran, and pushing a political transition, in October the president abruptly announced the

pullout of U.S. troops. The results of this were gravely weakened U.S. leverage, a damaged counterterrorism campaign, frayed U.S. partnerships, and tremendous human suffering. Now, weeks later, officials are again claiming that the United States is still pursuing the same ambitious objectives in Syria—and has even added guarding oil fields to its mission set—all with fewer troops and an evident lack of commitment. Neither U.S. partners nor adversaries will be convinced that this is viable. In 2020, the Trump administration will need to reckon with the fact that it cannot do more with less.

**‘Amr Hamzawy** | Nonresident senior fellow in the Carnegie Middle East Program, senior research scholar at the Center on Democracy, Development, and the Rule of Law in the Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies at Stanford University

The ongoing protests of Arab citizens merit the continued attention of Carnegie Middle East scholars. Whether it is popular demands for just economic policies, anti-corruption measures, or democratic governance, all will lead to substantial reforms in Algeria, Iraq, and Lebanon. These issues remain fundamental, even as they pose grave risks of leading to violent outcomes and protracted conflicts between ruling establishments and protesters.

State fragmentation and civil wars in Libya, Syria, and Yemen also warrant attention. Key questions in this regard are whether military campaigns will give way to political solutions and how the eroded legitimacy of state institutions can be restored after years of widescale violence and persecution.

Finally, trends in countries that are democratizing, such as Tunisia and Sudan, and countries where authoritarian rule is being consolidated, such as Morocco and Egypt, should not be ignored. Both categories of countries face deep economic and political crises, poverty, corruption, popular mistrust of politics, and deep differences between younger citizens who can bring change and older citizens who tend to favor stability.

**Zaha Hassan** | Visiting fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace

The future of democracy in Israel and Palestine will play out in 2020 as both head toward spring elections. For Israel, this would be its third election in a year and for the Palestinian Authority (PA) its first since 2006. Whether such a road will resolve the political fractures within both communities, or will exacerbate them, is bound to affect how U.S. presidential candidates distinguish themselves on foreign policy priorities for the Middle East.

However, the outcome of Israel's elections is unlikely to lead to a repeal by the Knesset of Israel's Jewish Nation State Basic Law. The legislation provides constitutional imprimatur for discrimination against Palestinian citizens and prioritizes the extension and consolidation of Israel's sovereignty over the occupied West Bank.

Palestinian national reconciliation, a prerequisite for popular mobilization of the people to face the challenges to Palestinian rights and presence on the land, is unlikely to be advanced by PA elections. These require that the two main rival political factions, Hamas and Fatah, agree first over fundamental issues related to the representative character of the Palestine Liberation Organization and its relationship with the PA.

Given this morass, most U.S. Democratic presidential candidates will find it easiest to fall back on catch phrases such as “two states for two peoples” or talk about “going back to bilateral

negotiations.” Those two ideas have little meaning, however, as Israel is on the cusp of officially annexing parts of the West Bank and the Trump administration seems amenable to recognizing such a fait accompli.

The next year will certainly be the end of the era of the peace process and the beginning of another. This new era will either be defined by the dismemberment of international and multilateral mechanisms to support Middle Eastern peace, or by the reinvigoration of institutions to support a resolution of the conflict consistent with international law and human rights.

**Aaron David Miller** | Senior fellow in the Goeconomic and Strategy Program at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace

The Arab world seems to be in a chronic state of dysfunction. Each in their own peculiar way, Egypt, Syria, and Iraq, the three key Arab states that have long competed for power and influence, seem to be offline. As we move into 2020, I'll be focused on the region's most consequential powers, the three non-Arab states—Iran, Israel, and Turkey—with the capacity to project power beyond their borders.

Israel will go to the polls during the first week of March. Will exhaustion and fatigue with, as well as three indictments against, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu finally bring an end to the “Bibi era”? What will 2020 bring for the United States and Iran? Will it bring a dangerous escalation in their relationship or the beginning of an amelioration in tensions brought about by a risk-averse U.S. president who seems to want to avoid war with Iran in favor of vanity summits and a negotiating process? And finally what can we expect from Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in the way of new moves in Syria against the Kurds or with Russia and the Assad regime and NATO?

