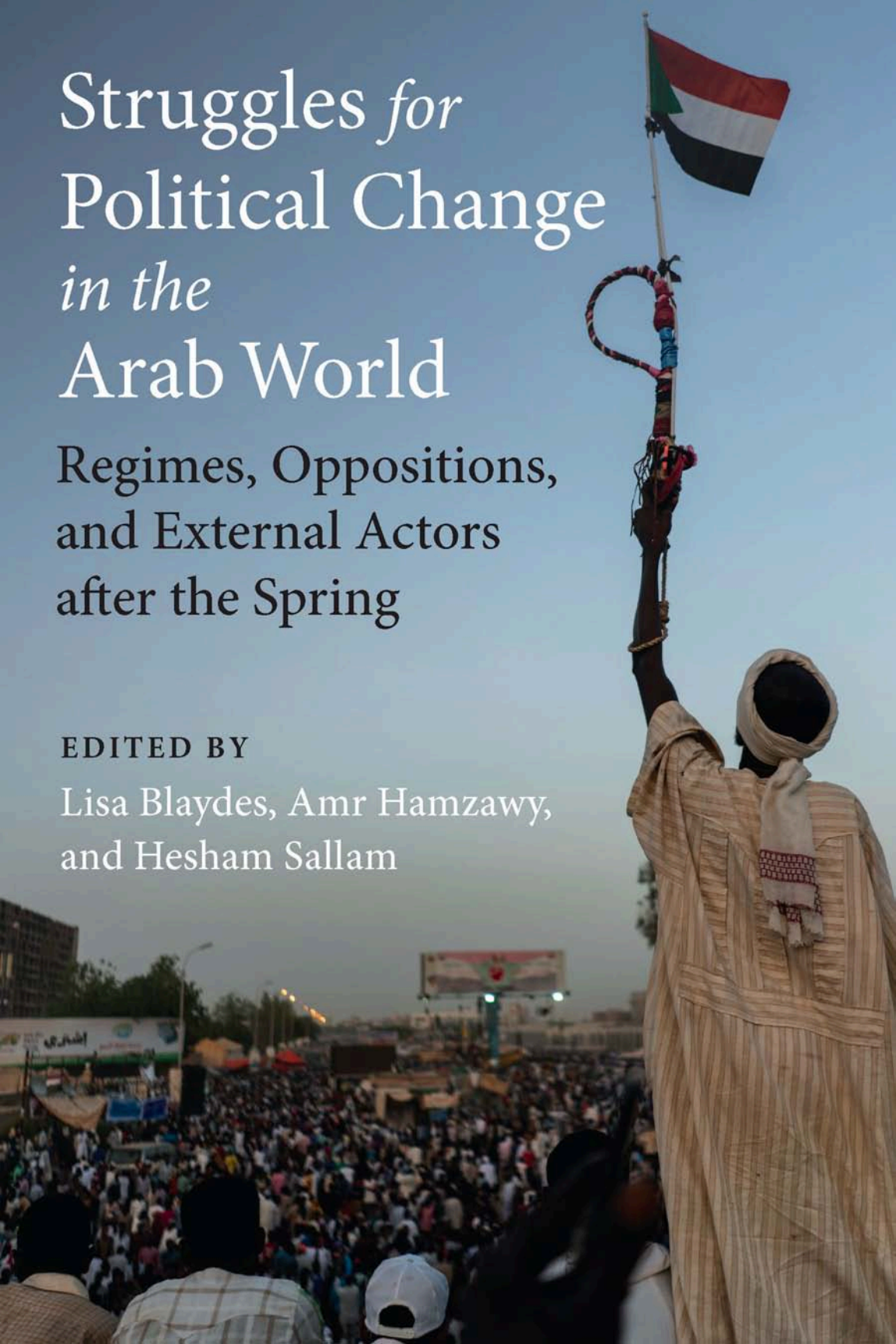


# Struggles *for* Political Change *in the* Arab World

Regimes, Oppositions,  
and External Actors  
after the Spring

EDITED BY

Lisa Blaydes, Amr Hamzawy,  
and Hesham Sallam



## Struggles for Political Change in the Arab World

WEISER CENTER FOR EMERGING DEMOCRACIES

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Cover: Sudanese protestors standing on a railway bridge during protests against the military junta on April 26, 2019, Khartoum, Sudan. Photo by Fredrik Lerneryd/Getty Images.

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## Preface

*Hicham Alaoui*

This edited volume reflects critical knowledge about the state of Middle East politics since the Arab Spring. It arises out of the research and conferences of the Arab Reform and Democracy (ARD) program at the Center on Democracy, Development and the Rule of Law at Stanford University. While many worthy research initiatives about Middle East politics operate within the globalized ecology of academic knowledge today, the ARD program is one of the few that explicitly focuses upon the struggle for democracy.

This struggle cannot be analyzed through disconnected events or newsworthy moments. While explosive protests and violent conflicts splash across media headlines, the scholars and experts gathered in this volume go beyond descriptive reporting to instead identify the deeper underlying patterns, historical processes, and contingent forces that shape how societies fight to make their countries more pluralistic and open places. In doing so, readers will notice that several overarching ideas guide the analytical terrain of this work.

First, the Arab Spring is an ongoing process. While the 2011–12 uprisings represented distinctive episodes of contentious protests, the new wave of political engagement unleashed by that period have continued to ripple throughout the region—and not just in countries where political contestation gave way to civil conflicts and foreign interventions, such as Libya, Yemen, and Syria. New social movements, opposition actors, tactics of resistance, and campaigns of change have continued to mark the public spheres of many countries.

Common threads underlie this generation of activism. In most places, it is driven by youths, attentive to economic concerns, oriented toward political participation, and unpersuaded that autocratic leaders



have all the answers. As the 2019 uprisings that rocked Sudan, Algeria, Lebanon, and Iraq showed, such demonstrative power persists in both spirit and action across regional populations. We are, in other words, living in an unprecedented era of emboldened action undertaken by the most technologically savvy generation in history.

Second, political regimes are not static. Comparative political scientists know well how adaptable modern autocracies have become in the modern era, both in their usage of technology and their capacity to reconfigure old strategies of control. A cat-and-mouse game has taken hold between many authoritarian rulers and opposition forces, with each side attempting to both battle and elude the other. Partly for this reason, the state of human rights in the region remains as fragile as ever.

Yet, something else is different now. Having watched an older generation of autocrats fall during the Arab Spring in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen—and in Syria and Bahrain to be rescued only by external allies—authoritarian rulers in the Middle East and North Africa today grasp the end game. They understand that the logical conclusion of successful mobilization means their ignominious expulsion from office, and the loss of all their privileges and powers. They have thus become more creative, and more repressive, in their efforts to stave off change. This has a stark implication. Future uprisings would be more tense and costly, with each side of the barricade understanding the stakes involved: if popular movements are more willing to fight, then rulers are more desperate to fight back.

The third overarching idea is geopolitics. In the Middle East, the internal affairs of countries have always been connected to the broader currents swirling across the regional landscape, be they ideological, economic, religious, or military. Since the Arab Spring, geopolitical conflicts and alliances have cast a long shadow on domestic confrontations.

Almost immediately after the Arab Spring, a counterrevolutionary front coalesced in the region led by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Over the past decade, they have waged a counterrevolutionary campaign on multiple fronts to squash the prospects of democratization. Among their efforts has been helping autocratic peers with economic assistance, such as in Morocco, Egypt, and Jordan, as well as launching aggressive adventurism elsewhere, such as meddling in Lebanese politics, ill-fated interventions in Libya and Yemen, and failed diplomatic maneuvers such as the siege of Qatar. The UAE-Israeli peace treaty announced in 2020 is part of this counterrevolutionary strategy. It reinforces the prominence of the conserva-

tive Gulf kingdoms in leading regional affairs while also further marginalizing the position of Palestinians.

Already, we have witnessed blowback from this trend. Over the past decade, a crucial element linking the counterrevolutionary drive to state–society struggles has been sectarianism. While sectarian and communal differences have always existed in the Middle East, they have become increasingly instrumentalized by opportunistic elites to amplify ever-worsening cycles of conflict and violence.

The Sunni Arab primacy of the counterrevolutionary front anoints Iran, and its allies or proxies such as the Syrian regime under Bashar al-Assad, Hezbollah, and the Huthi movement of Yemen as an existential opponent. For many nervous autocrats in the Arab world, these represent an expanding frontier of Shia militancy. In suppressing this challenge, Sunni Arab autocracies have clamped down with Western support. Equating sectarian threats with all forms of popular expression and political pluralism, they have pursued deepening repression at home alongside waging hostile confrontations against Iran.

In doing so, they have constructed a misleading narrative suggesting that without stable authoritarian leadership, the Arab world will collapse in disorder fueled by the dark forces of sectarianism, Iran, and violence. However, such a narrative has lost its allure, if it ever had one. During the 2019 mini-wave of popular uprisings, and especially within Lebanon and Iraq, new protest movements explicitly rejected sectarian affinities. Citizens flooded streets to call for basic public goods, such as capable governance and political accountability—demands they understood were as likely to be distorted or ignored by sectarian elites that supposedly represented them within the fractious communal politics of their countries. In Sudan and Algeria, likewise, activists rejected efforts by elites to manipulate national debates by pointing to examples like Syria or Yemen as the chaos that awaited if popular unrest did not end.

Those episodes showed that while domestic political conflicts can never be fully separated from the regional context, a clear gap of perception separates regime elites from everyday activists. For the latter, the process of change begins with local quotidian efforts to reject authority, mobilize resistance, and voice their aspirations. Their social, economic, and political aspirations have little to do with the outside world, and everything to do with the recalcitrance of authoritarian rulers. At the core of those aspirations remains the reverberating theme of the Arab Spring, which still resonates across many societies today: Dignity.

In looking ahead, two recent changes bear relevance upon how these three factors will evolve. The first has been geopolitical currents shifting unpredictably. The axis between the counterrevolutionary front and Iran has become bogged down by untenable contradictions. The Gulf, a flashpoint for mutual tensions, has become a dangerous place of brinkmanship, as embodied in the September 2019 drone attacks on major Saudi oil installations, and the American assassination of Iranian General Qasem Soleimani in January 2020. As such events made the prospect for war real, both sides have also seen their regional strategies stumble. The counterrevolutionary front's adventures abroad have largely failed, particularly in Yemen and Lebanon; there is too much chaos with too little return. States like Morocco and Algeria, which are distant from the Gulf, have proven insulated from its pressures.

Meanwhile, Iran's projects have also not generated desired strategic gains. Not only does the Iranian camp face the same popular pushback that we see elsewhere in the region against authoritarian leadership, but the same regional quagmires that have drawn in its Sunni Arab foes have also engaged its interests. This is true especially in Lebanon and Iraq, where the mobilized street has opposed the ruling coalitions in power.

In parallel, a regional recalibration in the balance of power has also occurred. As the contradictions of the Arab counterrevolutionary alliance and Iranian ambitions have converged upon the Gulf, the Eastern Mediterranean has become the new locus of geopolitical competition. Natural gas reserves there, alongside the Libyan civil war spiraling out of control, has put Turkey, Qatar, Israel, Egypt, and the European Union onto a new collision course. While this new great game is still playing out, one definitive impact has been Libya's worsening violence, as the country now serves as a proxy arena for many of these forces. As in the past, when elephants stomp upon the ground of the region, everyday peoples suffer the most.

The second change that has buffeted the political equation for democratic struggle has been the COVID-19 pandemic. The contentious politics that erupted during 2019 might have well consumed 2020 had it not been for this global crisis. The thoughtful contributions collected in this book were mostly written prior to the pandemic, and this book's completion during its worst stretches shows how unexpectedly long and costly this public health battle has been for the world. In the Middle East, many regimes exploited the pandemic to declare states of emergency, immobilize their populations, and grab additional powers

of surveillance and policing. Thus, from March onwards in 2020, large-scale protest activities stopped in many states.

However, this temporary halt in what had been a resurgent crescendo of activism will not last. In many countries, the coronavirus crisis exposed severe deficits of governance in terms of income inequality, underachieving educational systems, and overloaded healthcare facilities. Indeed, it was partly because many rulers had such little excess infrastructural capacity that their lockdowns were so strict and harsh, for even a minor uptick in infections and deaths would have overwhelmed their social service provisions. The crisis has also grounded the regional economy. Key sectors required by all but the richest oil-exporting economies, such as worker remittances, tourism receipts, and informal businesses, suffered devastating immobility. Even the most optimistic estimates suggest it will take another one to two years for economic growth to return to pre-pandemic levels.

Once the pandemic subsides, popular forces will again struggle toward familiar goals regarding social justice, economic fairness, and political rights. New moments of reckoning loom. When that transpires, ruling elites must have better answers than instructing their societies to wait for better circumstances, or to warn about the menace of violence and conflict should their authoritarian grasp upon power dissolve. These represent old excuses that no longer hold water.

The resulting process of change that awaits will be protracted, unpredictable, and sometimes painful. But it will nonetheless still be one of change, not continuity. As this volume makes clear, history continues to rewrite itself in the Middle East and North Africa.



# Introduction | Struggles for Political Change in the Arab World

Regimes, Oppositions, and External  
Actors after the Spring

*Hesham Sallam, Lisa Blaydes,  
and Amr Hamzawy*

The advent of the Arab Spring<sup>1</sup> in late 2010 was a hopeful moment for partisans of progressive change throughout the Arab world. Authoritarian leaders who had long stood in the way of meaningful political reform in the countries of the region were either ousted or facing the possibility of political if not physical demise. After ruling Tunisia with an iron fist for over two decades, President Zine El Abdine Ben Ali fled the country on January 14, 2011 in response to a popular uprising that spanned only a few weeks. That same month, nationwide protests kicked off in Egypt and in a matter of only 18 days, the 30-year rule of Hosni Mubarak was no more. Soon thereafter, protests erupted throughout the region, including countries where public expressions of dissent were rarely tolerated. A national rebellion in Libya, backed by NATO air strikes, ended the tenure of the Arab world's longest-serving dictator at that time Muammar Gaddafi, who was captured and killed in October 2011. Four months later, Ali Abdullah Saleh formally stepped down as Yemen's president after a year-long struggle to cling onto power in the face of an unrelenting national uprising.

For many observers, the downfall of long-standing dictators and the tenuous position of authoritarian security establishments as they faced

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1. We use this term critically and with recognition of its limitations. See, for example, Gelvin (2012, 32–33).

off with strong-willed protestors signaled that political change in the countries of the region was within reach (Al-Momani 2011). The transformative potential of that moment seemed so compelling that analysts rushed to ask why Middle East scholarship had failed to foresee this historic event, while questioning the prior academic consensus on the durable and adaptive qualities of Arab authoritarianism (Gause 2011). Meanwhile, scholars spent much ink theorizing the conditions that paved the way for these uprisings and their initial success in challenging the foundations of authoritarian rule in multiple countries (Bellin 2012; Holmes 2012; Hoffman and Jamal 2012; Lynch 2011, 2014; Heydemann and Leenders 2011; Albrecht and Bishara 2011; Korany and El Mahdy 2012; Achcar 2013; Cammett and Diwan 2013). Also retreating from previously dominant frameworks of authoritarian durability, others turned their attention to research agendas that spoke to the democratizing potential of the uprisings: new political actors that emerged in the wake of the Arab Spring (al-Anani 2012; El Sherif 2011; Torelli, Merone, and Cavatorta 2012; El-Meehy 2012; Sallam 2013), the outcomes and quality of electoral contests held in the aftermath of the uprisings (Hamad and al-Anani 2014; Benstead, Jamal, and Lust 2015), conflicts over constitution writing and political institutional design (Dalmaso and Cavatorta 2013; Al-Ali 2016; Cross and Sorens 2016), civil-military relations (Nepstad 2013; Makara 2013; Droz-Vincent 2011; Barany 2011; Bou Nassif 2012; Taylor 2014), and the prospects for security sector reform (Kartas 2014; Ashour 2012; Brumberg and Sallam 2012).

It was not long, however, before shifting realities began turning the tide against hopeful visions that saw in the downfall of dictators the start of a new era of progressive change in the countries of the region. In March 2011, the Bahraini government, with the help of Saudi and Emirati troops, crushed an uprising calling on the ruling family to enact far-reaching reforms. That same month, a violent crackdown against pro-democracy protests in Syria sparked a multi-sided civil war involving international and regional powers and foreign militias, resulting in hundreds of thousands of deaths, and millions of refugees and internally displaced persons. Meanwhile, in countries like Jordan and Morocco, anti-government protests faltered in the face of repressive measures and promises for state-sponsored reforms, which would later prove, at best, cosmetic. In Egypt, gridlock across the Islamist-secular<sup>2</sup> divide intensified in 2012, thereby setting the conditions for a

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2. We recognize the limitations of using the term “secular” in the context of the

coup that overthrew the country's first democratically elected president in July 2013, installing in his place a highly repressive military-led regime. By late 2014, the transitional framework supporting power-sharing between Yemen's competing political factions collapsed, leading to a civil war and a Saudi-led military intervention that caused a dire humanitarian crisis. Similarly, politics took a violent turn in Libya in 2014 when a civil war erupted and continued for six years.

Permeating these developments was the deepening involvement of regional and international powers in political conflicts and civil strife throughout the countries of the region, whether through direct intervention, or financial and political backing. Among these were Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Turkey, Iran, Qatar, and Russia. Accompanying this development was the growing profile of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), which captured territories in Iraq and Syria between 2014 and 2015, and established links with insurgent groups throughout the region and beyond. Thus, international and security dimensions of political conflicts in the countries of the region, proxy wars, and international and regional power rivalries, as this volume demonstrates, became unavoidable issues for any discussion on the prospects for political change in the Arab world (Aras and Falk 2015; Von Soest 2015; Hassan 2015; Valbjørn 2017; Hinnebusch and Saouli 2019).

Meanwhile, with the collapse of what once appeared as democratic transitions in multiple Arab countries and the declining relevance of pro-democracy movements as a result of state repression or violent conflict, scholarship turned to alternative lines of inquiry. Notable among them was interest in explaining variation in political outcomes across countries that experienced uprisings in 2010 and 2011: Why did democratizing outcomes or stable transitions occur in some contexts but not others (Brownlee, Masoud, and Reynolds 2015; Volpi 2013; Heydemann 2016; Hinnebusch 2018; Stacher 2012; Kao and Lust 2017; Beinin 2015; Holmes 2019)? And why did some countries “miss” or resist the Arab Spring (Ryan 2018; Barari 2015; Cavatorta 2016; Buehler and Ibraheem 2018)? Other related research agendas centered on explaining the “failure” of the Arab Spring or the rise of the “Arab Winter,” a term that came to denote the proliferation of authoritarianism, civil wars, radical ideologies, polarization, and proxy wars between anti-democratic powers (Achcar 2016; Feldman 2020; King 2020).

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Arab world to describe political actors who uphold the non-religious character of the state.



Yet it was not long before empirical realities, once again, began imposing demands for new directions in scholarly research. Just as observers were pondering the “end” of the Arab Spring and the prevalence of authoritarian trends, a fresh wave of uprisings swept the region in 2019. In Algeria, weeks of protests forced President Abdelaziz Bouteflika to drop his bid for reelection and to step down on April 2 after spearheading a corrupt ruling establishment for 20 years. The resignation of Bouteflika led to a military-managed transition, which remains heavily contested by protest movements demanding more transformative changes than the transition thus far has offered. In Sudan, the 30-year rule of Omar al-Bashir came to a dramatic close on April 11, when his generals deposed him in response to a months-long popular uprising. In October, nationwide protests erupted in Iraq expressing popular anger at government corruption, economic mismanagement, and sectarianism. The protests brought about the resignation of Prime Minister Adil Abdel-Mahdi in late 2019, but popular mobilization and calls for more comprehensive reforms continued into 2020. In Lebanon, weeks of cross-sectarian protests against corruption and poor economic performance forced Prime Minister Saad Hariri to step down in late October 2019. The protests quickly morphed into a large-scale popular movement demanding the end of the confessional political system, widely perceived as the protective shield of a highly corrupt and unaccountable class of sectarian leaders. These waves of popular mobilization remain largely inconclusive across all three countries, and therein lies the empirical context in which the contribution of this volume was conceived.

### **Struggles for Political Change: Regimes, Oppositions, and Transnational Influences**

The reemergence of anti-regime popular mobilization as a major force contesting the configuration of power in multiple countries suggests that the alleged triumph of authoritarian regimes after 2013 has not generated as stable of an equilibrium in the region as once thought. Instead, the set of uprisings that took off in 2019 challenges scholars to revisit broader narratives analyzing the Arab Spring and its aftermath through the structured binary of success versus failure. Nor can one reduce these recent developments and the complexities they entail to a second spring of democracy—or an “Arab Spring 2.0”—that would even-

tually yield a story of success or defeat along the lines of the “first” Arab Spring of 2010–11. As the contributions to this volume clearly indicate, the 2019 uprisings were connected to longer struggles for change that pronounced themselves during the Arab Spring and in subsequent years. Equally significantly, the outcome of the struggles observed during the Arab Spring remain largely uncertain both for regimes and their opponents. It is for that reason that this volume proceeds on an intellectual foundation that eschews the binary of success versus failure and the deceptive narrative of a first and second Arab Spring. Instead, the analyses in this volume conceptualize the events of the past ten years in Arab politics holistically as an expression of a set of interconnected struggles for change and that remain largely open-ended, hence the title of the book *Struggles for Political Change in the Arab World*.

