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**Rumblings in North Africa: What the Algerian Protests and Discontent
in Neighboring Areas May Portend**
Sarah Feuer

Until the outbreak of widespread protests in Algeria three weeks ago, the states of northwest Africa had appeared to settle into a relative stasis, despite the fact that the region's endemic social, economic, and governance-related problems remained very much unresolved. The eruption of demonstrations across Algeria, the largest country in Africa, suggests that frustrated publics in the region may no longer feel deterred from mobilizing. For Israel, the prospect of instability across North Africa suggests that policymakers in Jerusalem should pay particular attention to five trends: an aging leadership with uncertain succession scenarios, fragile economic foundations, the battle between Islamist and non-Islamist camps, the ongoing threat of jihadism, and the growing involvement of Russia. These trends are not unique to the Maghreb, but rather characterize much of the Arab Middle East today. As such, it is in Israel's interest to develop a more robust understanding of how events in North Africa reflect, relate to, and even influence developments across the region, including in countries closer to home. If the past eight years are any indication, notions of center and periphery likely obscure more than they enlighten the regional dynamics for which Israel must prepare, and in which it too is likely to become an increasingly active player.

Following the 2011 uprisings in the Arab world, the states of northwest Africa proceeded down vastly different trajectories, reflecting the varied fates Arab states would meet in the ensuing years. Tunisia, where the uprisings originated, embarked on a promising, if bumpy, process of democratization. Libya descended into fragmentation and civil strife, and today remains a largely failed state. In Algeria, where memories of a civil war twenty years prior reduced the appetite for large-scale protest, the state in 2011 reached into its deep pockets of oil money and distributed benefits aimed at quashing any potential unrest. And in Morocco, where protestors took to the streets demanding dignity, employment, and an end to corruption, the monarchy launched a reform process that produced a new constitution while preserving the kingdom's basic political and economic foundations.

Until the outbreak of widespread protests in Algeria three weeks ago, the Maghreb had appeared to settle into a relative stasis, despite the fact that the region's endemic social,

economic, and governance-related problems remained very much unresolved. Publics had evidently resigned themselves to a “new normal,” deterred from mobilizing by the chaos and violence unleashed in other parts of the Arab world. The eruption of demonstrations across Algeria, the largest country in Africa, suggests that deterrence may be wearing off. For Israel, the prospect of instability across North Africa will present security-related challenges but also potential opportunities. Policymakers in Jerusalem should pay particular attention to five trends in the coming months.

Succession in Algeria

In Algeria, the ruling party’s March 3, 2019 announcement that the country’s ailing, 82 year-old president, Abdelaziz Bouteflika, would run for a fifth term in the upcoming election sparked the largest wave of protests to hit the country since the late 1980s. Bouteflika has rarely appeared in public since suffering a stroke in 2013, and his candidacy suggested that the opaque amalgamation of military leaders, intelligence officials, businessmen, and political elites governing the country could not reach a consensus on his successor. Algeria has in recent years emerged as a linchpin of regional stability, with divisions of its 460,000 active duty, reservist, and gendarmerie forces engaged in mitigating the spillover effects of the war in Libya and preventing terrorist groups stretched across the Sahel region to the south from advancing northward into Europe. Disruptions stemming from a political crisis there could significantly destabilize the region, and although the government was forced to rescind Bouteflika’s candidacy (announced on March 11), it remains to be seen whether the leadership will devise a credible roadmap out of the impasse.

Economic Malaise

The protests in Algeria serve as a reminder that notwithstanding the political upheavals that swept the region, North Africa’s economic infrastructure looks much as it did in late 2010 and will, therefore, remain a source of potential unrest. In the oil- and gas-producing states of Algeria and Libya, an inability or unwillingness to begin diversifying the economy has left these countries at the mercy of volatile oil prices, which have yet to fully recover from their plunge in 2014. In Algeria, the result was a 50 percent decline in foreign currency reserves and a resort to unpopular austerity measures that fueled thousands of local demonstrations each year even before the latest eruption. In Libya, competition over control of the country’s petroleum facilities and revenues has become the leading driver of a simmering armed conflict that shows few signs of abating.

In the non-rentier states of Morocco and Tunisia, high unemployment and unmet expectations of deeper economic change since 2011 are fostering a growing discontent. In Morocco, where youth unemployment hovers around 18 percent, grievances stemming from corruption and lack of access to basic social services sparked a protest movement in

the northern Rif region and, more recently, a nation-wide boycott of three companies dominating the Moroccan economy. In Tunisia, optimism over the country's political liberalization has been overshadowed by persistent unemployment (estimated at 36 percent among the youth), endemic regional inequalities, and protests over unpopular austerity measures. Whether such conditions spark a second wave of uprisings will largely depend on these states' capacities to absorb and channel popular discontent.

