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### **Policing and Protests: Insights from the Middle East**

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The killing of an African-American man, George Floyd, by police in Minneapolis on May 25 triggered a wave of protests and acts of civil disobedience throughout the United States. These protests were accompanied by demonstrations of solidarity across the globe. In this *Crown Conversation*, we asked three members of the Crown Center research team—Hayal Akarsu, Junior Research Fellow; Yazan Doughan, Neubauer Junior Research Fellow; and Youssef El Chazli, Junior Research Fellow—to reflect on how their research on related topics in Turkey, Jordan, and Egypt sheds light on aspects of this global moment of mobilization, demand for police reform, and reexamination of racial and social inequalities.

**The three of you work on issues of either policing or mass mobilizations in the Middle East. Be it in Turkey in the context of the Gezi Park protests in 2013 or in Jordan and Egypt in the context of the events known as the Arab Spring in 2011, some of the issues currently being debated in the United States and other countries in the past few weeks seem to strike a similar tone. Can you each elaborate on the ways in which your research has informed your understanding of this particular moment of global protest and demand for police reform?**

**Youssef El Chazli:** Many scholars have looked at the 2011 Egyptian Uprising as a “[Revolution Against the Police](#).” Indeed, the protests started on January 25, a national holiday known as “National Police Day,” and initially focused on the removal of the powerful Minister of Interior (who heads the Egyptian National Police) and an end to police brutality. The brutal beating and killing of 28-year-old Khaled Saïd in Alexandria in June 2010 by two plain-clothed police officers is often cited as one of the sparks that led to the 2011 upheaval. Intense clashes with police forces characterized the early days of protests, and, [according to Abdellatif El-Minawy](#), the head of news at the Egyptian state TV at the time, protestors set close to 100 police precincts and 2,000 police vehicles on fire throughout Egypt. By the evening of January 28, most police forces had deserted

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the streets of Egypt's major cities. So, by all accounts, the police seem to be a central component of what led to a revolutionary situation. This is in part due to a longer process of the broadening of police prerogatives and resources, dating from the early 1990s. As the Egyptian state waged a "war on terror" during that time, the Ministry of Interior (MoI) expanded and grew stronger, and its purview reached to every corner of Egyptian society. [It became a massive bureaucratic machine](#), helped by an arsenal of legal powers (notably the continuously extended law on the state of emergency) as well as financial and human resources. Its heavy hand could be felt in all social spheres.

States deal with their societies with a right arm and a left arm. The right arm is the one that hits, that disciplines—i.e., its security apparatus. The left arm is its social arm, dealing with welfare, health, education, etc. While there was some form of balance between those two arms in Egypt after the 1952 revolution, there has been a retreat of the left arm and a focus on the right one over the years, especially in the past three decades. In that sense, the police became the main, if not the sole, representative of the Egyptian state, called upon to deal not only with violent crimes, but also poverty, sectarianism, and, of course, protest. Politics was securitized, but so was most of the rest of society. In such a context, it is logical for a revolution to become a revolution against the police.

**Hayal Akarsu:** Excessive [police violence became a hallmark of the 2013 Gezi Park protests](#) in Turkey. United in their resentment against the police crackdown, protestors flooded streets throughout Turkey and turned the small-scale sit-in against the demolition of a city park in Istanbul into a nationwide anti-government protest. One slogan they chanted was ["Police, sell simit \(a type of sesame bagel sold on the street in Turkey\) and live in dignity,"](#) which implied that police officers could find alternative ways to make a living, even if that meant working in an informal sector with no job security or benefits. Protestors thus challenged a common defense of police behavior: "We're just doing our job and lawful duty!" Protestors were asking individual police officers to take moral responsibility, if not legal liability, for police violence and its effects on the communities that they took an oath to serve.