The term “struggles” in this context denotes conflicts over defining the emergent political orders that rose in the aftermath of the Arab Spring and the continuing shockwaves that the event sent throughout the countries of the region. This includes countries that did not experience a forced leadership turnover, but in which rulers and their opponents have responded in anticipation (or fear) of a similar dynamic taking hold locally, such as Jordan, Morocco, and Kuwait. In that sense, the notion of a struggle encompasses more than just the efforts of opposition groups and movements to advance reforms and open the boundaries of political contestation, as recently observed in Algeria, Lebanon, and the Sudan. A struggle could also be that of an autocrat to redefine the ruling coalition, revise the formal and informal rules and of political participation favorably, and to impose order and appropriate rights in the face of dissent, as illustrated by this volume’s contributions on Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Syria. Also relevant to the interests of this volume are the struggles of international and regional actors to shape the trajectory of political change and authoritarian stability in the region in ways that serve their security and economic interests (see the respective chapters by Lisa Blaydes, Abbas Milani, Sarah Yerkes, Ayça Alemdaroğlu and Gönül Tol, and Toby Matthiesen).

The contexts and fields in which these struggles pronounce themselves are diverse. In fact, the diversity of the studies presented in this volume is a strong testament to the fact that the modes and sites of contesting politics have greatly diverged across the countries of the region. In some cases, such as Tunisia, Sudan, Algeria and pre-2015 Yemen, the struggles are taking place against the backdrop of formal

processes—elections, constitution drafting, power-sharing negotiations, etc.—that were put into place in the aftermath of the ousting of an authoritarian leader. That is, they are happening in contexts that to some extent lend themselves to the heuristic tools offered by the literature on transitions and democratization (O'Donnell and Schmitter 1986; Bratton and Van de Walle 1997; Anderson 1999, Acemoglu and Robinson 2001; Bunce 2003). In other countries, like Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Morocco, Syria, and Jordan, the struggles are proceeding in the midst of repressive environments evoking theoretical frameworks studying regimes and opposition in authoritarian settings (Svolik 2009, 2012; Geddes, Wright, and Frantz 2018). The substantive issues animating these struggles are also variable. They range from overt conflicts over formal rules of political competition, as seen in Algeria, Tunisia, Sudan, and Lebanon, to more latent attempts at revising informal rules and norms governing leadership succession (see Michael Herb's contribution on Saudi Arabia) or relations between palaces and legislatures (see Samia Errazzouki's contribution on Morocco and Farah Al-Nakib's chapter on Kuwait).

Within this rich empirical context, it is the goal of this volume to explain how relevant political players in Arab countries among regimes, opposition movements, and external actors have adapted ten years after the onset of the Arab Spring. Specifically, it addresses the questions: What strategies have authoritarian leaders adopted in confronting domestic and external pressures for change? How have opposition actors' strategies and modes of mobilization evolved in response to opportunities for advancing political reform agendas and to state-imposed limits on expressions of political dissent? What structural and institutional factors have challenged the prospects for deepening political participation and competition in countries where authoritarian leaders have fallen prey to popular uprisings? How have international and regional powers sought to shape the patterns of political change and stability in the countries of the region?

This volume is not meant to serve as a comprehensive survey of the aforementioned questions across all the countries of the region. Rather it addresses the questions in three different sections, namely: (i) regime strategies of control; (ii) opposition mobilization strategies and obstacles to reform; and (iii) transnational influences, as shaped by the roles and strategies of external actors. Each section comprises a group of case-studies relevant to the question (or questions) under consideration. The first section includes contributions on Egypt, Morocco,

Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and Syria. The second brings together contributions on Algeria, Sudan, Lebanon, Iraq, Jordan, Yemen, and Tunisia. The third and final section features studies on the respective roles of the United States, China, Iran, and Turkey vis-à-vis questions of political change and stability in the Arab region. It also includes a study analyzing the role of Saudi Arabia and its allies in subverting revolutionary movements in other countries. Collectively, the case-studies highlight both common patterns and divergent (or unique) trajectories in how regimes, oppositions, and external actors have adapted their strategies of contestation in the aftermath of the Arab Spring.

*(i) Regime Strategies of Control*

The opening section of the volume focuses on how regimes have adapted their survival strategies in the face of the pressures for change that the Arab Spring either precipitated or heightened. In the first chapter, Amr Hamzawy explains how the military-backed regime of Abdel-Fattah al-Sisi has sought to consolidate its rule in the aftermath of Egypt's failed experiment with competitive, multi-party civilian politics. The regime, he argues, used a combination of repression and legal engineering measures to shut down channels of dissent in formal politics, civil society, and in the public sphere. The regime's discourse, he states, discredits the realm of civilian politics in its entirety and advances a narrative presenting the military as the only credible actor capable of preserving and modernizing state institutions, governing the country, and dealing with the national security and socioeconomic challenges it confronts.

In the following chapter, Samia Errazzouki presents a bleak picture of the contemporary political scene in Morocco, a country that was once hailed by observers as a model for gradual reform in the Arab world. Characterizing the rule of King Mohammed VI, she contends, is an effort to employ limited political liberalization measures to conceal the coercive aspects of palace authoritarianism in the country. Whereas the king had pledged to advance constitutional and political reforms in response to popular demands for change during the moment of the Arab Spring, instead the country witnessed an increase in the state's reliance on repression to contain popular mobilization and expressions of dissent. Meanwhile, the role of the Palace in governance expanded markedly as it consolidated its role as a de facto parallel government that competes with and undermines the elected one.

Farah Al-Nakib's chapter on Kuwait moves beyond traditional spheres of political contestation and takes seriously urban development as an arena where salient political conflicts are fought between the state and its adversaries. Accordingly, she concludes that the prevalence of Palace-driven urbanism in recent years speaks to a worrisome trend in the rule of the Al Sabah family, namely the decline in rule-by-consensus norms that had long governed its relations with the legislature and other independent social forces. Palace-driven urbanism, Al-Nakib argues, appropriates parliamentary prerogatives, undermines legislative oversight, and limits transparency and accountability inside executive institutions. In the immediate aftermath of the Arab Spring, she notes, the regime felt compelled to use urban development projects as a vehicle for empowering youth and a channel for their political inclusion. In contrast, the Palace is now moving toward heavily centralizing urban development projects as part of a broader effort to use such initiatives to insert its authority in the public sphere and to counterbalance conservative social forces that have become critical of the ruling family in recent years.

Michael Herb's contribution examines the waning of family-based rule in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in favor of personalism, as evidenced by the political ascendancy of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, commonly known as MBS. The centralization of power in the hands of the crown prince, Herb explains, has allowed him to consolidate his position vis-à-vis his potential rivals among senior members of the ruling family. The demise of family rule in favor of personalist authoritarianism, however, marks the end of one of the most important pillars of political stability in the Kingdom, namely informal power-sharing between influential members of Al Saud. The implications of this growing personalism, Herb explains, are reflected in the state's confrontational orientation toward political and religious dissent, as well as the adventurist foreign policies the Kingdom has pursued abroad.

Samer Abboud analyzes the political order Bashar al-Assad has tried to erect in Syria in light of the military gains he achieved with the help of the 2015 Russian intervention. The author characterizes this order as a unilaterally imposed victor's peace. The most prominent feature of that repressive order, Abboud tells us, is a legal framework appropriating the political and economic rights of those suspected of disloyalty. That framework has in effect imposed on Syrians a bifurcated system of citizenship, in which the state has stripped individuals with ques-

tionable allegiances of their basic rights, rendering them vulnerable to the wrath of a vengeful state.

Together, these studies highlight the **increasing role of repression and overt forms of legal engineering as tools of managing and preempting political dissent** in the aftermath of the Arab Spring. Syria and Egypt speak to a trend in which authoritarian states have reacted adversely and vengefully to experiences of popular mobilization after 2011. They have both resorted to unprecedented campaigns of repression and enacted draconian measures to deter citizens from engaging in any public expressions of political dissent, having witnessed, if not experienced, the threat of leadership ouster in the face of popular uprisings. Interestingly, even Morocco, a country that observers once associated with greater tolerance for opposition voices and political pluralism, has elevated its reliance on repressive tactics in dealing with proponents of political change.

The context for increasing repression is important to consider; that is, an environment in which regimes throughout the region have been gradually backtracking on earlier commitments to maintaining some semblance of competitive politics or consensus-based modes of governance. Prior to the shock of the Arab Spring, many authoritarian regimes had relied on survival strategies featuring limited forms of political liberalization, such as state-managed pluralism and multi-party politics, engineered electoral contests enjoying some degree of competitiveness, or the establishment of formal or informal representative bodies with checked powers (Posusney 2002; Herb 2002; Blaydes 2010; Brownlee 2011). This led to the proliferation of “liberalized autocracy” as a model of authoritarian governance in the Arab world (Brumberg 2002). The trends highlighted in the contributions of this volume raise the pressing question of whether liberalized autocracy is now taking a backseat to more closed and repressive forms of authoritarian rule. That Egypt, once the quintessential case of liberalized autocracy in the region, is now turning to a closed form of authoritarianism, as Hamzawy shows, is a case in point.

While some elements of political liberalization have remained intact, there appears to be a **declining interest among Arab rulers in ceding even the slightest political space for dissent or participatory decision-making**, either in the public sphere or even within the ruling coalition itself. For instance, as Al-Nakib notes, Kuwait’s rulers have shown a growing tendency to circumvent parliamentary proceedings in managing public policy areas determining the country’s course of

development and the everyday lives of Kuwaitis. Thus, the author concludes that the delicate balance of power that had long characterized relations between Kuwait's traditionally strong parliament and the Al Sabah family is waning in favor of a more centralized mode of authoritarian governance. Errazzouki observes a similar pattern in Morocco, where even the partial powers that elected institutions once enjoyed are under attack. Since the Arab Spring, the Palace has embarked upon a drive to centralize decision-making in unaccountable pockets inside the executive to the detriment of the elected government and its credibility. The proclivity to centralize power is very much apparent in Saudi Arabia, where Herb notes the historic steps the crown prince has taken to undermine the long-standing power-sharing tradition within the ruling family, replacing it with a more personalist mode of authoritarian governance.

**Increasing personalization of authoritarian governance** has been another noticeable trend in the Arab world after 2011, as these chapters demonstrate. For instance, as Hamzawy remarks, the discourse of the military-backed regime in Egypt has created a personality cult centered around President Abdel-Fattah al-Sisi, who is portrayed as the nation's savior and the guarantor of the well-being of its citizens. Similarly, in his analysis of the ascendancy to power of MBS, Herb shows that a personality cult has been formed around the crown prince. Thus, he has been presented as a daring reformer prepared to rectify the Kingdom's economic, social, and religious stagnation, and an able policy-maker determined to modernize the country and fight corruption. In his quest to undermine family rule, MBS, according to Herb, has used that personality cult to pressure his opponents into submission and to build popular support.

### *(ii) Opposition Mobilization Strategies and Obstacles to Reform*

The second section of the volume addresses how opposition groups and movements have adapted to the challenges and opportunities presented by the waves of political mobilization of the past decade. Sean Yom responds with a careful analysis of the achievements and shortcomings of Jordan's protest movements. He argues that the legacy of the Arab Spring has created a strong preference among Jordanian activists for organizing through informal, horizontal structures instead of formal political organizations. Informality and horizontality were advantageous to the extent that they lent themselves to adapt-

ability and inclusivity. At the same time, he argues, these structures proved detrimental to the long-term ability of activists to pressure the Jordanian state into enacting meaningful reforms and public policy changes.

In her study of Lebanon's contemporary political activism, Lina Khatib argues that the country's politically oriented protest movements have evolved over the course of three cycles of mobilization. Each cycle, she observes, precipitated a process of learning that shaped the demands and mode of organization in the subsequent cycle. The 2005 mobilization, which rose in response to the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafic Hariri, was coopted by established political parties. Thus, while it contributed to the end of the Syrian occupation, it did not challenge the underlying confessional political system, viewed widely as one of the biggest obstacles to meaningful representation and accountability in the country. Accordingly, the 2015 garbage-crisis mobilization operated away from political parties and was somewhat effective in linking popular grievances to broader calls for reforming the political system. Its main shortcoming, however, Khatib asserts, was failing to organize beyond Beirut. The October 2019 mobilization, on the other hand, had a wider geographical scope and was specifically focused on articulating the political reforms necessary to make elections and political institutions accessible to advocates of change. Much like Yom, Khatib acknowledges that activists have, thus far, fallen short of forcing lasting reforms in the political system. Yet, she sees the glass half full to the extent that through successive cycles of mobilization, activists have shown an ability to adapt in the face of adversity, not to mention success in building a cross-sectarian national consensus around the pressing need for political reform.

In his historically informed analysis of Algeria's 2019 uprising, Thomas Serres attributes the fall of Bouteflika to a regime crisis pertaining to ruling elite fragmentation and structural problems compounded by state failure to diversify a hydrocarbon-dominated economy. Thus, the rise of cross-sectional national mobilization through the Hirak movement was a game changer and posed an insurmountable challenge to the regime. The outcome of the uprising, which remains inconclusive, will largely depend on the ongoing confrontation between two important actors. The first is a military-backed political leadership that is seeking to limit the scope of political and economic reforms to the exclusion of more radical visions for change. The second is a popular movement that is disillusioned by two decades of



state-managed reforms and is therefore calling for far-reaching political changes that encroach upon the interests of the ruling elite.

Successful power-sharing agreements could emerge in contexts where sectarian tensions and conflicts are prevalent, as demonstrated in David Patel's analysis of Iraq's political system and the origins of the 2019–20 waves of protests. Patel argues that despite its seemingly problematic inception in the wake of the 2003 U.S.-led invasion, the Iraqi political system has proven resilient to the extent that it has witnessed multiple transfers of power and accommodated the inclusion of once anti-system actors. Yet because that system is heavily dependent on its ability to distribute patronage to important social groups, drops in oil prices have proven detrimental to its stability, as most recently observed in the 2019–20 waves of protests. The protests, Patel holds, are the byproduct of economic downturns and the rising expectations of a sizeable young population.

In his chapter on Sudan, Khalid Mustafa Medani offers an analysis explaining the determinants of success of Sudan's uprising in ousting longtime dictator Omar al-Bashir and the prospects for democratic change in the country. He argues that the conditions that led to the uprising and its success can be understood as the confluence of two sets of factors. The first pertains to economic grievances caused by a state fiscal crisis, which was compounded by a series of developments. These include the rise of discord among the ruling elite, the South Sudan secession, which limited the regime's access to oil rents, and decentralization initiatives that pushed socioeconomic grievances in rural regions toward expressions of popular anger. The second set of factors involves the agility and cohesion of the opposition actors and protest movements that led popular mobilization against al-Bashir. These groups, Medani explains, have adapted their strategies based on lessons learned from previous experiences of popular mobilization in Sudan and elsewhere in the Arab world. The future of democratic reform in Sudan—that is, whether it would lead to limited liberalization contributing to the rise of a hybrid authoritarian regime or more meaningful democratic change—will depend on a number of factors. These include the continued cohesion of opposition forces and their ability to overcome ideological discord, the coercive capacity and political capital of the military leadership and the “deep state,” the role of external actors and the extent of their support to military leaders, and the impact of civil strife and conflict on the emergent democratic process.

While inclusive consensus-building might be essential for advanc-

ing transitions to electoral democracy, the continued emphasis on consensus post-transition could in fact challenge the prospects for democratic consolidation. That notion is apparent in Lindsay Benstead's chapter on Tunisia and the fragility of the political parties that emerged in the post-Ben Ali era. These parties, she argues, have been relatively successful in finding common ground on thorny issues pertaining to the religious identity of the state and women's rights, yet they have fallen short in responding to popular demands for improved governance and economic management. This was in large part the result of increasing fragmentation among and within non-Islamist political parties, and infighting and gridlock among the political elite more generally. In an environment where consensus has become a de facto prerequisite for decisive political action, such divisions have made effective governance extremely difficult. Accordingly, public trust in government and national political institutions is low and this trend will likely continue haunting the prospects for democratic consolidation in the country. Adding to these difficulties is the constitutional coup orchestrated by President Kais Saied in July 2021 and that has put the future of country's democratic process in uncertain terrain.

In an attempt to understand structural and institutional challenges facing advocates of political change, April Longley Alley analyzes Yemen's post-Saleh transition and the factors that led to its collapse and the onset of civil war in 2014 and foreign intervention in 2015. She attributes the collapse of the transition to three critical factors. Among them was the absence of mechanisms for arbitrating disagreements among parties of the power-sharing pact that anchored the transitional framework. The pact, moreover, failed to account for the interests of Saleh's camp and the Huthi movement, thereby giving them a strong incentive to undermine the transition. More structurally, Alley concludes, the fragility and incomplete character of state- and nation-building in Yemen greatly limited the viability of a credible, stable power-sharing formula that could have paved the way for democratizing reforms.

These contributions underscore important trends worthy of pause and contemplation. On a general level, they highlight the growing **prevalence of horizontally organized popular mobilization as a mode of contesting political power**. That phenomenon was reflected in multiple examples of large-scale popular mobilization in the last few years, as described in the chapters on Jordan, Lebanon, Algeria, Iraq, and Sudan.

These studies also bring to focus the **increasing tension between formal politics and contentious political action**. Ironically, authoritarian leaders are not the only actors who have lost interest in state-managed political contestation. Pro-reform activists are distancing themselves from organized politics and in some cases steering clear of formal political parties, which are often viewed as complicit in sustaining exclusionary policies and limiting the representation of marginalized voices. In Jordan, as Yom explains, young activists have adopted a rejectionist stance toward political parties, which they view as coopted, obsolete, and lacking in credibility. A similar situation has recently arisen in Iraq, as Patel notes. Protest movements that led the 2019 protests rejected the participation of political parties, in large part due to the widespread perception that party elites have exploited protests in the past to settle their own parochial disputes. Serres describes a similar dynamic in Algeria, where HIRAK activists have approached the formal political sphere with much cynicism. They are reluctant to engage in elections and party politics out of fear that playing by the rules crafted by military leaders would only legitimize a political system and a ruling establishment that are fundamentally at odds with the revolutionary aspirations of the HIRAK. The tension between formal and contentious politics is even more clearly manifest in contemporary Lebanon. As Khatib explains, the protest movements that led the 2019 uprising have presented their efforts as an open rebellion against established political parties and their sectarian leaders, whom they view as responsible for widespread corruption and economic mismanagement. Even in the so-called “success story” of Tunisia, Benstead warns of the growing divide between formal political institutions and popular aspirations for economic and social change—a divide that has been increasingly apparent since the events of July 25, 2021. The only promising exception to that trend is in Sudan, where protest movements and horizontally structured activist networks, as Medani explains, have worked collaboratively with political organizations in mounting a successful uprising that led to al-Bashir’s ouster. When read against other experiences presented in this volume, the findings of the chapter posit the question of why Sudan’s opposition have been able to overcome the divide between formal and contentious politics prevalent elsewhere in the region.

The divide between protest movements and formal politics has important implications for the prospects of democratic reform in the region. The authors in this section demonstrate the relative success of

such movements as “veto actors” capable of paralyzing political processes, forcing the hands of leaders, and bringing down governments and possibly dictators, as recently observed in Algeria, Sudan, Lebanon, and Iraq. More questionable, however, is the ability of these movements to negotiate the terms of political and institutional reforms and see through their implementation in the long run. These considerations beg the question of whether popular mobilization by itself could advance meaningful democratic change in the Arab world.

Finally, the studies in this section provide some sobering lessons about structural challenges that continue to limit the prospects for political change. Central among these are the **fragility of state institutions and the persistence of unresolved questions about nationhood**. Yemen presents an extreme manifestation of that challenge, where, as Alley explains, societal disputes over the character of political community and the weakness of state institutions “weighed heavily on the prospects for a successful transition.” In Sudan, Medani warns, protracted conflicts in marginalized regions continue to pose a serious threat to the future of the country’s transition. Iraq’s post-2003 experiment, on the other hand, demonstrates the extent to which political institutions could in fact mitigate the turbulent effects of sectarian conflict and weak consensus over the definition of national political community. Despite all of the shocks it confronted in the last two decades, Patel argues, Iraq’s parliamentary democracy has proven “remarkably durable.”

A second challenge cutting through many of this volume’s analyses is the **chronic inability of national political institutions to address widespread social and economic discontent**. That reality has animated popular mobilization in Algeria, Sudan, Iraq, and Lebanon. In Lebanon and Iraq, public dissatisfaction with government performance was evident in recent uprisings, as Khatib’s and Patel’s chapters indicate. In Algeria and Sudan, poor economic performance contributed the downfall of their autocrats, as explained by Serres and Medani, respectively. Popular yearning for better and more responsive governance appears to be central not only in shaking the foundations of authoritarian stability, but also in shaping the resilience of democratic institutions and the prospects for democratic change. In Tunisia, often touted a democratization success story, the country’s governing elite, Benstead reports, “have fallen short in responding to popular demands for improved governance and economic management.” Thus, confidence in political institutions is on the decline and perceptions of pub-

lic corruption are on the rise—a reality that may have facilitated President Saied’s power grab of July 2021.

### *(iii) Transnational Influences*

In the years since 2011, political developments in the Arab world have been profoundly impacted by foreign governments that have sought to influence post-uprising political developments. The third section of the volume examines transnational influences on political reform with a focus on how countries like China, the United States, Iran, and Turkey have sought to promote and protect their interests in the aftermath of the Arab Uprisings. The volume also considers how other Arab states—particularly, Saudi Arabia and the UAE—have worked to thwart the success of popular protest movements as part of a counter-revolutionary political bloc.