Islamist Politics

Despite the downfall of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt in 2013 and the ensuing crackdown on affiliated movements in certain states across the region, developments in North Africa suggest it would be premature to begin eulogizing Islamist politics. Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated parties are established fixtures in Morocco and Tunisia. Parliamentary and presidential elections are scheduled for Tunisia in the fall, and the leading Islamist party, Ennahda, is expected to do well. The group's leader, Rached Ghannouchi, is even mulling a run for President. Notwithstanding Ennahda's rebranding as a party of "Muslim Democrats," a strong showing in the upcoming elections would signal to sympathizers and detractors of political Islam across the region that Brotherhood derivatives continue to garner substantial support.

Meanwhile, in places less open to the Brotherhood's variant of Islamism, ultra-conservative Salafi movements have gained traction and elicited support from state bodies eager to check the Brotherhood's power. In Algeria, the state has promoted (apolitical) Salafism in an attempt to counteract militant strains of the ideology. And in Libya, armed Salafist brigades allied with an ostensibly secular military leader, Khalifa Hefhtar, have permeated the country's political, security, and social realms. The Salafists' ascendance in Libya suggests Islamist politics will remain a factor in the emerging order.

Jihadi Activity

The ostensible, if precarious, military defeat of the so-called Islamic State (IS) in 2018 may have rid the region of an aspiring caliphate, but jihadi movements will continue to pose a threat across North Africa. In Libya, where a US-backed military campaign succeeded in driving out IS militants from their self-proclaimed province in late 2016, IS-inspired attacks nonetheless more than doubled in the last year, and pockets of the group operate in the ungoverned south. Militants affiliated with Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb have also found a haven in southern Libya, and they continue to launch attacks against Tunisia's armed forces in the struggling democracy's western mountains. In Morocco, where officials routinely announce the discovery and disruption of terror plots, militants claiming allegiance to IS killed two female tourists from Scandinavia last December.

Russia's Expanding Influence

If recent years are any indication, Russia will continue to expand its presence across North Africa, pursuing a blend of geostrategic, economic, and political interests. The Maghreb offers Moscow a growing foothold in the Mediterranean, lucrative contracts in the energy and infrastructure sectors, and an opportunity to establish itself as a broker in the region's political conflicts. Algeria remains Russia's third largest customer for military equipment, including ships with proven performance in the Syrian arena. In Libya, Heftar's forces have reportedly benefited from Russian assistance, and Russian businesses continue to engage the various political factions in a bid to secure influence over whichever party emerges in a dominant position. In Morocco and Tunisia, a slew of economic agreements signed in recent years suggest Moscow is seeking to capitalize on a potentially diminishing US presence and eyeing these countries as gateways to African markets.

Implications for Israel

In light of the aforementioned conditions, the most immediate concerns for Israel are the prospect of Algeria's recent protests morphing into a larger destabilizing event, the ongoing chaos in Libya, and the degree to which pockets of the Maghreb will remain havens for jihadist and other Islamist factions hostile to Israel. Instability in North Africa has already accounted for weapons and militants making their way into the Sinai and reportedly even into Gaza. Israel should be exploring opportunities for enhanced security cooperation with those states in the region most affected by this instability and most receptive to cooperation with Jerusalem. Israeli-Egyptian ties, for example, could be expanded to include coordination on intelligence gathering and related measures aimed at securing Egypt's western border. Israel's recent diplomatic breakthrough with Chad reportedly stemmed in part from the latter's desire for Israeli assistance in containing the spillover from the violence in Libya. Israel would do well to quietly pursue similar openings elsewhere in the region.

More generally, while the trends outlined above may be occurring in North Africa, they are hardly unique to the Maghreb. An aging leadership with uncertain succession scenarios, fragile economic foundations, the battle between Islamist and non-Islamist camps, the ongoing threat of jihadism, and the growing involvement of Russia all characterize much of the Arab Middle East today. As such, it is in Israel's interest to develop a more robust understanding of how events in North Africa reflect, relate to, and even influence developments across the region, including in countries closer to home. If the past eight years are any indication, notions of center and periphery likely obscure more than they enlighten the regional dynamics for which Israel must prepare, and in which it too is likely to become an increasingly active player.