Such police-citizen encounters invited the wider public to reexamine the kind of social contract they had with the state, the police, and with one another and ask: What are the police for? Whose interests are they serving? Whose lives matter and are protected by the police, and at what cost, and whose lives are deemed as disposable and routinely criminalized by the police? For instance, for many Kurdish citizens of Turkey, the police violence at [Gezi was an example of the state's use of violence that they experience on a daily basis](#). Some criticized "White Turks"—a term used in Turkey to define urban, secular, middle and upper-middle class Turks—for turning a blind eye to injustices in the Kurdish-majority cities of Turkey's Southeast until witnessing police violence at home in Istanbul.

The effectiveness of a decade-long police reform process in Turkey also came into question during and after the Gezi Park protests. Strikingly, one of these European Union-sponsored police reform projects, ["Implementation Capacity of Turkish Police to Prevent Disproportionate Use of Force,"](#) was underway as the Gezi protests unfolded. The concurrence of large-scale police violence with a reform project explicitly designed to prevent such use of force seemed to many international observers and Turkish citizens to be proof that police reforms are doomed to fail. [Such projects, however, can lead to contradictory results after implementation.](#) In the case of the Turkish National Police (TNP), new legal and procedural regulations for the proportionate use of force provided the police with new legal tools to justify their excessive force. For instance, instead of denying their use

of excessive force, the TNP accused the protestors involved in the Gezi Park protests of resisting the police. And police officers who made headlines for their excessive use of force [acted with impunity](#) by legally establishing how their force was proportionate to the resistance they faced. Indeed, launching counter-cases against people who claim to have been tortured or ill-treated by police has become a widespread practice among the Turkish police during the reform process, a practice criticized in European Union Progress Reports in [2013](#) and [2014](#). Reforms to prevent disproportionate use of force, in a way, enable what might otherwise be considered extra-legal uses of force to be subjected to what police call “the proportion test,” relativizing police force by overemphasizing resistance or threats police face.

**Yazan Doughan:** Back in 2011, when I was starting my fieldwork on the Arab Spring in Jordan, one viral photo captured the scene of the Occupy Movement which was unfolding simultaneously in the United States: [a police officer pepper-spraying peaceful student protestors at UC Davis](#). One astute graduate student commented on social media that none of those students receiving pepper spray in their faces would likely make that officer’s salary, even after more than 10 years of post-secondary education and assuming that they could find suitable jobs in the first place. Today, Black Lives Matter activists—with their demand to “defund” the police, rather than “reform” it—are highlighting what many of us were unable to see then: namely, how much public money is being spent on policing and security instead of improving the living conditions of citizens, particularly those from marginalized communities.

In Jordan, a police or army officer does not make a salary equivalent to a university professor’s or any other white-collar professional’s. Yet, [welfare provisions for the police, the army, and other security agencies have remained steady even as similar provisions for the civil service and the broader middle class were severely cut under neoliberal austerity policies of the past 30 years](#). In June 2020, the Jordanian government crafted legal provisions that allow deductions from the salaries of public employees without their consent to help deal with the financial repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic. At the same time, King Abdullah II issued a decree that gave all members of the Jordanian Armed Forces and the security agencies an extra payment at the end of their service equal to one whole year of salary.

The restructuring of state welfare in Jordan followed a common World Bank prescription of redirecting state subsidies from the general population, including the middle class, to the “deserving” poor. In practice, this policy let large segments of the middle class slip into poverty while creating a new category of people—“the poor”—who now related to the state in a different way. Rather than achieving social mobility through employment, many Jordanians today try to maintain a semblance of middle-class status through consumption, which they finance through occasional cash handouts from the state (as social protection) and various forms of debt which they cannot pay off. [By now, over two hundred thousand Jordanians are wanted for failing to pay debts, and thousands have been jailed](#). Herein lies the irony: The law enforcement apparatus which is kept buoyant by the state is responsible for enforcing the collection of debt from those left outside of state welfare. This is not a cut-and-dry distinction, for the security apparatus is not a social group detached from the rest of the population. Yet, the restructuring of the state’s redistributive function vis-à-vis security and law enforcement makes Black Lives Matter’s point about the police salient beyond the U.S. context and the issue of racism. We are now in a position to ask: What does it mean for a state to be committed to the welfare and well-being of members of its security apparatus while the rest of the population is left to survive on their own and risk descending into poverty? Whose

lives is this emerging security state protecting? These are questions that will remain with us for some time.