These transnational influences, as the chapters in this section show, occur in the context of a **declining importance of the U.S. as a hegemonic actor in the Middle East**. In addition, **to the extent that the U.S. does exercise influence, it does not serve as a consistent champion for democracy**. The U.S.-led, liberal international order that long predominated as a model for economic and political development has ceded ground in recent years. Inconsistently applied democracy promotion policies and contradictory messaging regarding democratic values appear both across as well as within U.S. presidential administrations. A conventional wisdom suggests that the U.S. has lost both influence and moral credibility in the years following the 2003 invasion of Iraq. The subsequent Arab Uprisings raised the stakes for influence at a time when the U.S. witnessed a decrease in political clout. This situation has generated forms of precarity for authoritarian regimes, reform-minded activists, and regional actors.

In her chapter examining the evolution of U.S. democracy promotion policy, Sarah Yerkes chronicles how the United States has struggled to project a coherent pro-democracy policy across successive presidential administrations. U.S. democracy promotion efforts in the Middle East, she argues, went from sincere but imperfect during the George W. Bush and Barack Obama administrations to seriously eroded during the Donald Trump administration. According to Yerkes, Trump and his advisors exhibited suspicion toward the U.S. government’s democracy promotion bureaucracy and budget, both of which had expanded during previous administrations. As a result of eroding U.S.

commitment to democracy promotion, Arab autocrats have come to enjoy a new latitude to act on their authoritarian impulses, both at home, as described in the first section of this volume, and in their power projection efforts overseas.

For some Arab countries, the decade since 2011 has also been associated with a fragmentation of social order in ways that have redrawn boundaries of political “belonging” (Meier 2018). Existing scholarship suggests that the uprisings disrupted long-standing political bargains in many Arab societies particularly as related to the relevance of sectarian identities.<sup>3</sup> The shift in regional norms over the salience of sectarian identity has arguably created opportunities for new patterns of transnational power projection.<sup>4</sup>

The growing fragmentation of social order, coupled with the decline in U.S. influence, has opened the door for outside actors to drive the regional agenda. While external powers have long been important players in Arab politics, the years since 2011 have witnessed the marked ascendancy of **a wider set of actors seeking to influence the direction of political change in Arab societies**. In some cases, these vectors of influence break with historical trends. For example, Europe has been relatively ineffective at projecting power in Arab countries in recent years because of uncoordinated and ineffective foreign policy-making (Henoki and Stemberger 2016) and an increasingly negative image in Arab societies (Isani and Schlipphak 2017). While Russia has maintained an important military presence in the region, a new “great power” rivalry has emerged with China’s economic development and outward-looking foreign policy agenda. Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and other Arab Gulf countries are all pursuing their own agendas for regional influence and are less likely to coordinate with either the U.S. (or each other) relative to the recent past. The net result of these developments has been a dynamic regional system with a more fluid set of transnational actors seeking opportunities for political influence.

These actors may be **less attentive to Arab publics and more willing**

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3. For example, Hinnebusch (2016) links state failures since 2011 with the rapid diffusion of sectarian discourse and practices. Salloukh (2017) finds that the Arab Spring weakened existing states and regimes in countries like Syria and Yemen, creating opportunities for outside actors to seek influence by instrumentalizing sectarian linkages.

4. Analyses of public opinion surveys collected over the last decade support this conclusion, demonstrating increasing identification with transnational sectarian identities (Ciftci and Tezcur 2016; Kose, Ozcan, and Karakoc 2016).

**to support the use of state repression than in the past.** Previously, transnational actors were concerned with how they positioned themselves vis-à-vis popular ideological positions related to Arab nationalism, political Islamism, and support for the Palestinian cause. Now, however, the popular will of Arab publics appear less central in their decision-making calculations than in the past. The authoritarian backsliding of Turkey, once touted as model for Muslim democracy, has also dampened optimism for democratic reform. Simultaneously, many external actors have shown a willingness to repress their own publics along with a willingness to engage in military operations abroad that have been associated with civilian casualties.

Among the most significant of these emerging actors is China. Its political interest in Arab societies has grown remarkably as part of the more outward-looking foreign policy put forward by Chinese President Xi Jinping. In this volume, Lisa Blaydes examines the growth of economic ties between China and Arab countries with a focus on the political implications of the Belt and Road Initiative—a global infrastructure and investment-oriented development project promoted by the Chinese government. She argues that China’s ability to bring development funding to countries from Algeria to Oman has proven to be appealing to Arab governments, offering Beijing an avenue to regional clout at a time when U.S. influence is waning. The roll-out of the Belt and Road Initiative has been complicated, however, by the global COVID-19 pandemic. Although the international health crisis has provided opportunities for China and Arab regimes to trade aid and assistance, China’s image in the eyes of Arab publics may have been damaged because of Beijing’s unsteady early handling of the crisis. The global economic impact of the health crisis may also force Beijing to scale back its investments, reducing the overall political pay-off from the initiative.

Recent years have also witnessed **the diversification of hard- and soft-power strategies external actors employ to enhance their political leverage in the region.** The levers of power projection now include financial investments, humanitarian assistance, and military interventions, as well as cultural propaganda. These developments follow broader trends. Authoritarian regimes around the world have increasingly invested in instruments of soft-power projection in a bid to block the political aspirations of activists seeking more representative governance (Walker 2016). Whereas forms of cultural diplomacy used to predominate in efforts at soft-power projection, market-oriented economic strategies are increasingly common (Nisbett 2016). The digital

revolution in communication technology has further increased tools at the disposal of outside actors seeking to influence political developments (Rugh 2017). For example, Turkey previously engaged in forms of cultural and economic influence but has been increasingly opting for military forms of intervention. Iran, which was previously accustomed to reliance on proxy military groups and development of its nuclear program to influence trajectories, is revitalizing and updating its ideological and ideational interventions.

Abbas Milani provides important details about the nature of Tehran's ideological apparatus abroad in this volume. The Iranian regime, he argues, promotes a revolutionary brand of sectarian identification in a bid to compete with Riyadh for regional influence. While much of the existing scholarship on Iranian foreign policy has focused on Iran's tactical use of militant armed groups, Milani draws our attention to how the Iranian regime has fostered an anti-democratic, anti-Western ideological vision rooted in radical Islamist organizations to offer an ideational alternative. Milani argues that Iran has long sought regional political power and that Tehran has used civil society, educational, and media organizations to advance these goals in a top-down manner. By cultivating cultural and ideological points of influence, Milani explains, Iran's soft-power strategy "transcends tactical exigencies," allowing for a more powerful strategic approach.

Iran's proactive foreign policy can be explained, at least in part, by a desire to balance the growing political and economic strength of Saudi Arabia and the other countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). Saudi Arabia and its efforts to project ideological power have influenced and complicated the international relations of the Middle East (Rubin 2015; Lynch 2016; Gause 2017). Jones, Porter, and Valeri (2018) argue that Gulf states have moved to the center of regional politics since 2011, occupying a new activist role as they work to shore up endangered allies and hasten the demise of rival regimes.

Toby Matthiesen's contribution to this volume describes the formation of a new regional alliance of Arab states led by Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Matthiesen argues that this new coalition, the "Arab Counter Revolution," did not only develop to balance against regional rivals. Rather, the counter-revolutionary bloc, he contends, has been primarily concerned with implementing antidemocratic policies, like mass surveillance, with the goal of preventing political activists from promoting government accountability and social justice. According to Matthiesen, this counter-revolutionary bloc sees the Muslim Brother-



hood as a threat and has adopted the use of repression and censorship (among other strategies) in order to discredit the Brotherhood and reduce its regional influence.

Interventionist foreign policy actions run the risk of blowback—the unwanted and unintended consequences of strategies pursued abroad. Phillips (2017) has argued that in the years since 2011, countries like Saudi Arabia and Turkey have overestimated their capacity to affect regional outcomes. Along similar lines, in their contribution on Turkish soft- and hard power gambits in the Arab world, Ayça Alemdaroğlu and Gönül Tol suggest that Turkey has overplayed its political hand with President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's transition from a strategy of “zero problems with neighbors” to one of cross-border militarism. Alemdaroğlu and Tol acknowledge the varied determinants for this foreign policy transition and point to a growing military-industrial complex in Turkey as well as Erdogan's desire to increase his legitimacy on the home front. Alemdaroğlu and Tol argue that Erdogan's efforts to empower the Muslim Brotherhood in Arab countries have largely failed, uncovering a tendency toward political overreach with harmful long-term consequences for Turkey.

Taken together, the chapters in this volume suggest both the ways that Arab movements for political change are vulnerable to transnational power projection as well as the limits to outside influence. The cases reveal a regional system in flux, complicated by great power competition and regional rivalries, all of which influence the direction of political change within the Arab world.

## Future Research

The chapters in this volume assess the struggle for political change in the Arab world a decade after the Arab Uprisings. The themes that have emerged speak directly to important blind spots on the existing academic scholarship, seeding new directions for future research. This section enumerates some of these areas with the goal of encouraging further exploration.

First, the literature on authoritarian institutions tends to engage with popular movements for change in a highly abstract way. While it is widely acknowledged that dictators face threats from the masses, the institutional structures that govern authoritarian power-sharing are typically analyzed separately from the forces of social mobilization. As

a result, we know little about how formal institutions and processes—like elections and constitution making—interact with protest movements. In this volume, Hamzawy, Errazouki, and Abboud all point to the ways that repression and coercive legal frameworks work together to shut down channels of dissent. But how effective are formal institutional processes in the face of prolonged protest movements? And under what circumstances do authoritarian institutional structures unravel as a result of popular protests?

Second, the contributors to this volume have described ideological and tactical coalitions that have characterized protest mobilization across the Arab world. Yom has argued for the tendency toward informal, adaptable protest movements. Khatib makes the case for the importance of cross-sectarian forms of mobilization in order to achieve political reform. Under what conditions can coalitions of protestors cooperate and collaborate effectively over the long term? Political polarization damages the potential for opposition groups to work together, but for how long and under what circumstances? Future research might address the how protest mobilization might successfully transition to durable political movements, organizations, and parties.

Finally, the chapters in this volume have suggested that the future of political change in Arab countries is not determined by regimes and publics alone. Not only do transnational actors have the incentive and opportunity to influence politics in Arab countries, but the linked global economic and health crises will have additional impacts on political outcomes. Given the high costs of power projection—and the potential expenses associated with foreign policy overreach—how will economic shocks impact expansionist policy efforts moving forward? Will a global economic recession increase grievance, fueling protest movements while weakening the capacity of authoritarian regimes to engage in repression? For the oil-rich states of the GCC, how will economic contraction challenge countries seeking to implement expensive national vision programs (i.e., Saudi Vision 2030; Kuwait Vision 2035)? The global COVID-19 pandemic threatens some of the foundational assumptions of GCC economies including reliance on global travel connectivity, international migration, and oil-driven economic growth.

Moving forward, increasing research will need to explore the conditions under which countries like Iran and Turkey maintain or abandon efforts at promoting their interests abroad. To what extent will efforts

at exporting revolutionary sectarianism continue as a younger generation of Iranians take on leadership positions? And under what conditions might Erdoğan and his domestic allies abandon expansionist foreign policy in the Middle East? Innumerable questions remain about the unfolding struggle for political change in the Arab world.

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# 1 | Authoritarian Narratives and Practices in Egypt

*Amr Hamzawy*

This chapter discusses some of the factors that have enabled the Egyptian regime to effectively re-establish authoritarian rule after the popular uprising in January 2011 and to undemocratically govern at a low cost a society that witnessed waves of democracy-inspired mass mobilization between 2011 and 2013.

Since 2013, the military and security-led regime has reinstated its control over society and citizens with an iron fist, curtailing freedom of information and banning freedom of expression. Peaceful political participation and civil society activism, which were the pillars of the January uprising, have been de facto outlawed by the adoption of an arsenal of undemocratically spirited and restrictive laws (Stacher 2016). However, the regime has not faced any significant challenges. Popular resistance against its repressive measures has been marginal.

Since 2013, Egyptian economic, social, and political conditions have been marred by contradictory developments. On the one side, macroeconomic indicators have improved with an economic growth rate of 5.3 percent between 2017 and 2019, a domestic deficit dropping to 9.7 percent of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP), growing foreign reserves reaching \$42.6 billion in end-January 2019 (World Bank 2019). Socially, however, Egypt has remained a place of human suffering due to high poverty rates—29.7 percent in 2020 (Moneim 2020). Corruption has been staggering, with the country ranking 105 out of 180 countries surveyed in 2018 on the Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) of Transparency International (Transparency International 2019). Politically, human rights abuses, repressive measures, prosecution of nonviolent



opponents, and the systematic passing of undemocratically spirited laws have all increased dramatically as the post-2013 regime has moved to reassert its security grip over public spaces—especially political and civil society arenas (Hamzawy 2017a).

Amid these conflicting developments, improving macro-economic indicators—highly propagated in the regime-controlled media (Noon Post 2019) and praised by international monetary organizations (Tawfeek 2018)—and difficult social crises and deteriorating political conditions, the majority of the Egyptian citizenry seems unwilling to challenge the regime.

Indeed, recent public opinion polls have documented a growing popular trust in regime policies. According to surveys conducted by Princeton's University Arab Barometer Project, the number of Egyptians who took a positive view of their economic and security situation plummeted between June 2011 and the first half of 2013. In both these areas, confidence in the current state of affairs and in regime policies has since bounced back. In 2013, only 7 percent of the population judged the economic situation to be good, down from 23 percent in 2011. In 2016, three years after the end of the democratic experiment of 2011–2013, 30 percent of respondents were satisfied with the economy. Still more dramatic changes have occurred in the public's assessment of the security situation. In 2011, a majority of 53 percent had a generally positive outlook on this issue; in 2013, this figure slipped to 20 percent, but by 2016, it rose again to almost 80 percent (Soltan, Qamha, and 'Asilah 2011; Taviana 2017; Arab Barometer V 2019). In 2018, around 66 percent of Egyptians across gender and educational barriers reported having "a great deal of trust" or "quite a lot of trust" in the regime (Arab Barometer V 2019).

On the other side, Egyptians seem to have lost trust in political actors and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Recent public opinion surveys have also shown a dwindling interest in democratic governance. The voter-turnout rate in parliamentary and presidential elections, which was close to 50 percent between 2011 and 2013, has sunk to about 25 percent over the subsequent years. And if sinking turnout rates could be understood as reflecting disinterest in participating in elections in authoritarian environments where the outcome is a foregone conclusion, surveys of the Arab Barometer Project document that a considerable segment of the Egyptian population has backed away from demands for democratic governance. In June 2011, almost 80 percent of Egyptians surveyed considered democracy to be the optimal political system. As of 2016, this number had fallen to 53

percent (Soltan, Qamha, and ‘Asilah 2011; Tavana 2017). Egyptians’ dwindling support for democracy is clearly linked to dramatic shifts in their perceptions of economic and security conditions, as well as to declining public confidence in political actors.

Political parties in particular appear to have borne the brunt of popular discontent: Citizens’ trust in parties sank from 58 percent in 2011 to 20 percent in 2016 (Soltan, Qamha, and ‘Asilah 2011; Tavana 2017). The Muslim Brotherhood, a major political actor between 2011 and 2013 which has been banned since the failure of the democratization process (Laub 2019), has descended with regard to popular trust from 44 percent in 2011 to 17 percent in 2018 (Arab Barometer V 2019). Confidence in state organs generally declined less precipitously, and trust in the armed forces remains at 84 percent (Arab Barometer V 2019). In 2016, a majority of 82 percent of Egyptians opined that political reforms, if any, should be introduced “very gradually,” with the regime closely supervising their introduction (Tavana 2017).

The perceptions of the majority of the Egyptian citizenry thus seem to be in many ways aligned with the current discourse of the authoritarian regime, which depicts the democratic uprising of 2011 and the ensuing democratization process as “harmful events” whose repetition would only inflict further damage on the country and its prospects for economic development and security. Popular perceptions seem to also correspond to regime-sponsored attempts to ridicule political parties as well as NGOs as inefficient entities populated by profiteers looking for personal gain, and to put them in stark contrast to the army and other state institutions, which are hailed for championing national interests (Hamzawy 2019).

It is in this context of a popularly tolerated—if not supported—authoritarianism that the Egyptian regime has used four tools to consolidate its control over politics and society: the dissemination of populist narratives centered around the personality cult of President Abdel-Fattah al-Sisi, repression and prosecution of political groups, overt forms of legal engineering tailored to undermine human rights and basic freedoms, and the closure of formal political spaces.

### **Authoritarian Narratives**

Before the eighth anniversary of the January 2011 revolution, in 2019, Egyptian President Abdel-Fattah al-Sisi repeated more than once his depiction of the popular uprisings that swept different Arab countries

in 2011 as a “wrong cure” that was based on a “wrong diagnosis” (Nassar and Medhat 2019). Al-Sisi claimed that the “events of 2011” set Egypt back because they offered the wrong treatment by insisting on “bringing down the regime,” exposing both state and society to great risks. Egypt’s situation was not the only issue al-Sisi addressed. He asserted that the events of 2011 have had devastating consequences in countries such as Syria, Libya, and Yemen. These countries have witnessed, according to him, the collapse of their stability, and it will take them years to rebuild state institutions, in addition to hundreds of billions of dollars to reconstruct their destroyed societies (Nassar and Medhat 2019). This presidential insistence on equating the popular uprisings with high-risk and/or destructive events lies at the heart of how the Egyptian regime attempts to silence the demand for democracy by propagating an authoritarian discourse on politics since 2013.

On the one hand, the word “events” replaces in the presidential discourse words such as “revolution,” “uprising,” “democratic movement,” and “Arab Spring.” These terms earlier described how Egyptian citizens took to the streets in January 2011, calling for the end of former President Hosni Mubarak’s regime and for the establishment of a constitutional and political framework enabling the democratic transfer of power and safeguarding human rights and freedoms. The word “events” disguises many meanings that the presidential discourse strips away from January 2011. By the same token, the use of the word “events” forcibly associates the popular uprising with other meanings that distort its true democratic nature.

The term “events” eliminates the systematic and peaceful qualities of the popular demand for democracy, which millions of Egyptians put forward before 2011, during the 18 days of the uprising (January 25–February 11, 2011), and between 2011 and 2013—until the military, amid wide social unrest, took over power on July 3, 2013. Linguistically, the word “event” designates an unplanned, spontaneous, or sudden act, without any pre-organized mobilization or clear demands. The use of the word “events” ascribes to January 2011 chaotic, criminal, and violent contents. It parallels the labeling of the uprising of January 18–19, 1977 as events—the bread uprising, a popular protest against high prices and economic policies that marginalized the low-income majority, which former President Anwar al-Sadat termed the “uprising of thieves” and “criminal events” (Qutb 2019). It also parallels the description of the 1986 paramilitary riots as “events”—riots of Egyptian conscripts, which involved some of the poor police recruits who demon-

strated against the inhumane treatment they suffered from (Atef 2016). January 2011 did witness violence in various places, but citizens did not incite it. Rather, violent acts during the 18 days of the uprising were initiated by the security services of the Mubarak regime and aimed at undermining the popular demand for peaceful democratic change (Hamzawy 2016). The insistence of President al-Sisi to use the word “events” thus reflects an official desire on the side of the current Egyptian regime to criminalize January 2011 and to equate it with chaos in people’s imagination.

On the other hand, the characterization of the mobilization that led to January 2011 and other popular uprisings as a “wrong diagnosis” reveals a general conviction in the ruling establishment in Egypt that the demand for democracy is harmful and that citizens’ actions incorporating it are reprehensible. For the regime, actions such as protesting and demonstrating for political purposes must be prevented by convincing the people that activism is useless or by forcing the people to eschew it. In the speeches of President al-Sisi, the characterization “wrong diagnosis” supplements expressions such as “incomplete and fake awareness is the real enemy” (Hosni and Hassan 2019), or “the countries that went through crises in the past years wouldn’t have had to pay such high human, financial, and moral prices had the situation remained the same” (Rashwan 2018) or still

. . . what happened in 2011 was a reckless movement with good intentions . . . We opened the gates of hell in our country when we thought we could change our reality. This does not mean that we should silently endure our crises, but things can easily get out of control. (Rashwan 2018)

When taken together, these expressions reveal an official discourse that accuses democracy-demanding citizens in Egypt of fake awareness and credulity, which resulted in careless actions and caused great harm to the country in 2011. Within this discourse, “well-intentioned” Egyptians who took to the streets in January 2011 are required to take a step back, to rely only on their regime to deal with the existing social crises and to avoid inducing chaos (referred to in the presidential discourse as “things spiraling out of control”) by giving up their call for regime change and by refraining from interfering in politics altogether. Also, Egyptian citizens are warned within the same discourse of the severe consequences of their “re-involvement in similar events like in

2011” because the “Egyptian state”—here the regime is depicted as the sole embodiment of the state apparatus—will not tolerate their recurrence. It will inevitably punish those who ignore the warning, be it by protesting in public sphere or by expressing dissenting opinions on social media networks. The repressive measures that have met protesters in the autumn of 2019 are a clear indication that the regime follows through its warnings.

In characterizing January 2011 as a wrong diagnosis, the Egyptian regime aims to reinstate a dominant political culture conducive to citizens’ subjugation after a brief period of democratic mobilization that began in the mid-2000 and culminated in the 2011 uprising and the political opening between 2011 and 2013. For the smooth functioning of authoritarian rule, citizens need to acknowledge the monopoly of the president, his regime, and the security services over politics and public matters. Egyptian authoritarianism has always been profoundly skeptical of the people and systematically opted to silence them, regardless of how peaceful they may articulate their demands or the real problems those demands may reveal (Blaydes 2010; Kassem 2004).