**Sherif Mohyelddeen** | Nonresident scholar at the Carnegie Middle East Center in Beirut

As we are witnessing what can be considered the second wave of the Arab uprisings, there are several topics and issues worth focusing on. They include the flow of ideas and people across the Arab world, alternative security approaches for countering terrorism and radicalization, transitional justice, impunity, fair trials, and memorializing and compensating the victims.

Almost all of the North African states have witnessed mass protests and uprisings. These have led to the overthrow of the regimes of five presidents since 2011. I would like to focus on the trials of some of those presidents, and examine whether transitional justice is being applied in those cases or not.

Furthermore, I intend to continue my research on cross-border areas in North Africa. I would like to explore how the increasing flow of goods, people, and ideas between Egypt and Sudan contributes to socioeconomic advancement for borderland communities.

**Marwan Muasher** | Vice president for studies at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, overseeing research on the Middle East

This last decade has ended as it began for the Arab world, with Arab uprisings that have spanned

twelve out of 22 Arab states so far. Whereas many commentators had written off much of the first wave of protests as failures, concluding prematurely that Arab states had successfully ridden the wave, the second wave of Arab uprisings in Algeria, Sudan, Iraq, and Lebanon are living proof that the challenges that brought about the first wave have not been adequately addressed.

Carnegie Middle East scholars have consistently predicted that what the region has faced is but the first chapter in a transformational process taking decades to unfold. Already, important differences are discernible between the two waves. The second one is more mature, peaceful, and patient. It is rejecting the binary choice offered by most Arab governments to their citizens—either authoritarianism or chaos. Citizens are now calling for a third way: civil states governed by the rule of law and a serious fight against corruption.

Whereas the first wave led in some cases to the disintegration of states and the emergence of powerful and radical non-state actors such as the Islamic State or sectarian military groups in Libya, Yemen, Syria, and elsewhere, the second wave is a cry to go back to the national state, this time based on new foundations of civil rule and equal treatment of all citizens. I expect Carnegie scholars to keep analyzing these emerging trends and offer lessons to be learned from this second iteration of Arab uprisings.

**Marc Pierini** | Visiting scholar at Carnegie Europe, where he focuses on developments in the Middle East and Turkey from a European perspective

Syria, the eastern Mediterranean, and the Maghreb will witness major developments, with ramifications far beyond the region.

Even if the Syrian war decreases in intensity after nine years of crimes against humanity, serious hurdles will remain. First, Turkey's military presence will continue in 'Afrin, Jarablus, and Tell Abyad. Many call this an occupation, but Ankara says its military actions are directed against terrorism. The situation will not end well since Russia and Iran intend to return all Syrian territory to the Assad regime.

Turkey's offshore drilling activities and agreement on maritime boundaries with the Tripoli-based government in Libya are likely to mean more tensions with Greece and Cyprus, as well as Egypt and Israel. Hopefully, dialogue will prevail over confrontation at sea. The tense situation at home may push the Turkish government to ramp up the nationalist narrative for the sake of perpetuating the seventeen-year political dominance of the ruling Justice and Development Party.

Meanwhile, in Algeria, despite the recent election of a new president, the popular protest movement is likely to go on for a second year. This will continue until the Algerian military realizes that this is a watershed moment in the country's politics.

**Bader al-Saif** | Non-resident fellow at the Carnegie Middle East Center in Beirut, where he focuses on the Gulf and the Arabian Peninsula

In 2020 I will be watching whether the Saudi Arabia-United Arab Emirates axis, which has been dominant since the 2010–2011 uprisings, will continue, or whether there will be a realignment in their alliance. More broadly in the Gulf, of major interest will be what the terms are for the fast-approaching rapprochement in the Gulf Cooperation Council, marked by the rift between Qatar and its other Gulf partners. Will it be a permanent resolution or temporary and half-hearted to counter

external threats such as Iran?

In Saudi Arabia, against the backdrop of social reforms and a regional youth bulge, how will the kingdom's youth relate to these developments in terms of identity formation, religious belonging, and economic opportunities? The impact of the Aramco listing on the oil industry and future economic reforms and state-citizen relations are key in this regard. In terms of generational change, political transitions will be worth monitoring in 2020.

I will also be watching to see if there will be a continuation in the dominance of Gulf states in the Arab region and a weakening of traditional Arab centers of power, in Egypt, Syria, and Iraq. There too I will be looking to see how relations may change and what power plays take place.