**One of the striking and lesser remarked upon aspects of the current protests in the United States is that there seems to be no single leader leading them. This form of mobilization was discussed extensively in the context of protests in the Arab world during and after the Arab Spring. How did that feature—that particular form of organization—help or hinder the movement’s ability to achieve goals in the context of Jordan and Egypt?**

**Yazan Doughan:** Many commentators on the Arab Spring moved too quickly from the observation that there were no national leaders for the protests to claim that these protests were leaderless. This was a common misunderstanding. On the ground, there were indeed leaders who fulfilled various roles such as writing slogans, chanting them, giving inspiring speeches, speaking to the media, or coordinating between different parts of the movement. There were also activists who were more experienced in protesting and could pass on their experience to newcomers. These were all leaders, but their leadership was not in the form of a top-down chain of command. Rather, they inspired the crowd by providing lived examples for how to act and facilitated collective decisions through consensus building.

This style of leadership suited crowds that were deeply suspicious of political power and of private interest masquerading as the common good. It also precluded a shift to the more formal politics of representative democracy. Among the HIRAK, the protest movement I researched in Jordan, attempts to move from organic association and consensual decision-making to formal structures and decision-making through majority vote often devolved into fissures and factionalism. The state, for its part, used this reluctance to engage in formal politics as a pretext to delegitimize the movement as unable or unwilling to be “constructive.” [In one meeting with tribal leaders summoned to the Royal Court in 2012](#), King Abdullah II claimed that he was “with the HIRAK” but that ultimately protestors “on the street should decide if they want to sit with us at the table to build our country, or if they want to just remain in the street.” [The exact same argument was made four years later by President Obama when he called upon Black Lives Matter activists to stop “yelling.”](#) Both in Jordan and the U.S., the state attempted to turn social movements into structures of political representation by selecting and inviting individual activists for meetings with top politicians or recruiting them into government positions (as was the case of Mothanna Gharaibeh, the Jordanian HIRAK activist who became Minister of Communication and Information Technology in 2018). In both countries, those state-selected “leaders” quickly lost their authority in the eyes of the crowd.

Did the movements’ reluctance to engage in formal politics hinder their ability to achieve their goals? The answer here depends on what we mean by goals. If we understand goals in the narrow sense of legislation and policy, then the answer is probably a yes, although it remains a speculative answer. But if we take the movements’ organic form of organization as integral to their political project, rather than accidental, then we need to look at the work they do beyond mere politics. Activism is about transforming oneself and society. It is about creating a new political morality by putting up for debate big questions related to social justice, democracy, the common good, and citizenship. Many of these so-called “leaderless” movements have done exactly this. By 2016, when Donald Trump was elected president, many declared the Black Lives Matter movement dead. But, four years later, the movement is more vibrant than ever and has incorporated wider segments of the population than before precisely because it managed to [highlight the ethical and political questions](#)

of police brutality and state neglect. Similarly, in Jordan, [as I have argued elsewhere](#), the HIRAK's achievement was to create a new kind of patriotism which future generations of activists can take up and build upon.

**Youssef El Chazli:** It is important to note that protests in reaction to a given event (in contrast with a coordinated campaign) usually evolve out of small, local, and uncoordinated mobilizations. This local dimension is key: Neighborhood groups, groups of friends, co-workers, or family members will go out together to protest. In that sense, local protests are more likely to attract [people who do not have a long experience in protest politics](#). In Egypt before 2011, for instance, activists used to stage protests in front of courts, other public buildings, and in sparsely populated areas—all places where security forces could easily “manage” them. But the death of Khaled Saïd led to protests in more densely populated areas of Alexandria. Learning from that experience, activists decided to organize marches on National Police Day (January 25) calling for the removal of the Minister of Interior. [Activists started demonstrations from densely populated areas, and, instead of staging one protest, they initiated a multitude of small marches in several parts of the city](#). It was then far easier for more timid would-be protestors to go out and “test the protest waters” at walking distance from their homes rather than on the other side of town. This strategy helped protests grow organically. And it also hindered the security forces’ capacity to contain protestors because they could not be everywhere at the same time; they were quickly overwhelmed by the numbers in the streets.