Thus, contemporary Egyptian authoritarianism propagates a discourse in which January 2011 is deprived of any positive content, and undemocratic governance is praised in order to prevent citizens from articulating popular demands. This is by no means a vision limited to the current regime. Authoritarianism has been the only type of governance known to Egypt since the establishment of the republic in 1952 and constantly reaffirmed in the wake of crises and uprisings, as was the case after January 2011. Since 1952, Egypt has only known the alliance of economic, financial, intellectual, and media elites with authoritarian rulers. These elites relied on the rulers to protect their benefits and accepted to constantly justify official policies and decisions, regardless of content, implications, and contradictions. Successive Egyptian regimes have systematically used repression, human rights violations, and cooptation to control society and keep citizens in check. The authoritarian barter “*bread and security for freedom*” has been widely disseminated along with the notion that the country was still not ready for democracy amid fear tactics claiming that chaos is the sole alternative to authoritarian rule.

The result is the unlimited power Egyptian presidents and their ruling establishments have accumulated over time, the almost complete absence of checks and balances between the overly dominant executive branch of the regime and weak parliaments and judiciaries, and the

securitization of politics, which, since 1952, has come to be a domain of military, intelligence, and police officers. Once again, Egyptians have been forced to evacuate the public sphere, either convinced of the authoritarian barter to give up on freedom for bread and security, or fearful of prosecution if they expressed their opinions freely. Disseminating undemocratic notions, threatening repression, and restricting freedom of information, Egypt's authoritarianism has always tried to distort people's collective awareness as well as to impose fear on citizens in order to dissuade them from searching for freedom.

More than ten years after the democratic uprising in January 2011, the realities of governance in Egypt have not changed. The authoritarian contract persists; so does the impasse of dissidents and human rights activists whose inability to transcend secular–Islamist divisions, to provide viable policy alternatives to societal crises, and to build cross-ideological consensus has contributed to the failure of the short-lived democratization process between 2011 and 2013 (Hamzawy 2019).

### **Repression and Prosecution of Political Groups**

The role of security services—the state security, the general intelligence, and the military intelligence—has increased over the few past years, and their financial allocations have come to represent one of the largest portions in the regime's budget (Miller and Hawthorne 2018). The role of security officials is no longer limited to tracking opposition forces, nor to the use of repressive measures against those individuals that the regime perceives as a source of immediate or potential threat. They have also assumed direct control of key arenas in society. For example, security officials have taken full charge of NGOs and trade unions, practically sidelining the ministries of social affairs and labor respectively. They have acquired a leading role in delineating “red lines” limiting the exercise of freedom of expression, be it in traditional media or in social media networks, which the regime strongly surveils. Security officials have been managing elections and defining the legislative agenda of Parliament since 2013 (Miller and Hawthorne 2018). Furthermore, retired state security and intelligence officers along with retired army officers have invaded the state bureaucracy, particularly increasing their presence in governorates and municipalities. This complete and powerful security network controls key arenas in society and makes it difficult for citizens seeking the protection of

their rights and freedoms to organize against the omnipresent authoritarianism.

Since 2013, the regime has used repression as one of its main instruments to subordinate Egyptian citizens. Repressive measures have been employed systematically to ensure either the obedience or the silence of the majority, as well as to limit the outreach of opponents' voices. The regime has worked to diminish the risk of losing the effectiveness of repression over time, primarily by combining it with the use of non-repressive measures geared to subjugate citizens to the official anti-democratic discourse of Egyptian authoritarianism (Hamzawy 2017b).

In justifying repression, the regime has depended increasingly on the media. The regime, along with its allies among the economic and financial elites, considers the traditional media to be the easiest venue from which to dominate the public sphere and to monopolize public debates utilizing an anti-democratic discourse. Besides passing different laws that restrict media freedoms and subject journalists to the supervision of quasi-governmental bodies such as the supreme council of media, the regime has extended direct ownership by the security services of traditional media outlets—especially television channels and newspapers (Hamzawy 2017b). Either security owned or security controlled, traditional media outlets have sought to impose the regime's denial tactics on Egyptians and to undermine voices of dissent by defaming them. In social media networks, the security services have organized a strong pro-regime presence and launched orchestrated campaigns to defame its opponents (Foundation for Freedom of Thought and Expression 2019).

Since the summer of 2013, the security services have employed the expression "*either with us or against us*" to accuse and demonize both secular and Islamist dissidents as enemies of the Egyptian state. In doing so, they have justified collective punishment of opponents without making any distinction between violent individuals, on the one hand, and peaceful citizens on the other. Pro-regime intellectuals, writers, and politicians have been brought to the forefront of the hysteria about purported treason, confusing the war on terror and peaceful freedom of expression. This has stifled any possibility to deal with the continuous violations of human rights and freedoms without falling into the trap of double standards. In the public sphere, it has become impossible to simultaneously reject terrorism and state violence and demand accountability for breaking the law.

In this climate of dehumanization of opponents as enemies of the state, the Rabaa massacre took place in summer 2013. The killing of nearly eight hundred Muslim Brothers was not the last attempt by the regime to violate citizens' right to life and to infringe on the rule of law. On the contrary, it marks the official start of a system of violence still practiced today. The victims' bodies piled on the streets and in mosques were a warning for forthcoming illegal extrajudicial killings, forced disappearance, torture, and incarceration for political reasons. These acts have become instruments used regularly to liquidate opponents, subjugate citizens, and control society. The public falsification of what really happened in Rabaa was no less catastrophic than the bloodshed: Egyptian authoritarianism mobilized its followers and those frightened of repression in the public sphere to deny the carnage. The victims were accused of carrying arms and committing violence. They were all classified as actual or potential terrorists. The killing was portrayed as "legitimate defense" by the security services. However, independent reports documented the massacre, refuting official allegations of self-defense and the victims' violence. Acquainted with undermining the truth, deluding awareness, and rejecting reason, the security-owned and security-controlled media thus justified the massacre as a "national necessity" imposed by the war on terror, while being dismissive of the victims' losses and the families' suffering (McKernan 2018).

Since 2013, Egyptian authoritarianism has continued to exploit its control of the media to justify repression. A set of interrelated statements, which are well known to citizens since the 1950s, have been widely disseminated: "No voice above the voice of the war on terror"; "Saving society and the state and defending our national security require gathering around the presidency and the executive power"; "Governance in Egypt respects the rule of law and protects all the rights and freedoms, including economic and social rights, and continues to build democracy"; "Those who oppose the laws, regulations, and procedures that enable the state to confront terrorism betray Egypt and conspire against the nation," among others.

### **Legal Engineering**

Using undemocratic legal and judicial tools with a zeal unmatched even during the long authoritarian rule of former President Hosni Mubarak (1981–2011), Egypt's government is closing the public space



by cracking down on independent political parties and autonomous civil society, asphyxiating the practice of pluralist politics, and pushing citizens away from peaceful and active engagement in public affairs.

For example, on November 24, 2013, Egypt's then interim president, Adly Mansour, used his temporary legislative prerogatives to issue a law titled "Organizing the Right to Public Meetings, Processions, and Peaceful Demonstrations" (Egyptian Official Gazette 2013). This measure, known locally as the "Protest Law," has usurped the freedom of many Egyptian youth, students, workers, and activists (Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy 2018). The Protest Law recognizes citizens' right to "organize a meeting or conduct a procession or protest." It requires notification to be given at least three days and no more than 15 days in advance of such actions. Yet, the law as originally drafted gives the security services absolute power to cancel or postpone a demonstration, change its location, and modify its path based on "serious information or evidence" regarding the existence of threats against security and peace. In its tenth article, the law effectively eliminates citizens' rights of peaceful assembly and demonstration. It also does not include any guarantees that demonstrators will not undergo surveillance, or be subjected to threats. This set-up makes the security services the proverbial judge, jury, and executioner. It essentially allows police forces to conduct themselves—potentially committing abuses—without any oversight, control, or a framework for objective evaluation of their actions. The only check on security services in the law is weak. Article 10, as originally drafted, allows for citizens to air their grievances concerning the prevention of demonstrations, or the delay of decisions in front of a judge. This only means, however, that citizens can file a complaint, with no indication of the potential outcomes of such action (Egyptian Official Gazette 2013).

In another stipulation, the law essentially gives the security services and other executive-affiliated bodies the capacity to bar civilians from protesting in front of public offices. It endows the security services with the authority to delineate "secure zones" surrounding public institutions and facilities, in which demonstrations and rallies are not prohibited. The security services have expanded their use of the term "secure zones" to prevent any protest against legislative, executive, and judicial institutions that are responsible for public actions—institutions that across the world draw the attention of citizens with grievances and constituencies harmed by public policies. The same stipulation has also been employed to disperse marches on police stations, governors'

offices, and municipalities that have quotidian interactions with the public and often marginalize society's weakest groups. The law outlines a range of financial sanctions, as well as imprisonment, for those who violate its rulings. The most serious of these punishments is a draconian ban imposed in article 7 on various types of protests. It prohibits participation in meetings, rallies, marches, and demonstrations that the government classifies as disturbing societal peace and as potentially resulting in the damage of public and private property, blocking roads, and inhibiting other citizens from exercising their rights. Article 10 outlaws peaceful rallies, strikes, and sit-ins that could potentially damage state-owned means of production or individual businesses. This draconian ban negates the constitutionally enshrined and internationally sanctioned right to protest peacefully in streets and squares, and to conduct strikes and sit-ins in work sites. The tools available to the security services to virtually abolish citizens' rights to protest are outlined in other articles of the Protest Law as well. Articles 11 through 13 grant police forces the authority to use batons as well as rubber and non-rubber bullets to disperse meetings, rallies, marches, and demonstrations they deem not in accordance with the peaceful nature of citizens' protests. The law does not include an adequate definition of what constitutes a "departure from the peaceful nature." It authorizes "dispersion by force," which has led to a massive increase in the use of violent dispersal tactics (Egyptian Official Gazette 2013).

There has been some movement against this law since it was passed. On December 3, 2016, the Supreme Constitutional Court (SCC) struck down article 10 (Reuters 2016). The court ruled that granting the security services the power to regulate and prevent demonstrations was unconstitutional. The demonstrators' constitutional rights and the principle of separation of powers require that demands by the security services regarding restricting demonstrations and other protest activities are referred to a court to adjudicate the matter. The most significant aspect of the SCC ruling, that the court decided the requirement for citizens to notify the security services of their intentions to demonstrate, is designed to compel the government to accept a constitutional right, not to restrict it. The ruling says that only a competent court in accordance with due process could apply such a restriction. This could have implications in areas other than demonstrations, most notably non-governmental organization (NGO) registration. It could force the government to go to court to prevent an organization from gaining official status, rather than the current practice of rejecting registration

applications and forcing the applicants to engage in lengthy litigation to reverse the decision. If the security services are determined to restrict demonstrations, other components of the Protest Law that will survive the SCC ruling give them wide-ranging legal powers to undermine the rights of demonstrators. For instance, they can ask a court to ban peaceful demonstrations in squares, roads, and work sites, or demand that citizens be barred from peacefully protesting bad policies or human rights abuses close to state buildings and public offices. And the provisions regarding the use of force still stand (Hamzawy 2017a).

A second example for the use of legal engineering by the Egyptian government to restrict citizens' rights and freedoms is the amendment of article 78 of the Egyptian Penal Code, which carries the most indiscriminate implications. On September 21, 2014, President al-Sisi amended article 78 using his interim legislative prerogative in the absence of Parliament.<sup>1</sup> The amendment essentially criminalizes the public and peaceful activity of individuals and NGOs that the new authoritarianism classifies as enemies and conspirators, thereby revoking their freedom of association as well as their rights to operate legally (Adel 2014). The article of concern is vague, stipulating the criminalization of specific acts without defining them in an objective legal manner. The amended text criminalizes acts that "could harm the nation's interest," or "breach public peace and order." These concepts are inherently undefinable in an objective manner and result in legal ambiguities that are used as a tool of repression by the government (Adel 2014). Equally legally unorthodox is the lack of an objective, substantive definition of the contraband addressed in article 78. Instead, the legislation relies on ambiguous phrasing, such as "or other things." Terms that allow for a wide range of interpretations by the government are codified throughout the amended text in additional vague statements, such as "the same penalty shall apply to her/him, who gave or offered or promised something with the intention of committing a harmful act." And in the third paragraph, harsh penalties—including the death penalty—are imposed in cases of "mediating in harmful acts," without any definition of what constitutes mediation (Adel 2014).

Article 78 blurs lines in many ways. It subjects NGOs working on rights and freedoms to the same surveillance and criminalization as proven participants in acts of terror, violence, and espionage. There are no clear-cut and substantial differences between acts of terrorism

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1. The House of Representatives convened in January 2016.

and violence rightfully classified as hostile acts, on the one hand, and the legitimate activities of rights groups documenting human rights abuses and defending victims, on the other. The lines between the criminal receipt of weapons and ammunition with the purpose of committing acts of violence and the receipt of computers and printers that are needed by NGOs to manage their activities have also disappeared (Hamzawy 2017a).

A third example for legalizing the crackdown on citizens' rights and freedoms and on civil society is the passing of the Egyptian terrorism law. On February 17, 2015, in the temporary absence of the legislature, President al-Sisi issued the presidential decree law no. 8 of 2015, known as the "Law of Organizing the Lists of Terrorist Entities and Terrorists" (Manshurat Qanuniya 2015). This law too includes vague wording that further enables the government to legally surveil and penalize those individuals and organizations who peacefully oppose official policies and practices. It creates an environment in which accusations of "terrorism" can be used without legal restraint against opponents of the new authoritarianism. This is because the law is drafted using the same vague terms and concepts that have come to be the main feature of lawmaking since the 2013 coup and systematically conflate crimes committed by violent groups with citizens' and NGOs' activities, when their use of freedom of expression and freedom of association collide with official policies. The phrasing "breaches to public order" is used to describe these inherently different acts and the classification of so-called "hostile entities" as terrorist entities does not end where violence stops (Manshurat Qanuniya 2015).

Additionally, the law regulates the procedures by which individuals come to be included on "terrorist lists." Article three includes a provision delegating jurisdiction over this process to one or more criminal circuit courts in Cairo's Court of Appeals following a formal request by the state prosecutor. The criminal circuit courts are required to adjudicate requests within seven days of the date of the state prosecutor's filing of the necessary paperwork. Crucially, the Terrorism Law does not require the government's accusations of terrorist involvement to be proven through transparent judicial proceedings before individuals are placed on the list. Rather, the process of list enrollment under the law has become a kind of cooperative administrative effort between two judicial destinations: the state prosecutor's office and the criminal circuit courts (Manshurat Qanuniya 2015).

Another danger here is that the law does not clearly identify the

paperwork necessary for requesting the enrollment of an entity or individual as a terrorist. It does not allow the concerned entities and individuals to appeal their placement on the list until after listing, and it designates the Court of Cassation (the court's criminal circuit) as the body responsible for adjudicating the appeals without specifying a time period for issuing decisions. This deprives the entities and individuals placed on the lists of the constitutional and legal right to fair trial prior to conviction. The law presents a wide spectrum of potential effects that enrollment on terrorist lists could have on listed entities and individuals. They include confiscating organizational and financial assets, revoking licenses of NGOs, banning enrolled individuals from travel and seizing, or annulling their passports, stipulating that these individuals have legally lost the "good reputation" necessary to hold office and, based on that, barring them from running for public and parliamentary positions. The wording of the law mandates that these effects take place immediately following placement on the terrorist lists (Hamzawy 2017a).

These are but a few examples for how the Egyptian government has used legal engineering since 2013 to restrict citizens' rights and freedoms, to crack down on civil society, and to curtail peaceful activism. It has thus far acted methodically and effectively to consolidate its rule and to create a citizens' diaspora, a hunted community outside of the public space, pursued by a government that does not shy away from sponsoring violence and legalizing repression.

### **Closure of Formal Politics**

Political parties on the right and left have taken one of two positions since the emergence of the military-controlled government in 2013: either endorse or condemn the policies of the government. Neither position has prevented the decline of the parties' political roles (Aleem 2019). Facing a government that interferes systematically in elections in order to organize comfortable majorities, and a security apparatus that is determined to restrict their outreach activities and drain them in internal conflicts, Egyptian parties have not been able to carve out a stable and independent space for their role in politics. The reality of marginalization has pushed some parties to deprioritize formal politics and to move closer to collective actors such as student groups and

the labor movement in their attempt to escape the authoritarian grip. However, there too the government has limited the parties' role using intimidation and prosecution. Since 2013, the government has demonstrated a declining interest in ceding even the slightest political space for dissent or participatory decision-making, either in formal politics or in civil society.

Despite the current landscape, some political parties have opted to collaborate with the government to embed themselves in the legislative and executive branches. Their support of the government has not changed, even as the hegemony of the military establishment and security services has been rising within the state apparatus and in key sectors of society. Notable among these groups are the New Wafd Party, the Free Egyptians Party, the Congress Party, the Egyptian Social Democratic Party, the Nation's Future Party, the Democratic Front, and the National Progressive Unionist Party. The New Wafd and Social Democratic parties led the formation of the first cabinet after the 2013 coup and enjoyed strong representation in the Constituent Assembly tasked with amending the country's constitution. Others, including the Free Egyptians, Nation's Future, and Congress parties, have endorsed governmental policies without equivocation and have been rewarded with parliamentary representation. In the 2015 parliamentary elections, the pro-authoritarian parties nominated candidates and won seats in the House of Representatives (Bahgat 2016). The Free Egyptians Party gained 65 seats, while the Nation's Future and New Wafd parties won 50 and 45 seats, respectively. Smaller parties also won seats: for example, twelve seats went to the Congress Party, four seats to the Social Democratic Party, and one seat to the National Progressive Unionist Party (Abdel Tawab et al. 2015). Although the security services promoted non-party-affiliated candidates and made sure they earned a majority of the seats, the pro-authoritarian parties, apart from the Social Democratic Party, have not faltered in their support for the government (Al-Mursi 2016).

While some parties have shown unwavering support, others have opposed the military-dominated government from the beginning, or have switched to emerging opposition platforms over time. Several liberal and leftist parties have distanced themselves from the new authoritarian government as of early 2017, after initially endorsing the crackdown on citizens' rights and freedoms. For example, the Constitution Party participated extensively in the immediate power arrangement

following the military-ordered removal of the Muslim Brotherhood's elected president, Mohamed Morsi, from office in the summer of 2013. Mohamed al-Baradei, the party's founder, was appointed vice president on July 9, 2013 (Alarabiya 2013). Other key figures participated in the first military-controlled cabinet and in the Constituent Assembly tasked to draft a new constitution (Mukhtar 2013). However, al-Baradei resigned on August 14, 2013, in protest of the forced dispersal and mass killing of Muslim Brotherhood supporters during their sit-ins (Amnesty International 2019). Other parties have found themselves in similar situations, most notably the left-leaning Socialist People's Alliance Party and the Nasserist Dignity Party. Along with several smaller liberal and leftist parties, they coalesced to form a platform named the Democratic Current (Nassar 2016). Since late 2013, the Democratic Current has grown more vocal in its opposition. It has issued several statements to condemn the passing of undemocratic laws, such as the Protest Law and the Terrorism Law, and to call on the government to end human rights abuses, including torture, forced disappearances, and the referral of civilians to military trials. In the 2014 presidential elections, the Democratic Current refused to support al-Sisi and instead backed Hamdeen Sabahi, a leftist political veteran and a founding member of the Nasserist Dignity Party (Dunne and Hamzawy 2017).

As a result of its efforts, the Democratic Current has continued to garner the support of other disenchanting parties such as the Social Democratic Party, which repositioned itself after severe internal tensions and massive resignations led by the party's staunch pro-authoritarian members (Dunne and Hamzawy 2017). The Democratic Current also includes parties that were critical of the military-controlled government since 2013. The Strong Egypt Party, with semi-liberal and semi-religious leanings, emerged in this context, as did the Bread and Freedom Party Initiative that has garnered the support of young leftist activists and students. Both parties boycotted the 2014 presidential elections and the 2015 parliamentary elections because of the government's systematic interference that undermined any democratic potential. Both parties also have criticized the government's involvement in human rights abuses and collaborated with young activist protesters, student groups, professional associations, and labor movements (Dunne and Hamzawy 2017).

The growing opposition of some liberal and leftist parties has not prevented the military-dominated government from restricting citizens' rights and freedoms, closing the public sphere, or mocking for-

mal politics. Statements condemning undemocratic laws have not forced the government to change its position. Similarly, increased criticism of human rights abuses has not discouraged the security services from conducting widescale repression. The Democratic Current party and other opposing political parties have been unable to stymie the oppression of independent NGOs, professional associations, and organized labor. Put differently, the actions of opposition parties have not brought about any real change in the policies that the government has implemented since 2013, nor in the power arrangement that emerged to subjugate citizens and society to the domination of the military establishment and the security services (Al-Waraqi 2017). Aware of the limitations imposed on their roles in the public sphere and in formal politics, opposition parties have sought to engage in informal political activities. Some parties, especially the Strong Egypt and Bread and Freedom parties, have attempted to organize loyal student groups. However, even these activities have not altered the structural weakness of opposition parties. Targeted constituencies—young activists, students, and the urban middle class—particularly affected by the deteriorating living conditions in Egypt have lost their trust in parties and party politics (Tavana 2017).