**Armenak Tokmajyan** | Nonresident scholar at the Carnegie Middle East Center in Beirut

The Syrian regime, with the help of its allies, has recaptured many opposition-held areas in the last two years. Military force, especially Russian air support, was crucial for the regime's successes. However, the regime also used non-military and non-security networks—former Ba'athists, retired state officials, tribal leaders, other prominent officials, and so on—in the process of recapturing territory. It relied on such networks to broker local agreements with opposition forces or simply facilitate their surrender. That is why I would like to focus on how the regime has used these non-military and non-security networks, and even expanded them, in order to facilitate its return and strengthen its control over society.

**Jake Wallis** | Nonresident senior fellow in the Middle East Program at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, where he focuses on Israeli-Palestinian issues, Tunisia, and counterterrorism.

I will be watching to see how Israel navigates its ongoing political crisis, with a third Knesset election in less than a year scheduled for March. Could this finally be the end for long-serving Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu? He certainly won't go down without a fight, as he maneuvers between his political opponents on the one side and the legal system on the other. Will President Donald Trump try to rescue him by supporting annexation of the Jordan Valley or a U.S.-Israel defense pact? If annexation goes forward, it would be the final nail in the coffin of any realistic two-state solution.

Meanwhile, the Palestinians are seeking to hold their own elections. Will Netanyahu allow them to go forward and authorize Palestinian voting in East Jerusalem? Will the West Bank continue to remain calm if there is no realistic hope of a Palestinian state?

**Maha Yahya** | Director of the Carnegie Middle East Center in Beirut

Protests that have erupted across eight Arab countries over this past year—Algeria, Sudan, Lebanon, Egypt, Jordan, Iraq, Morocco, Tunisia, and Syria—indicate that governance, both political and economic, continues to be a central question in the Arab world. Expanding corruption, growing distrust of the political class and of all institutions (public, private, and in some instances religious), deteriorating economic situations, and rapidly declining living standards are driving citizens across the region to demand new modalities of governance. In some countries, it is also reinvigorating a newfound sense of national identity and associated citizen rights.

In the coming year I will focus on the ripple effects of ongoing protest movements and political settlements, especially in Lebanon, Iraq, and Syria. Triggered for the most part by growing dissatisfaction in the political and economic management of their countries, citizens have been asking for a complete transformation of their regimes.

In Lebanon, a severe economic and fiscal crisis is threatening the very foundations of the Lebanese state even as the political class drags its feet on forming a cabinet that can restore the trust of citizens and the international community. Trends to monitor include whether total economic collapse will precede cabinet formation or will the political class finally concede the need for an international bailout, with all its difficult conditionalities? In Iraq, with the failure of the repression of protests that has left at least 400 people dead, how will a new government address grievances and stem a new civil conflict? What new forms of political mobilization will take place and how will the national awakening in Iraq and Lebanon impact governance?

Regionally and in view of the U.S.-Iran standoff and Russia's increasing role in the region, what kind of political settlements will emerge? If some agreement is reached between President Donald Trump and Iran, what impact will this have on Hezbollah in Lebanon and the Popular Mobilization Forces and affiliated militias in Iraq, and how will this affect tensions between the Arab Gulf states and Iran? How will this impact negotiations over Syria, where the Assad regime's recapturing of territory has not translated into sustainable peace? And what implications will it have for a refugee return and longer-term regional stability?

**Sarah Yerkes** | Fellow in the Carnegie Middle East Program, where her research focuses on Tunisia, as well as state-society relations in the Middle East and North Africa.

I will be watching how the region's ongoing protests—from Algeria to Lebanon to Iraq and Iran—continue to unfold. While protestors have succeeded in unseating long-standing leaders, akin to what happened during the "Arab Spring" in 2011, these protests are different in several ways, particularly their longevity and their unwillingness to compromise. In 2020, we will see how the protestors' demands evolve and whether their governments will be able to meet their demands.

I am also going to be watching whether other countries in the region, whose populations are equally frustrated with poor governance, challenging socioeconomic conditions, and lack of a voice and accountability at home, will undertake large and lasting protests of their own. And I will be paying attention to how governments respond to these protests—whether they undertake a more forceful and violent approach or are willing to acquiesce to demands that will provide real positive changes to the lives of their citizens.

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