On the other hand, it is usually argued that this decentralized nature of leadership is detrimental to a movement’s success. Finding representatives, people to speak in the name of the masses, becomes very difficult. Also, these types of mobilizations foster what the social movement literature calls “radical flank effect”: the effect of “radicals” on relative “moderates” within a mobilization. If spokespeople emerge and try to negotiate with the authorities, it is easy for others to undermine them and paint them as traitors to the cause, pushing a more radical agenda forward. One might see this as a negative thing, but, in many cases, this is how more progressive policies emerge. Activists in Egypt started out with demands such as the removal of the Minister of Interior and a modest increase of the minimum wage; within days, if not hours, of protesting, they were overtaken by “ordinary protestors” who were asking for the downfall of the president and a complete overhaul of the political system.

Nevertheless, this form of organization can indeed make it difficult to sustain protest for the long haul. Beyond the initial effervescent phases of protest, a majority of protestors might leave the streets (which does not necessarily mean leaving their ideals behind). For highly committed participants, major waves of protest are an immense investment in terms of time and resources. Many have to go back to their “normal lives.” Without organizations to channel these energies and bargain with incumbents, it becomes easy for state authorities to break down a movement’s momentum.

**Is there something new in how definitions and debates around policing and police reforms seem to be shared across countries? Is there a global context to these debates in Turkey?**

**Hayal Akarsu:** Police reform today, more than ever before, is a global phenomenon. An international network of security experts, policymakers, and human rights activists discuss and exchange “best practices” of policing in training rooms, conferences, and workshops. Democratic reform of the police, for instance, is a top policy recommendation of international donors for

countries from post-conflict Middle Eastern societies to the so-called violent democracies of Latin America. A plethora of handbooks, checklists, manuals, “how to” and “what works” documents circulating in these police reform networks persistently buttress the faith in ready-made templates, techniques, and tools as a way to better organize what policing entails. These sets of techniques typically attempt to professionalize police, by creating an efficient police force equipped with scientific tools; implement new civilian oversight mechanisms, making police accountable and transparent to the public; or better integrate police with communities they serve through community-oriented policing projects.

Most of these technical and procedural reform packages, however, remain top-down attempts to standardize police practice without paying much attention to larger societal structures or systemic factors that shape respective police cultures and (mis)conduct, such as arbitrary shootings and biased profiling. Even if such global standards have the potential to reform certain police practices, their implementation is context-specific and open to manipulation by those police who are cynical of these changes. In my research on non-violent tools and practices of police reforms in Turkey, for instance, I found that police reform can provide police with a new toolkit to [extend their power into novel social domains](#), manufacture legally-sanctioned impunity, and garner popular support. On that note, the increasing cooperation of police with citizens in police reform projects invites us to rethink the faith many put in “community-oriented solutions” to law enforcement. I found that [the involvement of communities in policing does not necessarily result in less policing](#). On the contrary, one unexpected outcome of such reforms is the broader involvement of the public into the policing of suspect “others,” such as ethnic or racial minorities, migrants, urban poor, or political dissidents.

Another global shift in the conceptualization of policing and reform is the increasing prominence of surveillance mechanisms, especially digital technologies. Police departments across the world are often fascinated with—and invest in—new technologies, surveillance, and data collection. The use of digital technology to improve service efficiency is usually part of good governance reforms, and the Turkish government invested millions of Euros in the [digitalization of government services](#) with funds provided by the EU, UNDP, and World Bank. The Turkish National Police increasingly relies on digital media, not only to cultivate an efficient and relatable police image but also to crowdsource intelligence and surveillance. Such networked cultures of policing challenge [techno-optimistic formulations](#) and the capacity of digital technologies to reform the police.