Realizing the parties' incapacity to effect change and their loss of constituency support, Egypt's authoritarian government has focused more on cracking down on oppositional Islamist movements. The Muslim Brotherhood has been one of the regime's prime targets. In the summer of 2013, the Brotherhood was at the core of what the government called "enemies of the nation" (Human Rights Watch 2014). Arrests of the Brotherhood's rank and file have continued since then in large numbers. The security services have been systematically involved in human rights abuses, including the extrajudicial killing of Brotherhood members, the torture of some prisoners and detainees, and the neglect of the medical needs of others in custody (Amnesty International 2019). The government has also used various legal and judicial instruments to repress the Muslim Brotherhood. In September 2013, a court ordered that the movement be banned, and its financial assets be frozen (Kingsley 2013). In December 2013, the government declared the Muslim Brotherhood a terrorist organization, mandating its dissolution and calling for the freezing of its financial assets (*Guardian* 2013). In August 2014, the administrative court system revoked the license of the Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party and mandated its dissolution (Noueihad 2014).



In part as a result of this, the Muslim Brotherhood's political significance has declined. Its exclusion from formal politics, the ban of the movement and its party, and the government-sponsored branding of the movement as a terrorist entity have shaken its popular base. In addition, the Brotherhood's organizational capacities have weakened considerably due to various fissures within the movement between the elders and the youth, between the pragmatic doves and the ideological hawks, and between the nonviolent and violent factions (Ranko and Yaghi 2019). Due to the sustained and systematic government repression of the Muslim Brotherhood, the probability of internal conflicts and defections within the movement will continue to rise (Awad 2017).

Meanwhile, Islamist movements that chose to support the government have also lost political significance and presence in society, and are in no better position than the Islamist opposition to counter the erosion of political Islam in Egypt. Pro-government Salafis did not face the fate of the Brotherhood and other Islamists that chose to defy the will of the new regime. They avoided being banned and were given stakes in the post-2013 power arrangement. For example, after the Alexandrian Salafi Missionary Group and its political party, al-Nur, assisted the military establishment and security services in preparing for the 2013 removal of elected President Morsi, they were included in the Constituent Assembly and allowed to have access to the government-controlled media (Emam 2018). The Salafi group and its party endorsed the former minister of defense for president in 2014, and in return were free to field candidates in the 2015 parliamentary elections. These pro-government Salafis expected to gain a significant number of seats in the legislature, but that expectation proved to be misguided (Lacroix 2016). The regime's need for Salafi support has declined as its crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood has been ramped up and the government has gained more control over official religious institutions. As a result, al-Nur was given only twelve seats in the House of Representatives (Bahgat 2016). This is in stark contrast to the 2012 parliamentary elections in which the party landed nearly 111 seats (Emam 2018).

Against the backdrop of legal engineering and declining party politics, Egypt's authoritarian government has sought to use an additional tool to consolidate its control over citizens and society: the dissemination of populist narratives geared to create a personality leadership cult centered on President Abdel-Fattah al-Sisi.

## Conclusion

There is very little in Egypt's current political landscape to suggest that a decade ago the country embarked upon an attempt at democratic transformation. Today, President Abdel-Fattah al-Sisi is now serving his second term. According to the 2014 constitution, this term was to end in 2022 and should have been al-Sisi's last. This changed on April 16, 2019, when the Egyptian Parliament—whose majority consists of the president's acolytes and representatives of the security establishment—passed constitutional amendments that extend al-Sisi's current term into 2024 and enable him to once more seek reelection; al-Sisi could now remain in office until 2030. The package of constitutional changes, confirmed in a referendum on April 20–22, 2019, also expands presidential powers vis-à-vis the justice system and confers a political role on the army.

Egypt's consolidated authoritarian regime has methodically and efficiently pursued its goals of restricting citizens' rights and freedoms, disseminating an undemocratic discourse, cracking down on political groups and independent civil society, and closing formal politics. The ultimate aim remains to restore the personality cult of "one leader, the symbol of the nation and the heart of the state," and to personalize authoritarian governance. As part of its broader program of cracking down on political groups and civil society, the Egyptian regime has tried through the use of repression, undemocratic legal frameworks, and aggressive judicial tools to suppress new forms of social activism such as student movements and labor protests, as well as spontaneous eruptions of popular anger in face of human rights abuses (Hamzawy 2017c). In 2019, following a few protests in different Egyptian cities, the government acted harshly, detaining numerous young activists and students, and arresting several critical intellectuals and journalists (Yee and Rashwan 2019).

Egypt's consolidated authoritarian regime has also benefited from a supportive regional and international environment. As Toby Matthiesen in his contribution in this book shows (chapter 16), the governments of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have spearheaded the formation of an Arab counter-revolution alliance since the popular uprisings in 2011. The two governments' financial aid and political backing have been instrumental in enabling the Egyptian regime to stabilize since 2013. Internationally, as the chapters by Lisa Blaydes on

China's role in the Arab world (chapter 14), and Sarah Yerkes on American policies demonstrate (chapter 13), key actors have been primarily interested in collaborating economically and financially with the Egyptian regime and reluctant to condition collaboration to a democracy and human rights agenda.

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## 2 | The People vs. the Palace

Power and Politics in Morocco since 2011

*Samia Errazzouki*

In the years that immediately followed King Mohammed VI's ascension to the throne in the summer of 1999, international observers were hopeful that his reign would usher in a period of democratic opening following the oppressive decades of his father, Hassan II, known as the "Years of Lead" (Macleod 2000; Jehl 1999). During the initial years of his reign, Mohammed VI oversaw widely lauded initiatives, including family code reforms and a Truth and Reconciliation Committee that addressed human rights violations which took place under his father's rule. Beyond the surface of these measures, however, the reality for ordinary Moroccans was less rosy. Publications were shut down for critical coverage, unemployment continued to rise which contributed to a growing exodus of skilled and educated Moroccans, and corruption remained rampant. These factors, among others, played a major role in fueling the February 20th Movement protests—Morocco's iteration of the "Arab Spring" in 2011.

During the early days of protests in 2011, international observers were again hopeful that Mohammed VI's response would address popular grievances, citing his speech on March 9, 2011 during which he announced sweeping constitutional reforms. Despite those measures and elections that gave the Islamist Party of Justice and Development (PJD) the reins of government, popular mobilization and dissent endured. In reality, 2011 marked the beginnings of an enduring strategy that covertly entrenched the palace's power at the expense of elected institutions. While the PJD continues to lead the

government coalition, it has increasingly been pushed out of strategic ministerial portfolios, while palace-appointed bodies, like the royal cabinet and security forces, have ballooned in their powers and prerogatives.

The summer of 2019 marked the twentieth year of Mohammed VI's reign and nearly ten years since "Arab Spring" protests, offering an opportunity to assess the claims and expectations of the Moroccan monarchy. In the immediate aftermath of the "Arab Spring" in 2011, Morocco was hailed as a regional model for both economic and political reforms in a region rife with authoritarianism and vast inequalities. The reality in Morocco, however, is one of deep authoritarian sustenance. Mohammed VI's reign has not lived up to the hopes and expectations of a more democratic Morocco. Instead, constraints on political expression endure through ongoing arrests, while attempts at mobilization have been met with an emboldened security apparatus. Economic measures, including the liberalization of the currency and behemoth investment projects such as the high-speed rail (TGV) and solar power plant (Noor), have done little to improve development in areas outside of the country's urban centers, contributing to skewed economic development (Monks 2018; Shields and Masters 2019; Kounouno 2018).

This chapter argues that, since the Arab Spring, the palace has implemented a series of measures that have supplanted elected institutions in an attempt to both maintain its authority and to manage dissent and popular mobilization. From palace-appointments that have consolidated the Ministry of Interior to placing oversight of public prosecution under the Royal Prosecutor to manipulating party politics, the palace has kept a tight grip on its power. As was the case during the "Years of Lead" under King Hassan II, the elected government continues to exist as a shock-absorber and to shield the palace from accountability. Since 2011, the palace continues to deflect criticism and blame for crises and scandals connected to elected government officials, resulting in a recurring pattern of cabinet ministers being dismissed. Collectively, these recent developments and measures signify the enduring reality of repression and the evolving nature of legal tactics intended to preempt and punish political dissent. Nine years after the Arab Spring, activists and journalists still face arrest, economic growth remains stunted, and elected institutions exist under the shadow of the palace—all of which indicate that little has changed since 2011.



## Regime Responses to Mobilization and Dissent Pre-2011

During the initial years following King Mohammed VI's accession to the throne in 1999, the overwhelming consensus among observers was that his reign was ushering in an era of unprecedented liberalization, both politically and economically. The reality, however, is that many of the measures that characterize the liberal perception of King Mohammed VI's reign were already well underway during the final years of King Hassan II's reign (1961–99). This section will provide a general overview of key policies that King Hassan II began to implement in the final ten years of his reign that set the stage for King Mohammed VI's regime. Ranging from the creation of institutions dedicated to human rights to constitutional reforms, the final years of King Hassan II's reign signaled what many perceived as the closure of the "Years of Lead." Under King Mohammed VI, sweeping legal reforms and a Truth and Reconciliation Committee dedicated to addressing the human rights violations under his father appeared to suggest that Morocco was on a path toward a political opening. In reality, however, the Moroccan regime would heavily constrain dissent and popular mobilization, leading to a number of arrests, the shutdown of independent publications, and widespread human rights violations that international organizations condemned. This modus operandi would go on to drive post-2011 policies in Morocco that centered on preserving the political supremacy of the monarchy at the expense of a genuine diffusion of power to elected institutions.

### *Sanitizing the Years of Lead (1990–99)*

The early years of King Hassan II's reign in the 1960s and '70s was a turbulent time for Arab monarchies. From Egypt and Iraq to Yemen and Libya, the nationalist wave that brought about postcolonial independence eventually turned against the reigns of kings who were seen as representative of a bygone era. Conscious of this image problem, King Hassan II opted for an iron fist that nipped in the bud any expression of dissent: martial law in the northern Rif region, a secret desert prison in Tazmamart, extrajudicial murders and disappearance of political opponents such as Mehdi Ben Barka (Miller 2013, 162). Such an approach successfully thwarted two military coup attempts in 1971 and 1972. Nevertheless, diplomatic pressure from the outside and persistent domestic dissent rendered King Hassan's II brutal policies

unsustainable. Loans from the International Monetary Fund and World Bank came with the condition of the standard political and economic liberalization measures of the Washington Consensus (Richards and Waterbury 2008, 243). In addition, King Hassan II's deteriorating health signaled the inevitable. Collectively, these factors played a role in shaping the liberal shift in King Hassan II's policies.

The year 1990 marked the beginning of a series of policy changes under King Hassan II. One of the first initiatives was the establishment of the Human Rights Advisory Council (CCDH) in 1990. The creation of the CCDH fit into a broader historical moment that saw the rise of "national human rights institutions" in the region that were much less concerned with addressing human rights concerns and more focused on cooptation. The structure of the CCDH placed the general discourse of human rights in Morocco squarely under the monarchy's purview through its role in appointing the organization's members. Soon after the establishment of the CCDH, King Hassan II introduced a series of constitutional amendments in 1992 that led to the promulgation of a new constitution in 1996. Under the 1996 constitution, reforms led to the expansion of the parliamentary electoral process, as well as a widening of the parliament's responsibilities, such as overseeing the state budget and the ability to question ministers over their policies (Ottaway and Riley 2006, 6).

Through what appeared to be a liberalizing shift, King Hassan II was both simultaneously seeking to correct his authoritarian record, while also setting the tone for and preparing the political landscape for his son, King Mohammed VI. Perhaps in an attempt to end his reign on a conciliatory note for the historical record, these aforementioned policies undoubtedly aided in improving his image, at least for international observers. To sum up his reign, his *New York Times* obituary stated: "Through intelligence, charm and cunning, he steered an absolute monarchy into the modern world" (Gregory 1999). Most importantly, however, King Hassan II provided King Mohammed VI with the blueprint for appeasing international critics and crafting an image of liberalization that cunningly masked the consolidation and preservation of the monarchy's power.

### *King Mohammed VI and Business as Usual (1999–2011)*

Not even a full year into his reign as Morocco's new king, Mohammed VI was already the subject of praise and admiration. In one of his first

and only interviews in 2000, *TIME* magazine characterized him as the “King of Cool,” highlighting a series of policies he enacted as indicating a break from his father’s legacy (Macleod 2000). Some of these measures included his dismissal of former Interior Minister Driss Basri who was notorious for his brutal police tactics, the establishment of the Moroccan Indemnity Commission that provided reparations to victims of torture under Hassan II, and allowing for the return of those who were in exile. On the one hand, these measures allowed King Mohammed VI to appear to be diverging from his father’s repressive policies. On the other hand, however, King Mohammed VI was simply continuing what his father perfected: implementing minimal liberalizing policies that yield widespread approval and applause, while securing and expanding the monarchy’s power.

During the first few years of his reign, King Mohammed VI carried out a series of measures that very clearly were designed to position himself as a champion of human rights and political freedom, both in comparison to his father, but also to set himself apart from leaders in the region steeped in authoritarianism (Ben Ali in Tunisia, Mubarak in Egypt, Gaddafi in Libya, etc.). In 1999, King Mohammed VI set up the Moroccan Indemnity Committee that provided a space for former prisoners and their families to express grievances over the conditions of their imprisonment, including cases of torture and deaths, with the promise of financial compensation (Slymovics 2001). Susan Slymovics writes:

The problem of past human rights violations is posed in material terms only, meaning that the only way for victims to be acknowledged is for them to file claims requesting indemnification. There are no public hearings, no attempts to provide the nation with an account of the past and blanket amnesties were declared as part of the creation of the Indemnity Commission [ . . . ] No one has been tried and crimes are considered unproven. (Slymovics 2001, 18–19)

As a result, Slymovics argues that “a fundamental paradox resulted: Morocco has ‘turned the page’ without recognizing state crimes” (Slymovics 2001, 21). During the same year, King Mohammed VI also dismissed former Interior Minister Driss Basri, a figure who was associated with the state’s most repressive policing tactics. In 1999, he also delivered a speech critiquing the state of women’s rights in the country,

setting off a series of debates that led to the promulgation of a new Family Code in 2003 (Evrard 2014; Žvan-Elliott 2015). While on paper, the new Family Code appeared to grant greater rights to women in terms of divorce, marriage, and inheritance, structural factors such as women being unable to file police reports or judges' arbitrary interpretation of the laws resulted in little material change (Errazzouki 2017c). In 2001, responding to critiques over the state's marginalization of the indigenous Amazigh population, King Mohammed VI announced the establishment of the Royal Institute of Amazigh Culture (Miller 2013, 226). Collectively, King Mohammed VI held up these measures and many others as concrete examples of his embrace of change and progress. In reality, however, none of these reforms or measures served to divert power away from the monarchy. On the contrary, these measures served to divert attention away from the power-consolidating moves that steadily stifled political dissent and constrained freedom of expression.

Behind the smokescreen, King Mohammed VI oversaw a series of policies that tightened the monarchy's grip on power. George W. Bush's "War on Terror" drew Morocco into the broader global policies that cited concerns over security to justify the expansion of surveillance, torture, and questionable legal practices that prolonged periods of detention without charges. In addition to introducing terror laws, Morocco became one of many countries that hosted a secret CIA "black site" that also doubled up as a facility where regime critics were subjected to torture (Alami 2015). When it came to the Western Sahara, activists, such as Aminatou Haidar, who called for independence and self-determination, were targeted with arrests, police harassment, expulsion, and confiscation of their passports (Human Rights Watch 2009). Independent media outlets like *Le Journal* and *Telquel* were faced with censorship and advertisement boycotts, along with charges and prison sentences against journalists and editors, resulting in a change of the editorial line or, as was the case with *Le Journal*, a total shutdown of the publication (van Langendonck 2010).

In the lead-up to the Arab Spring, Moroccans had much to be disgruntled over. Alongside mounting repression, the economic situation under King Mohammed VI was grim. Under his reign, King Mohammed VI continued implementing Washington Consensus economic policies that limited public spending and encouraged the sale of state enterprises to generate cashflow in exchange for loan packages. Despite these measures, even the World Bank conceded that "growth

has remained insufficient to reduce poverty and tackle unemployment in a significant way” (World Bank, 2006). In addition, the widespread sale of state-owned enterprises to members of the business elite with close ties to the palace created a network of power and capital that was heavily concentrated around political allegiance to the king (Khosrowshahi 1997). These policies also made way for the emergence of a new class of elites who simultaneously held positions as ministers and advisors while managing their business conglomerates. Even King Mohammed VI himself benefited from policies of privatization as he amassed a fortune through profits generated from his holding company’s private sector assets in industries spanning from real estate, telecommunications, and agriculture, among others (Black 2010). In 2010, the eve of the Arab Spring, assets in King Mohammed VI’s holding company, National Investment Co (SNI), totaled over 27 billion U.S. dollar (Karam 2011). In their analysis of the bleak human capital indicators in Morocco, including literacy, poverty, and unemployment, Alan Richards and John Waterbury drew an acute conclusion: “During the 1990s, however, unemployment, emigration, and poverty all increased. It is small wonder that the Moroccan state continues to preserve its discretionary powers, since it will very likely need them in the years ahead” (Richards and Waterbury 2008, 248). Sure enough, 2011 would become the first major test for King Mohammed VI’s reign, during which the monarchy’s preservation became and remains the single top priority, guiding political and economic policies.

### **Regime Responses to Mobilization and Dissent Post-2011**

The end of 2010 signaled the beginning of a turning point in Morocco that was reflective of the broader changes taking hold in the Middle East and North Africa as part of the Arab Spring. While scholars have extensively covered the implications of the February 20th Movement in Morocco, this section will gloss over the major political developments during the Arab Spring, with a greater focus on 2016 and onward. Focusing on the events and policies that took place beginning in 2016 will demonstrate how the Moroccan regime did not address the grievances expressed during the February 20th Movement and that the movement’s end did not necessarily mean an end to organized dissent. On the contrary, the February 20th Movement paved the way for evolving forms of mobilization and political expression that also solicited

evolving forms of state repression and containment. Ultimately, these developments will indicate how the monarchy's aim for self-preservation belies its claims of championing reform, pitting it against the forward-looking vision of an increasingly disgruntled populace with less and less to lose.

### *The Dawn of the Arab Spring*

In the months leading up to the rise of the February 20th Movement—Morocco's iteration of the Arab Spring—dissent was already mounting, particularly among unemployed graduates and the Sahrawi population. For years, the National Association of Unemployed Graduates of Morocco (ANDCM) had been at the forefront of social mobilization, having organized regular protests in front of Parliament since its founding in 1991 (Emperador 2007). By 2006, the unemployment rate among university graduates was more than five times the national unemployment rate, with a national unemployment rate of 4.5 percent compared to 30.1 percent among university graduates (Emperador 2007, 3). While the ANDCM organized regular protests that police frequently dispersed using violent means, it was the organization of the Gdeim Izik protest camp, in the Western Sahara, that was the most prominent protest movement before the February 20th Movement. Just weeks before Mohammed Bouazizi set himself on fire in Tunisia, Sahrawis set up their protest camp in early October 2010. The Gdeim Izik protest camp was established to denounce human rights abuses and poor economic conditions in the disputed Western Sahara territory under Moroccan control. At its height, over 15,000 Sahrawis lived in the camp, which Moroccan forces dismantled within a month of its creation, resulting in hundreds of injuries and arrests, as well as several deaths (Mandraud 2010). Between the ANDCM and the Gdeim Izik protest camp, not only was dissent mounting but so was the state's repression.

The February 20th Movement absorbed a politically and socially diverse coalition of groups, all of whom shared similar grievances spanning from better economic opportunities to demanding an end to corruption and state violence. Tens of thousands took the streets in the early days of the movement and at least five people were killed in the first wave of protests (Tremlett 2011). For weeks, protestors gathered en masse throughout the country, prompting King Mohammed VI to deliver a speech on March 6, 2011 promising constitutional reforms

(BBC 2011a). Not convinced by the king's speech, the February 20th Movement continued organizing mass protests, resulting in an upsurge of police violence and arrests (Jay 2011). Nonetheless, the state carried out a constitutional referendum in which 98.5 percent voted in favor of the reforms—a figure that many groups in Morocco questioned, considering the February 20th Movement's call for a boycott of the vote (BBC 2011b). By late November 2011, parliamentary elections were held, resulting in the victory of the Islamist Party of Justice and Development (PJD) (McCurdy 2011). Under the leadership of PJD head Abdelilah Benkirane, a new coalition government was formed. Variations of “Morocco weathers Arab Spring storm” and “Morocco survives Arab Spring” dominated news headlines and policy reports, leading to a consensus that all was well for Morocco as attention turned elsewhere in the region. A deeper look, however, reveals a contrasting story, in which the palace would continue to drain power away from elected institutions, essentially undermining the nominal constitutional reforms of 2011.

### *Behind the Smokescreen*

Beyond the constitutional reforms and election of a new government, the Moroccan palace was implementing measures that were driven less by liberal reforms and more centered on preserving and deepening its power. Many of these measures did not go unnoticed among the Moroccan public and played a major role in fueling ongoing protests. This section will highlight some of those key measures as demonstrative of a growing divergence between the strategies inherent to authoritarian regime stability and the demands and aspirations of an increasingly frustrated population. The main examples this section focuses on are the palace's deepening role in party politics, the growing security apparatus and its evolving practices, and the ongoing reactions to these measures among the population. Ultimately, these measures consolidated and institutionalized power and governance within the control of the palace and away from the PJD-elected government.

Since the formation of party politics in Morocco, the palace has always sought to manage a delicate balance between appearing to be above party politics while at the same time using party politics to bolster its centrality. After 2011 and despite constitutional reforms, little has changed. One of the first major signs that the palace was embedded in party politics and primarily concerned with authoritarian

regime stability was the appointment of Fouad Ali El Himma as royal advisor. El Himma had been a childhood friend of King Mohammed VI and previously served as deputy interior minister, along with establishing the pro-palace Party of Authenticity and Modernity (PAM). At the same time that Abdelilah Benkirane was engaging in negotiations with other parties to form a coalition government, in December 2011, King Mohammed VI announced that El Himma would serve as one of his royal advisors (*La Tribune* 2011).

The position of royal advisor is a murky one, where terms and responsibilities are not clearly defined or outlined in the constitution. Such lack of transparency has earned the group of royal advisors the unofficial title of a “shadow cabinet.” El Himma’s appointment as royal advisor sent a clear message: that election results were irrelevant and the palace will remain supreme authority. As founder of the PAM, which lost out to the PJD during the November 2011 elections, King Mohammed VI elevated El Himma to an official position whose power is arguably greater than even that of the prime minister’s. One minister characterized El Himma and the PAM as the “incarnation of authoritarianism,” to which the palace responded in a rare statement defending El Himma and attacking the minister for dragging the palace into party politics (El Yaakoubi 2016). Ironically, the very statement defending El Himma and the PAM—an unprecedented move—inadvertently proved the minister’s remarks and demonstrated that the palace was indeed invested in party politics. Nevertheless, the move to appoint El Himma was a direct jab at Benkirane, who had positioned himself in vocal opposition to El Himma, and served as a subtle reminder to the PJD that their government was subservient to the palace. After spending the majority of his political career railing against palace cronies, one of the first statements Benkirane made in reaction to El Himma’s appointment as royal advisor was: “I am forming the new government in a country whose head of state is King Mohamed VI, he is my boss. It is not my business how the head of state, who is my boss, manages his royal court” (Abdennebi, 2011). Benkirane’s comments served as a clear recognition of the power structures in which an elected government would maintain deference toward the palace, despite constitutional reforms that gave the appearance of granting the government more power.

Even after Benkirane asserted his deference to the palace, he faced numerous hurdles that culminated in King Mohammed VI ousting him as prime minister in 2017, the ultimate act of palace interference in



party politics. During the first few years of his tenure as prime minister, Benkirane oversaw a fragile government coalition comprised of parties with diverging political agendas. In 2013, the withdrawal of the Istiqlal Party from the coalition and the integration of the Rally of National Independents (RNI) in the coalition marked the beginnings of Benkirane's troubles. The cabinet reshuffle strengthened the RNI's position despite having performed relatively poorly in the parliamentary elections. Set to gain the most from this new configuration was Minister of Agriculture and Fisheries Aziz Akhannouch, who is also a close personal friend of King Mohammed VI and one of the country's wealthiest businessmen. Akhannouch had served as minister prior to the 2011 elections and was able to maintain his cabinet position after 2011 because he withdrew from the RNI and served as a technocrat (Bladi 2012). In October 2016, the PJD won elections, solidifying another term for Benkirane. After a poor performance in the elections, Akhannouch not only rejoined the RNI but he was elected as the party's new leader in the same month. In the months that followed, Akhannouch emerged as one of the most vocal critics of Benkirane, adamantly rejecting the prospects of renewing the coalition, leaving the PJD with few political allies. For months, coalition negotiations stalled as the lack of a government raised concerns over public spending that risked being put on hold with no government in place to approve and ratify the budget.

Six months after his reelection, King Mohammed VI fired Benkirane for failing to form a government, and appointed PJD veteran and former Foreign Minister Saadeddine El Othmani as the new prime minister (Errazzouki 2017a). Within days, El Othmani announced that he had reached an agreement to form a coalition with five other parties, one of which was the RNI under Akhannouch, despite his previous rejection of joining forces with the PJD (Gallagher 2012). The lack of transparency makes it difficult to know how involved the palace was in dictating these developments, but its interference is without question. Benkirane's second consecutive election win in 2016 risked empowering the PJD beyond the realm of palace control in a country where no one party has won enough votes to rule without a coalition. It could very well have been that Benkirane's refusal to give into the demands of other parties signified his maneuvering outside palace control, but what is certain is that King Mohammed VI's decision to oust him solidified the palace's position as supreme political arbiter.

In addition to the palace's role in party politics, it has deepened its

role in governance through overseeing the steep expansion of the country's security apparatus, placing the prosecution process under the oversight of the Royal Prosecutor, and issuing a wide array of royal decrees that have sidelined the government's role in decision-making. Collectively, these measures have not only contributed to the palace's deepening powers but have also placed an opaque veil around the process of decision-making that belies efforts to increase transparency and accountability.

Since 2011, a series of measures and palace-appointments would come to form a robust security force of intelligence-gathering and policing that has elevated the Ministry of Interior to the highest echelons of power, answerable solely to the palace. While the Minister of Interior, currently Abdelouafi Laftit, nominally sits on the government cabinet, he serves as one of several ministers who hold no political party affiliation, in addition to the Minister of Foreign Affairs Nassir Bourita, the Minister of Islamic Affairs Ahmed Toufiq, and the Minister of Health Khaled Ait Taleb, among others. As Minister of Interior, Laftit sits at the top of an administrative structure entirely independent of elections and political parties, overseeing a gubernatorial system where the palace appoints the governor for each of Morocco's twelve regions. Below these palace-appointed governors are a series of stratified bureaucratic positions whose responsibilities range from notarizing documents to monitoring activities in neighborhoods. Both Morocco's intelligence agency, the General Directorate for Territorial Surveillance (DGST), and the national police force, General Directorate for National Security (DGSN), also fall under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Interior. Also existing independent of party politics, officers of the DGST and DGSN are also known as *haamilu as-silah* (bearers of arms), who are excluded from voting or participating in elections.

Toward the end of 2011, a new law was promulgated that expanded the purview of officers with the DGST which granted them the title and responsibilities of judicial police. By 2015, the Central Bureau of Judicial Investigations (BCIJ) was established, dubbed the "Moroccan FBI." Unlike most judicial police agencies throughout the world that generally answer to a judicial entity, like the Ministry of Justice, the BCIJ would answer directly to the DGST. The BCIJ was primarily marketed as a Moroccan version of the FBI, whose focus largely centered around cases related to terrorism. The same year that the BCIJ was founded, Abdellatif Hammouchi, the current head of the DGST, was also appointed as head of the DGSN. With both the DGST and DGSN cur-

rently consolidated under the leadership of Hammouchi, himself answering to Laftit as Minister of Interior, it is the palace—not the elected government—to whom the security apparatus is accountable.

While Morocco's security apparatus has always been central in enforcing the palace's centrality, following 2011, it began to take on an even deeper and advanced role in quelling dissent. The most emblematic example of this was in 2012 with the citizen media collective *Mamfakinch*. After emerging in light of the February 20th Movement, *Mamfakinch* maintained an ongoing presence on social media, tirelessly documenting cases of activists and journalists facing arrest and covering ongoing protests throughout the country. There was no question that the site remained a thorn in the Moroccan regime's side and in the summer of 2012, members of *Mamfakinch* received an email containing government-sponsored spyware, drawing widespread condemnation (Privacy International 2015).

After Privacy International, a charity that defends privacy rights, published a report on the spyware, the Moroccan state announced it would be pursuing charges of defamation against all involved, denying that it was behind the spyware despite independent analysis that proved contrary (Front Line Defenders 2015). As a result, in October 2015, Hisham Almiraat, a co-founder of *Mamfakinch*, was later interrogated and charged with "threatening national security," along with six other activists and journalists (Front Line Defenders 2015). The move to send the spyware to *Mamfakinch* signified a shift in the Moroccan regime's strategy to countering and containing dissent through more covert means. It also marked a transformative moment where state surveillance would become a major tool to manage and silence dissent, with the Moroccan state spending millions of dollars on surveillance software (Privacy International 2019). With surveillance emerging as a cornerstone of the state's policies, the security apparatus—comprised of a number of entities, including the national police force, the judicial police, and intelligence services—grew in power and became more sophisticated. Sitting at the helm of this ballooning security apparatus was and remains Abdellatif Hammouchi; since 2011, he has emerged as one of the most powerful officials in the country, not only answering directly to the palace, but serving beyond the oversight of elected institutions.

Another major development that deepened the palace's authority was a series of legal reforms that pulled the public prosecution process away from the Ministry of Justice to judiciary council appointed

by the king. Like elsewhere in the region, including Egypt, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and Syria, Morocco implemented a series of legal reforms tailored to increase the power of the monarchy as the country's executive branch. In April 2017, the palace appointed members of the Supreme Council of the Judiciary who would now oversee the prosecution process (Chentouf 2018). Previously, the public prosecutor operated under the oversight of the Ministry of Justice, which is generally led by an official from the winning political party. Not only did this measure serve as another measure that undermined the powers of elected institutions and officials, but like other palace-appointed bodies, meant that the lack of transparency would come to dominate the prosecution process. Supporters of the measure characterized it as an effort to depoliticize the prosecution process to ensure greater independence.

However, numerous cases, particularly related to the targeted harassment and arrests of journalists with independent publication *Akhbar al-Yaoum*, including the arrest of Taoufik Bouachrine, Hajar Raissouni, and Souleiman Raissouni, all suggest that the prosecution process remains heavily politicized (Human Rights Watch 2019; Committee to Protect Journalists 2019; The Chartered Institute of Journalists 2020). Since 2017, hundreds of activists and journalists have faced charges and arrests, as well as ordinary citizens expressing their political views: blogger Mohamed Taghra sentenced to prison in 2017, activist and video journalist Mohsen Athari held in solitary confinement in 2017, journalists Mohamed al-Asrihi and Hamid al-Mahdaoui sentenced to prison in 2018, activist Elmortada Iamrachen arrested in 2017, protest leader Nasser Zefzafi arrested in 2017, journalist Hajar Raissouni arrested in 2019, social media commentator Soufian al-Nguad sentenced to prison in 2019, NGO Racines dissolved in 2019, journalist Omar Radi arrested in 2019—and the list goes on. While these cases vary in the specificity of the charges, they all share the common thread of an enduring crackdown on political expression in Morocco. Most importantly, they undermine the claims that the 2017 prosecution reforms have granted greater independence to the judiciary. On the contrary, that these arrests targeting activists and journalists continued signify that the palace maintains a chokehold on political expression. These cases, especially the ones targeting journalists, also demonstrate the duplicity of the Moroccan legal system. Whereas the 2016 reforms in the press code abolished prison sentences for journalists, the penal code upholds jail sentences in vaguely written articles

that judges have continuously cited to justify the above charges (El-Rifae 2016).

Collectively, all of these measures reflect a monarchy driven by both an existential and material crisis over its future. Yet, despite these efforts, protests and dissent continued. Toward the end of October 2016, the northern port-city of Al-Hoceima became the epicenter of a renewed struggle between Moroccan people and the state. On the evening of October 28, 2016, dozens of witnesses watched as police confiscated the stock of fish vendor Mouhcine Fikri. In an effort to retrieve his seized fish, Fikri jumped into the back of a garbage truck, during which witnesses said police ordered the garbage truck driver to “crush him.” Fikri was instantly crushed to death. The gruesome incident, which was captured on video and widely disseminated on social media, sparked the beginnings of the HIRAK Movement, drawing regular protests across the northern Rif region and throughout the country for months. At the helm of the HIRAK Movement were several activists from Al-Hoceima, including Nasser Zefzafi and Nabil Ahamjik, who led marches and protests that drew the biggest number of participants since the February 20th Movement in 2011.

By May 2017, both Zefzafi and Ahamjik—along with hundreds of other participants—were arrested and eventually condemned to prison sentences of up to twenty years for “threatening national security,” in addition to other charges. Immediately following Fikri’s death, Moroccan authorities announced an investigation, resulting in the suspension of several officers. Initially, security forces stood on the sidelines of the protests, looking on as the numbers swelled by the thousands every week. After the HIRAK Movement released a detailed list of demands that included a cancer hospital, highway, university, and jobs, the Moroccan government began issuing statements branding the HIRAK activists as “separatists.” It was not until French President Emmanuel Macron delivered a press conference during an official visit to Rabat in June 2017 that Moroccans heard what King Mohammed VI had to say about the protests: “He [the king] wishes to appease the situation by responding to the movement’s demands and giving greater consideration to this region,” Macron told reporters. Later that month, the palace issued a statement deflecting blame to government ministers for the failure to implement long-promised development projects in Al-Hoceima. By October 2017, the king sacked a number of ministers and officials, including then Minister of Interior Mohammed Hassad, while Abdellatif Hammouchi, head of the intelligence agency

and police force, remained in his position (Lamlili 2017). Meanwhile, in Al-Hoceima, security forces unleashed a violent onslaught on protestors, resulting in dozens of injuries, including at least one death. Checkpoints stifled people's mobility and prevented both local and foreign journalists from entering the area to cover the ongoing developments. Despite the mounting state violence, King Mohammed VI repeatedly singled out the security forces, praising them for their "restraint," while slamming and deflecting responsibility of the crisis to elected officials and bodies (Human Rights Watch 2017).

What all of these expressions of dissent represent are the aspirations of a Moroccan public whose visions for a more prosperous future remain incompatible with monarchy's aim of regime stability and sustenance. Despite mounting state repression, mobilization has continued to color the political landscape in Morocco, even well after 2011. Drawing from past experiences, each new movement or campaign that emerges has developed new tactics to counter the state's watchful eye and forceful hand. Yet, just as these protests continue to evolve, so too has the state's response, signifying not just an impasse, but a bleak future for political change in Morocco.

### **Conclusion: Visions for the Future**

Under King Mohammed VI, a surface reading would suggest that Morocco avoided the drastically turbulent outcomes of the Arab Spring that overthrew numerous leaders. In addition, and as Sarah Yerkes argues in her chapter, U.S. policy has enabled the monarchy to maintain a liberal façade without having implemented genuine democratic reforms. Through a combination of measured reforms that gave the appearance of change and a firm grip on dissent, it is not Morocco that emerged unscathed, but the monarchy. As the head of a family that has ruled Morocco for over three centuries, King Mohammed VI has primarily been concerned with one aim above all else: survival. To make sense of the past few years and to consider the possibilities of the future struggle for political change in Morocco, the positivist vision of a Morocco marching on a path toward democratic progress conceals the machinations of another reality. Instead, it is more useful to consider these recent developments as part of a dialectical process, with a monarchy driven by the aim of survival on the one hand, and a population that remains disenchanting with the status quo on the other hand.

It is the pushes and pulls of this dialectical process that has driven these political developments since 2011 and will be the driving force for the years to come.

If we consider these recent political developments as products of a dialectical process between two seemingly divergent visions for Morocco's future, the question that remains is what is the threshold of state violence and economic hardship that the Moroccan population is willing to endure and for how long? One of the rallying cries for the protests that have emerged after 2011 has been *hogra*, a word whose meaning embodies the lack of dignity. For many ordinary Moroccans, *hogra* has come to incorporate the totality of political, economic, and social circumstances that continue to strengthen and enrich the monarchy at the expense of the Moroccan population. As time goes on, not only will the sentiment of *hogra* continue to mount, but as it grows, Moroccans will have less and less to lose. For those capable, emigration remains the most common recourse, with nearly 10 percent of the Moroccan population residing abroad (de Haas and Vezzoli 2010). However, stricter migration laws have increasingly stifled mobility for Moroccans trying to enter the European Union, United States, and elsewhere. Even Morocco itself has actively prevented Moroccans from leaving the country, as was exemplified with the case of Hayat Belkacem, a young law student who was killed by the Royal Moroccan Navy as she was trying to emigrate to Spain in October 2018 (Errazzouki 2018).

Between a monarchy primarily concerned with survival and stricter migration laws, the monarchy will find that the costs of authoritarian regime stability will continue to mount as patience dwindles and people have nothing left to lose. Ironically, it was these circumstances that have been cited as explanations for why the Arab Spring began and which the Moroccan monarchy has been quick to dismiss. So long as the monarchy continues to approach dissent and grievances with the aim of maintaining and strengthening its supremacy as opposed to a genuine diffusion of power, the possibility of unrest will always loom ahead.

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### 3 | Kuwait's Changing Landscape

#### Palace Projects and the Decline of Rule by Consensus

*Farah Al-Nakib*

When the first cases of COVID-19 were discovered in Kuwait in late February 2020, the government took several decisive steps to stop the spread of the virus, being the first country in the world to completely shut down its borders. The regional director of the World Health Organization praised Kuwait's response to the pandemic (Al-Diqbasi 2020), which by mid-May, according to Kuwaiti political analyst Bader Al-Saif, seemed to "have restored the trust of many Kuwaitis in their executive branch" (Al-Saif 2020). Often referred to simply as "the government," the executive (consisting of the amir, crown prince, and prime minister—all members of the ruling Al Sabah family—as well as the council of ministers) has been mired in a series of political conflicts and crises over the past decade, from the forced resignation of one prime minister in 2011 to the resignation of another just two months before the coronavirus hit. But by May 2020, while appearing to swiftly shepherd the country through the pandemic, the leadership seemed to be "living its best days in years" (Al-Saif 2020).

Those days in the sun for the Kuwaiti leadership, however, were short-lived. Far from containing the virus, by July 2020 Kuwait was one of the world's worst coronavirus hotspots, and remained so for the subsequent year (Leatherby 2020). Kuwait is also facing a severe economic crisis triggered by the closure of the economy and the simultaneous drop in oil prices. Kuwait remains heavily dependent on oil and has done little to diversify its economy beyond its two main sovereign wealth funds: the General Reserve Fund (GRF) and Future Generations Fund. In July 2020, the government asked the elected Parliament

to approve a debt law that would allow it to borrow up to 20 billion dinars (65 billion dollars) over 30 years from international debt markets to finance the government deficit; during the pandemic, Kuwait had rapidly depleted its GRF to plug the deficit. Lawmakers criticized the government for not being transparent on how they would both spend and repay the borrowed funds. Debt obligations normally lead to austerity measures, which in Kuwait would likely mean the introduction of taxes, cuts to public sector wages, reduced welfare benefits, and raised utility prices (Hagagy 2020). The debt law—which has been on the agenda since 2018 and at the time of publication is yet to be passed—has therefore met with staunch resistance from members of Parliament, whose constituents are accustomed to cradle-to-grave welfare benefits that they are loath to relinquish, even as the country's economy flounders. In September 2020, the credit agency Moody's Investor Service downgraded Kuwait's rating by two notches, citing the absence of legal authorization to issue debt and the depletion of the country's liquid resources. The agency also said that the “fractious relationship” and ongoing deadlock between Kuwait's government and Parliament “point to more significant deficiencies in Kuwait's legislative and executive institutions and policy effectiveness than previously assessed” (Reuters 2020).

Kuwait's rulers have historically drawn their political legitimacy—both domestically and internationally—from their ability to govern by consensus and in consultation with the public, and with a healthy tolerance for opposition and criticism. However, the current crisis surrounding the debt law is the latest installment in an ongoing conflict between the executive and legislative branches that has resulted in systemic stagnation over the past 15 years, particularly in areas like economic diversification and urban development. Government-issued reforms have for years been consistently met with parliamentary opposition, resistance, and obstruction, resulting in a perennial “absence of consensus between the government and the assembly” that permanently hinders the passage of government-initiated laws, at the forefront of which is the public debt law (Abdelsattar 2020). The government's inability to obtain parliamentary support for the debt law, so critical to shoring up the country's collapsing economy, exposes just how far the leadership's capacity to foster a sense of consensus and unity between the rulers and the ruled, even during a national crisis, has waned. While much blame for this deadlock is placed on the legislature, the government has also demonstrated a growing intolerance

for political dissent in recent years, finding procedural loopholes to block opposition lawmakers and using its executive powers to regularly suspend the Parliament, even changing the electoral law—all of which fuel resentment and intensify the obstinacy of the legislature. Furthermore, parliamentary suspicions of government spending are not ill-founded, as multiple corruption scandals implicating high-level government officials, including prominent members of the ruling Al Sabah family, have emerged in recent years, exposing millions of dinars in embezzled or misspent public funds. Years of political bickering, mistrust, and corruption have significantly eroded public trust in both the government and in the political system as a whole, and many in Kuwait see this political stand-off as the primary reason the country has fallen so significantly behind its Gulf neighbors in economic, urban, and cultural development.

Against the background of the collapse in the Al Sabah-led government's capacity and will to govern by consensus and its growing intolerance toward participatory modes of governance, this chapter examines how Kuwait's rulers have begun to seek alternative methods and spaces beyond the formal political sphere to regain public confidence. To do so, the regime seems to be looking to other Gulf countries like Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates for ways to centralize power in executive hands, albeit without explicitly eliminating the one element that positively sets Kuwait apart from those countries: its publicly elected Parliament. The Diwan al-Amiri, the ruler's office that serves as the head of the executive branch, has instead found ways to bypass the Parliament to launch major development projects that significantly enhance Kuwait's public image. Specifically, the Diwan established the Kuwait National Cultural District (KNCD), consisting of a massive public park, a large center for the performing arts, and an enormous museum complex, which collectively surpassed every public project constructed in the country's history in scale and quality. Such palace-driven urbanism is common in the southern Gulf states, where rulers have used architectural mega-projects to inscribe their power, sovereignty, and vision onto the city and the nation. But in Kuwait—the region's only constitutional monarchy—since the advent of oil in the 1950s public sector institutions such as the municipality (rather than the rulers) have steered urban projects, resulting in slower and less extravagant urbanization. By mimicking the approach of their regional counterparts, the Diwan established the KNCD unilaterally without the consultation of Parliament or participation of

public sector institutions—that is, without the political consensus necessary to plan major projects, and without the oversight, transparency, and accountability required to implement them. However, by focusing on seemingly apolitical “soft power” projects such as gardens, museums, and cultural centers, the Diwan has garnered significant public satisfaction and little resistance to its new role in urban development. This has given the Diwan implicit public consent, and political leverage, to expand into other realms such as healthcare, sports, and tourism—all spheres that traditionally fall under the purview of government institutions that are checked by the legislature. Kuwait is thus discretely yet briskly moving toward a more personalized form of authoritarian governance akin to that of its Gulf neighbors, even as government ministers and elected lawmakers continue to battle it out in the traditional spaces of the “politics of permanent deadlock” (Allarakia and Albloshi 2021).