**How did protests and the government’s response in Turkey, Jordan, and Egypt affect citizens’ trust in particular public institutions? And did differences between groups’ or communities’ trust in public institutions increase or decrease?**

**Hayal Akarsu:** Turkish citizens from diverse backgrounds gathered in the Gezi Park protests in 2013 to voice their grievances against the repressive practices of the governing Justice and Development Party (known by its Turkish acronym AKP). The excessive police violence that protestors faced at Gezi was seen by the critics of the AKP as yet another sign of Turkey’s drift from its commitment to democratization, human rights, and police reforms. The failed coup attempt of 2016, however, restored the authority and improved the public perception of the police and state institutions to a certain extent, especially among AKP supporters, who make up almost half of the population. Yet, the restoration of public trust in police and the state during this period cannot be separated from the upsurge of nationalist discourses in Turkey after the failed coup attempt. The government’s emphasis on existential security threats went hand in hand with the criminalization of

any kind of protest, such as [the portrayal of the Gezi Park protests as “terrorist plots”](#) designed by internal and external enemies of Turkey. [In a survey conducted in 2017](#), for instance, 64% of the population responded that they now see the Gezi Park protests as a plot against Turkey instead of as a democratic manifestation of a right to demonstrate.

[According to a study conducted by The Turkish Economic and Social Studies Foundation \(TESEV\) in 2015](#), public trust in the police ranks considerably higher among those who voted for the AKP and Nationalist Action Party whereas voters of the pro-Kurdish Peoples’ Democratic Party have the lowest trust in police. TESEV’s study also notes that the public in Turkey tends to have greater trust in the effectiveness of the police (e.g., solving crimes) than in the impartiality of the police. In other words, although some people view the police as operationally successful in coping with crime, they are still suspicious that they will be treated equally when they encounter the police. Indeed, the same study reveals that having a previous encounter with the police negatively influences people’s trust in the police. Trust in the abstract idea of the police in Turkey is higher than trusting police in everyday interactions, revealing how public trust reflects larger political and ideological loyalties and commitments.

**Yazan Doughan:** [The Jordanian state’s reaction to the Arab Spring protests stood in stark contrast to that of neighboring countries](#). Minister of Interior Hussein al-Majali’s non-brutal policy towards protestors, dubbed by the state as “soft policing” (*al-amm al-na’im*), was often credited for sparing Jordan the kind of mass violence that neighboring Syria and Egypt witnessed at the time. Similarly, Jordanian protestors, while facing state repression, did not see their relationship to the police as ultimately antagonistic but rather as one of potential alliance. One common slogan chanted during the protests was “*ihinna w-il-darak w-il-jeish b-tijma ’na lugmet il-’eish*” (we, the gendarmerie, and the army are united by our concern for making a living). It is tempting to take the state’s policy towards protestors as the reason why public trust in the security apparatus remains high in Jordan. [A recent poll by the Arab Barometer puts trust in the police at 90% and in the army at 95% – the highest in any Arab country for both institutions](#). However, this explanation misses larger, structural trends that seem to affect public trust in state institutions beyond the effect of any single policy or reaction. [The Arab Barometer’s historical data, in Jordan and other Arab countries, show a steady drop in trust in public institutions over the past 15 years, while trust in the security apparatus remains steady](#). More likely, the steady drop in public trust in government and parliament in Jordan (38% and 14%, respectively, in 2018) is related to the state’s withdrawal from welfare and development provisioning and shift towards servicing the mounting public debt, which currently stands at 101% of GDP. For most Jordanians, the state is constantly tapping into their pockets without giving much in return. By contrast, the security apparatus, as the only growing and well-financed part of the state, remains remarkably effective and provides a living for more than 200,000 personnel and their families.