### **Governance by Consensus**

Kuwait stands apart from its neighbors as the sole Gulf monarchy with a popularly elected Parliament that serves as an actual law-making (rather than just advisory) body. The country’s democratic tendencies are inscribed in its origin myths. According to popular tradition, in 1752, the founding settlers of Kuwait selected Sabah I from among the heads of the main families to govern the community, while the merchants provided the town revenues. Because of the financial dependence of the rulers on the merchants, the Al Sabah governed in consultation with the town notables. This notion that the Al Sabah were chosen by the people and governed by consensus and with accountability has historically been key to establishing the ruling family’s legitimacy. Both the public and the rulers draw on this history to safeguard their respective positions in power-sharing. Though the advent of oil in the late 1940s gave the rulers the financial autonomy to establish a powerful state, the Al Sabah retained their convention and will to govern by consensus. In 1962, the ruler Abdullah Al-Salem called elections for a Constituent Assembly to draft the newly independent country’s Constitution, and in 1963 Kuwait’s first Parliament was elected. The Constitution established Kuwait’s system of government as democratic based on the “separation and cooperation of powers” between three branches: executive, legislative, and judicial. The executive branch

consists of the amir (and his heir apparent, the crown prince), the prime minister (appointed by the amir, also a member of the Al Sabah), and the cabinet of ministers appointed by the prime minister (only some of whom are Al Sabah). The National Assembly (Parliament) is elected by Kuwaiti citizens over the age of 21. Members of the ruling family are constitutionally barred from running in elections, though they serve and vote in Parliament as cabinet members. The prime minister and all ministers can be held to votes of no confidence by the Parliament.

The Constitution thus institutionalized the traditional power-sharing between the rulers and the ruled, though this balance has not gone unchallenged. From as early as the second election in 1967, allegations of government interference and ballot fraud tarnished Kuwait's nascent democratic institutions, and in 1976, the ruler Sabah Al-Salem dissolved Parliament unconstitutionally (meaning that new elections were not held within 60 days), which remained defunct until 1981. The assembly was again dissolved unconstitutionally in 1986, and by the summer of 1990, on the eve of the Iraqi occupation, the country's democracy came under serious threat. After weeks of aggressive popular protests demanding the restoration of the Constitution, the ruler Jaber Al-Ahmed called elections for a transitional consultative council to propose controls for a future parliamentary process. The opposition boycotted the June elections, fearing the council would amend the Constitution to give more power to the rulers, but the body never met due to the Iraqi invasion that August.

With the Al Sabah government overthrown and in exile in Saudi Arabia, the invasion provided the opportunity for the restoration of democracy in Kuwait. In October 1990, the founding pact between the Al Sabah and the Kuwaiti people was reinstated when Crown Prince Saad Al-Abdullah met with leading opposition figures in Jeddah and promised the restitution of the Constitution and National Assembly after the liberation. In a March 1991 article, opposition leader Ahmed Al-Nafisi made the stakes of that promise clear. "Stability can only be restored and reconstruction initiated," he wrote, "if the Al Sabah family is joined by the Kuwaiti resistance and the democratic movement. To attempt to exclude these forces from power is to choose a path toward even more social turmoil, and possibly civil war." He reminded the "tribal lords" who had just "returned from their luxury hotels in Taif" that the constitution "says that sovereignty resides in the people, and the people are the source of all power—including the appointment of

the emir.” He also reinforced that the government was accountable to the Parliament, and that “all the emir’s powers must be approved by the parliament” (Al-Nafisi 1991). In other words, the amir was to restore democracy by reconvening the elected Parliament, and in return the Parliament of the people would recognize the amir as their legitimate ruler once more. The 1962 Constitution and the National Assembly were eventually restored in 1992. Although Jaber Al-Ahmed dissolved the Parliament in 1999, he did so constitutionally with new elections held within 60 days. In 2003, the positions of crown prince and prime minister were separated, making the latter no longer protected by law from public criticism. The willingness to subject the prime minister to parliamentary scrutiny acknowledged “that the government relies on parliamentary support” for its legitimacy, and for the Al Sabah to govern by consensus (Herb 2014, 4).

Although Kuwait’s rulers have not always demonstrated an absolute affinity for constitutional democracy, the Al Sabah have historically tolerated a higher level of criticism and opposition to their rule than any of their regional counterparts. Kuwait has had free and independent newspapers and active civil society organizations since the 1950s, serving as the mouthpieces for diverse opposition groups calling for social, political, and economic reform. Except during the two periods when it was unconstitutionally suspended, members of Parliament have used their legislative powers to not only check and balance the power of the executive branch but also to condemn and investigate corruption among government officials, including members of the ruling family. MPs use interpellations, or “grillings,” of ministers, government officials, and the prime minister—which can lead to votes of no confidence—as powerful tools with which to express their opposition to government policies and practices.

One key point of political debate in Kuwaiti oppositional politics has been the question of electoral districts. Historically, popular support has favored fewer districts with larger constituencies to minimize the government’s ability to buy off MPs to vote in its favor, whereas the government has preferred a higher number of districts with smaller constituencies. When the Parliament was established in 1963, Kuwait was divided into ten districts with five deputies each. In 1981, Jaber Al-Ahmed increased the number of districts to 25 with two deputies each. In April 2006, after Sabah Al-Ahmed came to power, a ministerial committee concluded that the ideal electoral solution for Kuwait was five districts with ten deputies each. When it became clear that the govern-



ment was instead pushing the Constitutional Court to adopt a ten-district proposal, young citizen bloggers launched an anti-government protest movement called “Nabeeha 5” (“We Want It 5”) that attracted thousands of citizens to demonstrations opposed to the measure. Opposition MPs submitted a no confidence motion against the Prime Minister for the first time in Kuwait’s history. In the midst of the unprecedented crisis unfolding on the streets and in the assembly chamber, the amir dissolved Parliament on May 20, 2006. New elections were held that June, with candidates supporting five districts winning an overwhelming majority. In July, the new Parliament approved an electoral reform law reducing the number of voting districts to five.

Redistricting forever transformed oppositional politics inside the walls of Parliament. A higher number of anti-government MPs won seats in 2006, and frequent stand-offs between deputies and ministers ultimately led the amir to dissolve the assembly in 2008 to break the deadlock. The May 2008 elections were the first in which the five-district system came into effect, resulting in more seats for tribal candidates. Though historically, tribes had been used by the government as political allies, the fact that tribal deputies now represented such sizeable constituencies made it difficult for the government to buy them off (Etheridge 2009). This resulted in a substantial increase in parliamentary grillings of cabinet ministers. In response, as Luai Allarakia and Hamad Albloshi note, “Since 2009 the government has been increasingly exploiting vague articles in the constitution, and the National Assembly’s internal rules of procedure to block or delay legislation and oversight by the National Assembly, causing battles over the interpretation of the articles with the opposition.” Both the speaker of the National Assembly and the Constitutional Court tend to interpret these rules in favor of the government. The opposition’s frustration with its inability to legislate has, in turn, led to “an overzealous utilization of oversight tools,” namely repeated interpellations of ministers and votes of no confidence (Allarakia and Albloshi 2021). This stand-off between the government and the Parliament has led to successive dissolutions, early elections, and cabinet reshuffles, all of which have “paralyzed political life and delayed key economic reforms” (Laessing and El Gamal 2008). As Allarakia and Albloshi put it, the endemic deadlock and stasis plaguing Kuwait’s political and economic development is therefore caused not only by “conflict over policy” between the rulers and the ruled, or the government and the Parliament, but also by “disputes over the rules of the game” (Allarakia and Albloshi 2021).

## The Political Crises of 2010–13

The post-2006 period saw numerous political reforms that further catalyzed a change in oppositional politics beyond the walls of Parliament, the confluence of which rapidly eroded the Al Sabah rulers' capacity and will to govern by consensus. The law of associations was expanded to allow for the registration of new civil society organizations for the first time since the 1960s, while a court ruling found the restrictions imposed by the 1979 Public Gatherings Law, which required gatherings of more than 20 people to obtain a police permit, unconstitutional. A 2006 Press and Publications Law permitted the opening of private television stations for the first time ever, as well as new private newspapers for the first time since the 1960s, immediately exposing the Kuwaiti public to even more political views, discussions, and debates, both pro- and anti-government. When a brief succession crisis in early 2006 led to the monopolization of most government positions by one branch of the Al Sabah, public infighting between, and criticism of, members of the ruling family became commonplace in the private media, intensified by the proliferation of blogs and other social media networks. It was in this context that the government began to suppress political dissent in the public sphere.

In 2010, prominent Kuwaiti journalist Mohammed Abdulqader Al-Jassem—who had criticized the prime minister on his blog for allowing Iranian intelligence to interfere in Kuwaiti politics—was arrested on charges of defamation, “instigating to overthrow the regime,” making a “slight to the personage of the Amir,” and “instigating to dismantle the foundations of Kuwaiti society,” all of which are forbidden by Kuwait's Press and Publications Law (Human Rights Watch 2010). Around the same time, an oppositional MP revealed that a check for the amount of 200,000 Kuwaiti dinars had been signed by the prime minister for a member of Parliament the previous year (an alleged pay-off for voting in the government's favor). When the government attempted to lift the whistleblowing MP's immunity in order to bring charges against him for disclosing this information, tribal, Islamist, and liberal MPs created the Constitution Bloc to defend constitutional and civil liberties. On December 8, 2010, the Bloc held a meeting at a private residence that was violently dispersed by baton-wielding special forces. The anti-government campaign grew significantly in the early months of 2011 amid uprisings across the Arab world, with large youth-led protests held in Sahat al-Irada (Determination Square) across from the Parlia-

ment building. The opposition called for the resignation of Prime Minister Nasser Al-Mohammed Al-Sabah as charges of political and financial corruption mounted against him. By September it was found that up to 16 MPs, over 30 percent of the legislature, had allegedly received funds (totaling millions of dollars) from the prime minister in exchange for supporting government policies. When the Constitutional Court blocked Parliament's attempt to question the prime minister over the scandal, around a hundred protestors, including opposition MPs like Musallam Al-Barrak, stormed and occupied the National Assembly building. On November 28, Nasser Al-Mohammed finally resigned as tens of thousands of Kuwaitis came out in massive protests. In December, Amir Sabah Al-Ahmed dissolved Parliament and new elections were held in February 2012, in which opposition tribal and Islamist candidates won a landslide of 34 seats. After four turbulent months, the Constitutional Court annulled the February elections on a technicality and reinstated the dissolved Parliament. The reinstated Parliament never convened, as the majority of MPs boycotted sessions, and on October 7, the amir once again dissolved the assembly. New elections were called for December 2012.

In the meantime, on October 19, one day before announcing when new elections would be held, the amir passed a decree amending the electoral law by reducing the number of votes cast by each citizen from four to one, supposedly to eliminate electoral corruption and vote buying. Two days later, tens of thousands of demonstrators gathered along the Arabian Gulf Road to protest the amiri decree; they were tear gassed by government forces. According to the Constitution, all amiri decrees must be voted into law by Parliament. However, the "one-man, one-vote" decree was to be put into effect *during* the December elections *before* the newly elected assembly could vote on it. Most opposition leaders and thousands of citizens boycotted the elections in protest. The following June the Constitutional Court, while upholding the amiri decree, once again annulled the December assembly and new elections were held in July 2013, which most of the opposition again boycotted.

In the turbulent wake of these political crises, the government clamped down on journalists and online activists for criticizing the amir, prosecuting at least 35 individuals between October 2012 and July 2013 in a "new and worrying trend" for a country that "used to be viewed as the most tolerant of free speech in the region, a standard that

is being quickly eroded” (Wille 2013). Though the amir eventually granted amnesty to anyone convicted of insulting him, Freedom House accurately reported in 2014 that given “an atmosphere of increased governmental intolerance toward critical reporting, journalists on all platforms continue to practice self-censorship, as failure to do so often results in reprisals” (Freedom House 2014).

Kuwait's rulers historically rested their legitimacy on their ability to rule with public consent, cooperation, and consensus, and on their willingness to be held accountable to the citizenry and their elected officials. But the multiple crises between 2010 and 2013—the mass public protests, the forced resignation of Nasser Al-Mohammed, the amir's use of his executive powers to change the electoral law, the multiple dissolutions and annulments of Parliament (including the 2013 assembly which was dissolved in 2016), the unprecedented government crackdowns on freedom of assembly and expression—suggested that the old social contract between the rulers and the ruled, established in 1752 and reinstated in 1990, was deteriorating. The crises—particularly the ousting of the prime minister—not only eroded the impression of consensus and legitimacy that long characterized Al Sabah rule in Kuwait, but also compromised the domestic and global image of the Al Sabah as an avant-garde royal family historically hospitable to criticism, accountability, and open political debate, unlike their regional counterparts.

### Corruption Scandals

Despite these setbacks to Kuwait's constitutional democracy, the country remains the most politically advanced of all the GCC states. Nonetheless, many elite Kuwaitis have felt that, as expressed in a 2007 front-page headline in *Al-Qabas* newspaper, “The Kuwaiti way of practicing democracy blocks development” (as quoted in Herb, 2014, 7). Although from the 1950s to the early 1980s, Kuwait was the Gulf's pioneer in economic growth, education, healthcare, and urban development, since the 1990s, Kuwait has seemingly been surpassed by its southern Gulf neighbors. Many blame the backlog in development programs on incessant parliamentary investigations into state contracts awarded to private sector companies, government financial dealings, and ministerial appointments. As Michael Herb argues:

Concerns about corruption are a sign of progress in Kuwait toward a different model of economic development [from its Gulf counterparts], one that better serves the interests of the middle class rather than the economic and political elite. In Kuwait, the National Assembly has worked hard to establish the norm that the wealth of the state should be distributed through a regular process governed by law. This effort, however, is far from complete. What has emerged is a political dynamic in which the National Assembly, to avoid corruption, blocks most initiatives put forward by the government for fear that the benefits will go disproportionately, and unfairly, to the traditional economic elite. (Herb 2014, 143)

Kuwait's Parliament is regularly accused by the elite classes of hindering private sector development, blocking privatization of state institutions like Kuwait Airways, and limiting the country's capacity for economic diversification away from oil dependency, focusing instead on securing "direct handouts to Kuwaiti citizens in order to pander to the electorate" (Hertog 2010, 287). Oppositional tactics such as parliamentary interpellations and investigations are not simply motivated by political ideology or ambition, but are significantly underpinned by class conflict—specifically, between merchant elites who control the private sector and the majority of the population who are state employees and dominate the bureaucracy. While members of the capitalist class regularly hold key positions in ministries related to their economic interests, they do not traditionally occupy numerous seats in Parliament. By contrast, members of the "publicly employed middle class" whose incomes rely directly on oil revenues constitute the majority of voters and are therefore well represented in Parliament (Herb 2014, 4).

One major difference between Kuwait and its Arab Gulf neighbors is that the Al Sabah are not autonomous when it comes to economic decision-making. This has resulted in the absence of state-owned enterprises (SOEs) so common in the UAE, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia: "sleek, profit-and market-oriented public companies" financed by state oil revenues (Hertog 2010, 262). Though state-funded, such enterprises—construction firms, real estate developers, airlines, ports, telecommunications companies—function like private businesses in that they generate a profit. Without public participation in economic decision-making, the regime has the autonomy to decide how to allo-

cate and redistribute those profits, as they do with oil revenues. Kuwait's government has attempted to set up similar publicly funded SOEs, particularly large-scale industry, infrastructure, and logistics projects. However, parliamentary fears that such enterprises may "threaten domestic distributional interests" have resulted in severe delays (Herzog 2010, 287).

While parliamentary oversight ensures that major economic decisions serve the public interest, the ongoing challenge to Kuwait's development has been that, as Herzog argues, "Deputies in the National Assembly tend to see corruption in every single contract, and the safe default position for bureaucrats is to do nothing—and that, in fact, is what they often do" (Herzog 2014, 144). However, hindrances to Kuwait's development cannot be solely pinned on the legislature, as fears of corruption in government financial deals are often well-founded. As early as 1965 the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD) reported that conflicts of interest among civil servants existed at all levels of the state bureaucracy, noting the absence of a clear-cut separation between public duty and private interest. High-ranking government officials, many from merchant families, were found to be "actively participating in commercial and other private activities," taking advantage of conditions favorable to their personal enterprises and awarding state contracts to their private companies or those of their associates—which still occurs today (IBRD 1965, 39). Nepotism and bribery also put people into government positions for which they are not qualified, which—coupled with a bloated bureaucracy in which people are assigned jobs on the basis of vacancy rather than knowledge or experience—further hinders development.

On November 6, 2019, hundreds of Kuwaitis demonstrated in Irada Square in response to a speech given by pro-government Speaker of the House Marzouq Al-Ghanim (one of the few members of Parliament from an elite merchant family), in which he "lashed out at what he said was gross exaggeration of the extent of corruption in Kuwait" (*Kuwait Times* 2019). The large turnout "pointed to the dissatisfaction of a large segment of Kuwaitis with the state of the country" and with the ongoing prevalence of corruption. In response to the public outcry, three ministers were interpellated (Al-Saif 2019a). The minister of finance resigned before his grilling, while the minister of public works and minister of state for housing affairs resigned after she faced a post-grilling vote of no-confidence. The third was Interior Minister Khalid Al-Jarrah Al-Sabah, whose interpellation also ended with a no-

confidence motion that could have led to his dismissal, which “would have symbolically undermined the ruling family.” Prime Minister Jaber Al-Mubarak’s cabinet therefore resigned before the no-confidence vote (Al-Saif 2019a). While this all seemed like Kuwaiti politics-as-usual, a twist occurred when Minister of Defense Nasser Al-Sabah Al-Ahmed, the amir’s eldest son who passed away in December 2020, publicly alleged that the real reason behind the cabinet’s resignation was his discovery of 790 million dollars in defense funds that allegedly disappeared under Khalid Al-Jarrah, who had been defense minister from 2013 to 2017. A public feud between the two Al Sabah figures escalated in “open media warfare” and implicated other former defense ministers, including Prime Minister Jaber Al-Mubarak (who held the defense position from 2001 to 2011), who stepped down to focus on proving his innocence (Al-Saif 2019a). The amir appointed Sabah Al-Khalid in his place. But as Bader Al-Saif argued a week after the appointment of a new cabinet in December 2019:

The formation of a new government under a new prime minister may temporarily soothe the political landscape. However, it will not, on its own, undo Kuwait’s cyclical crises. Addressing the root causes of these crises, as well as the corruption and inefficiency prevailing in the country, along with taking stock of an unchanged, half-century-old political system that is in need of a facelift, will be the first steps toward breaking the chain that reproduces similar crises. (Al-Saif 2019b)

Indeed, within the first three months of Sabah Al-Khalid’s government, two of his appointed ministers resigned. Meanwhile, the defense scandal escalated in July 2020 when the U.S. Justice Department filed a series of lawsuits to recover more than 100 million dollars allegedly embezzled by three unnamed former high-level Kuwaiti defense officials and transferred to California bank accounts connected to convicted felon Victorino Noval. Khalid Al-Jarrah had filed a lawsuit in 2019 against Noval and his sons for allegedly defrauding him in the sale of “possibly the world’s premier chunk of real estate” in Beverly Hills (Salama 2020b). Although federal investigators have associated that property, among others, with the Kuwaiti defense funds laundered through U.S. banks, Al-Jarrah’s U.S.-based attorney says his client denies any wrongdoing (Solis 2020; Leitereg and Flemming 2020). Meanwhile, also in July 2020, Sabah Al-Jaber Al-Mubarak—the son of

the former prime minister who resigned in November 2019—was arrested for money laundering in connection to the Malaysian Development Berhad (1MBD) scandal. 1MBD allegedly stole billions of dollars in Malaysian state funds, transferred into the accounts of that country's former Prime Minister Najib Raza and his associate Jho Low, who had close ties to Sabah Al-Jaber and his companies in Kuwait (Al-Mulla 2020b). It is not only members of the Al Sabah who have been connected to major corruption scandals in recent months. Several Kuwaiti officials, including two MPs, have been accused of involvement with a Bangladeshi parliamentarian, Mohammad Shahid Islam, who was arrested in Kuwait in June 2020 on charges of human trafficking and money laundering. Islam allegedly confessed to paying millions of dollars in bribes to Kuwaiti officials in exchange for contracts to employ Bangladeshi workers in government agencies (Salama 2020a). In 2019, Kuwait slipped on Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index from 35th in rank in 2003 to 85th out of 180 countries. In early July 2020, then-Amir Sabah Al-Ahmed lamented that Kuwait was being portrayed in the media as “a breeding ground for corruption” (Al-Mulla 2020a). What distinguishes these corruption scandals from the norm is the extremely high international profile of some of the cases, which tarnish the reputation of not only the government but specifically the Al Sabah family both domestically and globally. Though the aforementioned scandals have only recently come to light, systemic corruption at all levels of government coupled with the leadership's inability to govern coherently, manage sustainable development, and steer the country toward economic, social, and political stability have been incipient for years leading up to this calamitous moment, slowly chipping away at the old social contract and political consensus between the rulers and the ruled.