**Youssef El Chazli:** In Egypt, one can compare the different trajectories of the armed forces and the police before 2011. The armed forces were removed from public spaces; they were largely invisible. Egyptian men had to interact with that institution at a certain point in their youth, becoming conscripts or being exempted (which still required some form of interaction with military camps and administration). All in all, the army appeared as a strict and austere institution but without the image of corruption from which many other public institutions suffered. More specifically, most Egyptians did not have to interact with the army in their everyday lives. The case was very different for the police. As it became the main representative of the state in people’s everyday lives, it also became the target of most of their grievances. This explains why protestors were so angry at police

forces in January 2011 and why many of them, in contrast, welcomed the armed forces with open arms, [chanting “the people and the army are one hand.”](#) To a certain extent, many Egyptians trusted their military. Mass protests are moments of fluidity, where things happen quickly and rumors circulate rapidly. Perceptions and misperceptions play an important role in such moments. A single act can define a narrative, based on the experiences of different groups. So, for instance, if most people do not really have a history with the armed forces and they see them *not* shooting when others are, it is directly interpreted as proof that the army is on their side. On the contrary, many people, especially youth, had readily available personal anecdotes of police brutality or, at least, of authoritarianism and lack of accountability stemming from those everyday relations with the security state. It was thus easy to interpret the police’s action as the umpteenth clue to how they *really* are, and always were.

The dramatic entry of the army into Egyptian public life since 2011 might have cost it a lot in terms of public trust. It is difficult to say that the population does not trust that public institution anymore. Indeed, according to the [Arab Barometer](#), trust in the army is still quite high. But it is safe to say that far more people today distrust that institution than ever did before over the past three decades. By leaving the shadows and engaging in public life, the armed forces have automatically generated grievances and critiques. Instead of being an outsider, and the arbiter it hopes to be, it has become an [integral part of the process](#).

## Recommended Readings

### On Turkey

1. Hayal Akarsu, "Citizen Forces: The politics of community policing in Turkey," *American Ethnologist* 47:1 (2020): 27-42, <https://anthrosource.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/amet.12879>.
2. Elif M. Babül, *Bureaucratic Intimacies: Translating Human Rights in Turkey* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2017), <https://www.sup.org/books/title/?id=25751>.
3. Umut Yıldırım and Yael Navaro-Yashin, ed., "An Impromptu Uprising: Ethnographic Reflections on the Gezi Park Protests in Turkey," *Hot Spots, Fieldsights*. October 31, 2013, <https://culanth.org/fieldsights/series/an-impromptu-uprising-ethnographic-reflections-on-the-gezi-park-protests-in-turkey>.

### On Egypt

1. Youssef El Chazli, "It takes two (or more) to tango: the local coproduction of the Alexandrian revolutionary moment" in: James Jasper & Frédéric Volpi (Eds) *Microfoundations of the Arab Uprisings. Mapping Interactions between Regimes and Protesters* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2018): 135–157. <https://www.aup.nl/en/book/9789462985131/microfoundations-of-the-arab-uprisings>
2. Salwa Ismail, "The Egyptian Revolution against the Police," *Social Research*, 79:2, (2012), <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/9427215.pdf>.
3. Neil Ketchley, "'The army and the people are one hand!' Fraternalization and the 25th January Egyptian Revolution," *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 56:1, (2014): 155–86, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0010417513000650>.

### On Jordan

1. Anne Marie Baylouny, "Militarizing Welfare: Neo-liberalism and Jordanian Policy." *Middle East Journal* 62.2 (Spring 2008): 277-303, <http://faculty.nps.edu/ambaylou/Baylouny%20military%20welfare.pdf>
2. Ziad Abu-Rish, "On the Nature of the Hashemite Regime and Jordanian Politics: An Interview with Tariq Tell." *Jadaliyya*. August 22, 2012. <https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/26928/On-the-Nature-of-the-Hashemite-Regime-and-Jordanian-Politics-An-Interview-with-Tariq-Tell-Part-1>; and <https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/26936/Jordan%60s-Current-Political-Opposition-Movements-and-the-Need-for-Further-Research-An-Interview-with-Tariq-Tell-Part-2>
3. Yazan Doughan, "The New Jordanian Patriotism After the Arab Spring." *Crown Center Middle East Brief* 134 (March 2020), <https://www.brandeis.edu/crown/publications/middle-east-briefs/pdfs/101-200/meb134.pdf>.

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