In the midst of this corruption crisis, Amir Sabah Al-Ahmed died on September 29, 2020 and was succeeded by his brother Nawaf Al-Ahmed Al-Sabah. According to Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, “There had been hopes that Kuwait's smooth leadership transition would herald a new and more consensual approach to politics . . . some expectation of a ‘détente’ that might draw a line under the fractious relationship that opposition figures had with Emir Sabah, dating back to political upheaval in 2011–12” (Ulrichsen 2021). However, the December 2020 parliamentary elections swiftly evaporated “any initial sense of goodwill” between the government and opposition lawmakers (Ulrichsen 2021). Fighting corruption was the main theme of the elections, which



saw opposition candidates win 24 of 50 seats in the legislature. Despite the disapproval of a majority of MPs, Marzouq Al-Ghanim—“a key figure in aligning the legislative branch in deference to the ruling family-led executive since 2013,” and whose downplaying of corruption resulted in mass protests in late 2019—was re-elected as speaker with the help of votes from *ex officio* cabinet members (Allarakia and Albloshi 2021). This reignited the conflict between the government and elected lawmakers. By early January 2021, three MPs put forward a motion, supported by 36 others, to question Prime Minister Sabah Al-Khalid over his formation of a cabinet “not reflective” of election results and over allegations of government “interference” in the election of Al-Ghanim (Aljazeera 2021). A week later, the cabinet resigned in protest over the grilling, due to take place the following week. In February, the new amir used his executive power to postpone the opening session of Parliament by one month in an effort to defuse tensions. In March 2021, the prime minister selected a new cabinet, swapping out four contentious ministers in “an apparent gesture to appease Parliament” (Ulrichsen 2021). But later that month the Constitutional Court nullified the parliamentary membership of Bader Al-Dahoum, one of the three MPs who submitted the motion against the prime minister, on the basis that his 2014 conviction for insulting the former amir made him ineligible to run for office. In response, 30 opposition lawmakers boycotted the swearing-in session on March 30, during which the largely pro-government remainder ruled to postpone any questioning of the prime minister until 2022 (Freer 2021).

Since then, Kuwaiti opposition MPs intent on questioning the prime minister—on the constitutionality of that ruling, the government’s handling of the coronavirus pandemic, and the aforementioned corruption scandals—have developed a new strategy of obstructing parliamentary sessions by sitting in seats reserved for ministers, a gesture indicating they do not consider the current government to be legitimate (Hagagy 2021). The government’s refusal to be held accountable to elected officials over massive corruption scandals has pushed the antagonistic relationship between the legislative and executive branches of government to unprecedented levels, which in turn has pushed the latter to turn against its historic tendency to rule by consensus. As Allarakia and Albloshi correctly claim, the ongoing political crisis cannot be resolved without serious reforms such as the removal of loopholes in parliamentary rules of procedure and the participation of the Parliament in appointing members of the Constitutional Court

(Allarakia and Albloshi 2021). Though such reforms would make Kuwait's political system more democratic (as they would mean that "legislation [would] not hinge solely on the desire and goodwill of the executive"), they require the rulers to willfully relinquish their own sources of power and leverage over the legislature, something they show no intention of doing (Allarakia and Albloshi 2021). And so, while maintaining the stagnant status quo inside the traditional halls of government, the regime has found alternative ways of enhancing its power outside of the traditional spaces of politics-as-usual in Kuwait.

### Palace Urbanism

It is in this context that the Amiri Diwan-led Kuwait National Cultural District, which emerged immediately after the political crisis subsided in 2013, must be analyzed. Since 2015, the KNCD projects have revealed the capacity of the rulers to develop Kuwait in ways that the Parliament and other public institutions have never been able to do, while also helping to restore the liberal progressive image of the ruling family in the public arena, outside the archaic realm of Kuwait's politics of perpetual deadlock. Urban development has always served as a prominent and tangible realm through which Gulf states have asserted their legitimacy and authority, a process Kuwait began in the 1950s. Throughout the first decades of oil modernization, the pre-oil port town was demolished en masse to make way for a new capital city planned and built by the state that would serve as the ultimate symbol of Kuwait's newfound prosperity and progress. Whereas in the first two decades of oil, state-funded urban development primarily served the needs of the citizenry (water desalination plants, public housing, schools, and hospitals), after the 1973 oil boom, the government concentrated on the construction of state buildings designed by world-renowned modernist architects that inscribed the newfound independence and legitimacy of the state (though not specifically the rulers) onto the city (Al-Nakib 2013). After the Iraqi occupation, however, Kuwait City stagnated as reconstruction hindered new development plans, and by the late 1990s, the United Arab Emirates, followed by Qatar and now increasingly Saudi Arabia, took the limelight away from Kuwait. Rulers like Dubai's Rashid bin Maktoum turned their cities into spatial manifestations not just of modern state-building but of their own personal grand and futuristic visions, investing in major "vanity projects" (museums, sports facili-

ties, luxury resorts, etc.) designed to “make their mark on the world” (Herb 2014, 6). For instance, Ahmed Kanna examines how the enormous Palm Jebel Ali project “is literally an expression of the sovereignty of the absolute monarch, Muhammad bin Rashid,” with a land barrier even built in the shape of the Arabic script of one of the ruler’s poems. Through such projects, Gulf ruling families have drawn substantial domestic and international prestige with “monumental, propagandist intent” (Kanna 2013, 125).

In the aftermath of the political crises of the early 2010s, it is not surprising that this kind of “authoritarian development” model might have become enticing for Kuwait’s rulers—who until then had never been directly involved in urban development except through private sector companies—as a way of restoring their own image and legitimacy (Herb 2014, 143). Kuwait’s public sector, which falls under the auspices of the Council of Ministers, has been plagued by ongoing systemic shortcomings due to government corruption, stagnation from incessant political standoffs, and general mismanagement that have thwarted state efforts to create the kind of city that would give Kuwait, and its leadership, the progressive image it has sought for decades. A prime example of the significant deficiencies of public sector development is Kuwait University’s new Shedadiya campus. The enormous 490-hectare site—which intends to consolidate six of KU’s 17 colleges—has taken over 18 years (with multiple delays) and 10 billion dollars to construct, and though it opened in September 2019, it is still not complete.

But rather than invest in public sector reform to improve the capacity of state institutions to plan, construct, and manage major public projects for Kuwait, the Diwan al-Amiri has instead adopted what Hertog describes as a “second-best development strategy”: the construction of isolated “islands of efficiency” (Hertog 2010, 263), specifically the sites that make up the Kuwait National Cultural District. Whereas the major architectural projects of the 1970s and ’80s symbolized the sovereignty and modernity of the state and the nation, these new sites inscribe the autonomy and progressivism of the Al Sabah rulers themselves onto the cityscape. The first to open in 2015 was Al-Shaheed Park, a 200,000 square meter (and growing) park consisting of botanical gardens, a lake, walkways and jogging tracks, two museums, a multipurpose auditorium, an amphitheater, and cafes and restaurants. The second phase opened in 2017 to include areas for skating, parkour, climbing, and other youth activities. The third phase is currently under

construction. Next to open in 2016 was the Jaber Al-Ahmed Cultural Center (JACC), a large center for the performing arts featuring multiple theaters and concert halls, a conference and convention center, and a large restaurant plaza with at least 18 different eateries. In 2018, the Abdullah Al-Salem Cultural Center (ASCC) opened, one of the world's largest cultural complexes housing a total of 22 galleries with over 1,100 exhibits, including a natural history museum, science and technology museum, an Islamic science museum, a space museum, a fine arts center, and a theater. Finally, in 2019, the Al-Salam Palace Museum (ASPM) opened in a renovated historic palace adjacent to the JACC, with two of three museum displays emphasizing the history of the Al Sabah in Kuwait.

The centers of the KNCD are all financed by the Diwan al-Amiri (described on the JACC website as “the headquarters and the permanent centre of the country’s rulers”)—meaning that they are funded by Kuwait’s oil revenues that are allocated to the executive branch. But never before has the Diwan been directly involved in developing such major projects in Kuwait, and the centers are institutionally opaque and ambiguous. By being conceived, financed, built, and operated directly by the Diwan, the KNCD falls outside the jurisdiction of Kuwait’s public institutions that would normally be involved in the planning, construction, and operation of such state-led projects, such as the Parliament, Municipality, Ministry of Public Works, and National Council for Culture, Arts, and Letters. The KNCD centers are not public institutions as they are not governed by any public sector oversight (except for the State Audit Bureau which oversees the spending of state funds), nor are they private institutions as they are financed by state oil revenues. They are similar to SOEs in that some of the revenue they generate goes back to the Ministry of Finance, but other profits they generate go to private companies.

Contributing to their ambiguous status is their location on public land. Nearly 90 percent of Kuwait’s total land area is owned by the state and is considered a public resource. The allocation of public land for development normally comes under the purview of the legislature, which “jealously guards against what it sees as alienation of the national patrimony through sale to the private sector,” to ensure that public resources do not “further enrich the ruling family and the traditional merchant elite” (Herb 2014, 150, 182). The limited availability of real estate that *can* be developed by the private sector has resulted in exorbitantly high land values that serve as an impediment to economic

growth, with land speculation becoming more lucrative for private investors than development. The politics of the land market is therefore yet another point of contention between the capitalist class (supported by the government) and the Parliament that has stunted Kuwait's development. However, the Diwan al-Amiri has found a way to overcome this obstacle by "reclaiming" (a word used on the Al-Shaheed Park website) major plots of state land to be developed under the auspices of the executive branch, sidestepping the legislature, and providing opportunities for the private sector to profit from this development without parliamentary intervention or oversight. For example, the ASCC museums are located along the Arabian Gulf Road, southeast of Kuwait City in Sha'ab on the site of the demolished Abdullah Al-Salem High School, one of Kuwait's first post-oil public schools which in more recent years had been used as district offices by the Ministry of Education. Al-Shaheed Park is located along the former green belt that marks the landward perimeter of Kuwait City along the path of the old city wall demolished in 1957, where a derelict and unused public park previously existed. Not far from the former green belt, the JACC is located along the seafront on the western edge of Kuwait City. Though all of these projects are on public land that is technically unavailable for private profit without parliamentary approval, the Diwan has allowed private sector companies to open restaurants, cafes, and retail sites in all of the KNCD projects.

One of the sites that the JACC specifically appropriated for commercial use was a large, open space known as Flag Square or Sahat al-'Alam, which had previously been used for national celebrations and public rallies. This was the last remaining open public space in the city, as the historic Sahat al-Safat—an urban square historically used for political protests and where anti-government demonstrations were planned in January 2011—had been boarded up by the municipality for alleged renovations just as protestors occupied Cairo's Tahrir Square and Manama's Pearl Roundabout. When Sahat al-Safat was reopened in 2014, it was permanently gated and locked when not in official use (Al-Nakib 2014a). Flag Square, meanwhile, is now fully enclosed within the JACC, and is the site of an enormous musical fountain and the center's restaurant plaza. While the flagstaff remains and the space is still called Flag Square in the center's signage, all possibility for the future political appropriation of the large space has been completely eliminated—yet another sign of how the

KNCD reflects the regime's shift away from participatory politics in favor of the capitalist class that supports it.

For the design and construction of these centers, the Diwan was able to work outside the constraints of regular bureaucratic procedures, using their own preferred vendors as opposed to allowing all vendors in Kuwait to submit a project bid. All of the KNCD projects aside from Al-Shaheed Park were designed by the local firm SSH, one of Kuwait's oldest and most prolific master planning, design, and project management firms established in 1961. A majority of SSH is now owned by KIPCO, an investment holding company principally owned and chaired by Hamad Al-Sabah Al-Ahmed, the son of the previous amir. Being owned by a prominent member of the Al Sabah has not safeguarded KIPCO from parliamentary scrutiny; in 2006, for instance, Musallam Al-Barrak demanded that the KIPCO-owned Marina Mall, being built under a "build-operate-transfer" contract with the government, be canceled for "irregularities" (Herb 2014, 158–59).<sup>1</sup> Although principally owned by the ruler's son, KIPCO and its subsidiaries are private entities and their contracts with the *government* are fair game for legislative investigation. However, contracts between such private companies (Al Sabah owned or otherwise) and the *Diwan al-Amiri* fall outside of parliamentary jurisdiction. Construction contracts for the KNCD were awarded to major private firms like Al-Hani, Ahmadia, and Alghanim International without public oversight.

In terms of management, Al-Shaheed Park stands apart from the other KNCD projects. When the first phase of the park was completed in 2015, the Diwan handed over its management to the Lothan Youth Achievement Center (LoYAC), one of Kuwait's oldest non-governmental organizations dedicated, according to Al-Shaheed Park's website (<https://www.alshaheedpark.com/about/management/>), to empowering "youth to develop their professional skills, enhance their personal growth and to help them find their sense of purpose by extending themselves to others." LoYAC's young team is mainly responsible for organizing cultural and educational events and activities in the park

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1. The "build-operate-transfer" (BOT) mechanism was devised as a way to make public land available for private sector development in a manner more acceptable to Kuwaitis opposed to the sale of state land to private merchants. Through a BOT contract, a private company builds a project on state land, operates it for a fixed period to make a return on its investment (and, ideally, a profit), and then transfers the land and all buildings on it back to the state without compensation.

while “creating a platform that engages the community.” They also oversee the maintenance, cleanliness, and safety of the facilities. The handing over of the park’s management to Kuwait’s leading youth-based NGO can be directly linked to the opposition movement of the early 2010s. After the February 2012 elections—which produced the most oppositional assembly in the country’s history—the Diwan established a National Youth Project (NYP) to address the needs of Kuwaitis under the age of 35, who constituted 72 percent of the national population. The NYP selected 50 young volunteers from existing civil society groups to identify and define Kuwait’s development goals and vision. A significant portion of the demonstrators who had led the protests in Irada throughout 2011 and 2012 were young, so this seemed like a gesture by the leadership that their grievances had been heard. Both the NYP and Al-Shaheed Park were born out of palace discussions on how to reach out to and empower (and, implicitly, depoliticize) disenfranchised and dissatisfied youth.

Though sharing this lineage, the remaining KNCD centers opened several years later, when the scars of the 2011 crisis were not as pronounced. While youth empowerment remains part of the discourse and function of the JACC and ASCC, the Diwan contracted out the operation of these cultural centers to private sector companies rather than partnering with civil society organizations for their management. AEA Consulting, a global firm in cultural and creative industry planning, holds a five-year contract with the Diwan to advise on the strategy and management of the KNCD, a 1.25 billion dollar project that, according to the AEA website, “represents one of the most significant cultural infrastructure projects in the world.” Since international companies can only establish an office in Kuwait with a local agent, AEA’s Kuwaiti agent is Group 7, a self-described “boutique IT company” specializing in audio/visual technology. AEA/G7 also have a partnership with Alghanim International to operate the centers (which also had the contract to build some of the projects). The employees who work and run the KNCD cultural centers are hired by Group 7, but some (like security personnel) hold contracts with Alghanim. None, however, are actually employees of the Diwan al-Amiri or the public sector even though, again, the funding for the centers (including for salaries) comes from the Diwan. Kuwaiti KNCD employees are registered as working in the private sector; that is, they receive the government-issued monthly salary subsidy that all Kuwaitis working outside of the public sector receive as an incentive to work in the private sector. As neither entirely

public nor entirely private entities, the KNCD centers represent a new ambiguous development model for Kuwait that remains outside the realm of public oversight, scrutiny, and criticism.

### Restoring Legitimacy

While it might be tempting to describe the KNCD as Kuwait's version of the same old "vanity projects" of other Gulf ruling families, this interpretation may be too simplistic. While certainly enabling them to "make their mark on the world," the significance of the KNCD for Kuwait's rulers cannot be divorced from domestic politics (Herb 2014, 6). Whereas such projects in the UAE and Qatar seem aimed at attracting global capital, tourists, and prestige, the KNCD is more akin to entertainment-oriented projects in Saudi Arabia that aim "to mobilize support for the regime among everyday Saudis." As Pascal Menoret argues, "By seeking to entertain the people, the Al Sa'ud elite wanted to spur everyday Saudis to forget themselves in leisure and sports" as an alternative to joining Islamic movements critical of, and repressed by, the regime (Menoret 2020, 206–7). Indeed, by attracting Kuwaiti youth as well as so-called "liberals," the KNCD projects are participating (perhaps unwittingly) in an age-old government strategy of playing off existing social divisions and conflicts in Kuwait to maintain political equilibrium. Since the advent of Kuwait's Parliament, the leadership has usually responded to political contestation by seeking out new allies among different sectors of society to balance out existing oppositional forces. In the 1960s and '70s, the government's main political adversaries were the urban, secular Arab nationalists. Much has been written about the mass naturalization of tribes from Saudi Arabia throughout this period to balance out the nationalist threat, under the assumption that recently sedentarized Bedouin would be more dependent on and therefore loyal to the patriarchal state (Al-Nakib 2014b). In the late 1970s and early 1980s, the government also sought an alliance with Islamist forces that were gaining popular appeal at the time for the same purpose. Though both tribes and Islamists had a short political run in the 1980s as Parliament was dissolved for most of the decade, they dominated the post-invasion assemblies and became increasingly politicized and oppositional. For instance, the pretext for Jaber Al-Ahmed's 1999 dissolution of Parliament was the interpellation of Minister of Awqaf and Islamic Affairs Ahmed Al-Kulaib over an incident in



which Qurans printed in Kuwait for distribution abroad were bound incorrectly, producing numerous errors. Two motions of no confidence were submitted against Al-Kulaib, himself an Islamist. Three other high-profile ministers—of finance, information, and the interior—had also recently been grilled by mostly Islamist MPs on various allegations. The latter two were members of the Al Sabah, the first ruling family members to be grilled since the restoration of Parliament after the invasion, and only the fourth and fifth since the establishment of the National Assembly in 1963. It was in this context of rising Islamist opposition in 1999 that the amir, two weeks after dissolving Parliament, passed a decree granting women full political rights. As with tribes before, expanding the franchise would reshape the electorate and bring in new groups who might be more loyal to the government. The amiri decree, which intended to show “appreciation of the effective and important role played by Kuwaiti women,” received strong support by women’s activists in Kuwait and abroad (*CNN* 1999). But the new Parliament voted against all of the amiri decrees passed when the assembly was suspended on constitutional grounds, and it was not until 2005 that MPs successfully passed the women’s suffrage law, with strong government support (and most female politicians have remained pro-government, or at least not overtly oppositional, ever since).

The political tensions of the decade following the 1999 dissolution that culminated in the crises of 2010–13 poignantly revealed that the loyalties of both Bedouin and Islamists had shifted far away from the ruling family. As seen above, Kuwaiti youth thus became the most recent social group sought out by the leadership as potential allies to restore political balance, and Al-Shaheed Park arguably played a key role in this process. At the same time, the new cultural centers seem to be making overtures to Kuwait’s secular elites who, as public discourse of the 2010s suggested, felt frustrated and alienated by the largely Bedouin- and Islamist-driven opposition. While we have already seen how the centers have catered to at least some private sector companies by awarding them extremely lucrative design, construction, and management contracts, the cultural programming of the centers caters to the desires of many “liberal” citizens for a restoration of Kuwait’s cultural openness that was eroded by Islamist-dominated Parliaments after the invasion. In 1997, for instance, the Parliament segregated Kuwait University, established as a coeducational institution in 1966. Whereas Kuwait was renowned in the 1960s and ’70s for being a leader in the Arab world in the arts, music, and theater, by the 1990s, the Ministry of

Education came increasingly under Islamist control and music and art were removed from public school curricula. In the early 2000s, under pressure from Islamists, the state began to crack down on public musical concerts and mixed private dance parties in hotels and restaurants, labeling music and dancing as un-Islamic. The JACC is taking the lead in reversing this trend.

The center's website explicitly claims that: "Kuwait's cultural identity has always been rooted in a modern, avant-garde and experimental tradition. We wish to return to this identity at JACC and establish ourselves as the model space for all cultural events and activities, on national, regional and international levels." Of course, it was the regime's coopting of the Islamists as political allies in the 1980s that ultimately eroded the progressive cultural identity to which the JACC now seeks to return. One of the center's most popular performances, "Tonight! The 80s"—brought back by popular demand three times since its first run in early 2018—explicitly felt like an about-face to the Islamists. As suggested by the name, the show was a hyper-nostalgic musical and visual celebration of a much more culturally liberal pre-invasion Kuwait, with clips of 1980s TV shows, cartoons, soccer games, video games, commercials, and songs aired on a giant screen with music performed by the JACC orchestra. Throughout each performance, men and women of all ages in the audience danced, sang, and cheered to what they saw on the screen—precisely the kind of behavior Islamists spent decades banning in the public sphere. In the third run of the spectacle in January 2019, the audience was joined unexpectedly by the late amir, who attended without prior warning and without bodyguards, and who joined in the euphoria of the music.

By restoring a "modern" and "avant-garde" cultural identity for Kuwait, JACC and its fellow KNCD projects are simultaneously restoring an image of Kuwait's rulers themselves as modern and avant-garde agents of progress, perhaps made most explicit in the naming of the two biggest centers after previous amirs. Like Al-Shaheed Park, the cultural centers all hire young Kuwaitis as administrators, ushers, and tour guides. They also employ local musicians, directors, producers, artists, and curators to run the centers' theatrical productions and museums. Just as these projects were built without parliamentary or public obstruction, so the intellectual and cultural communities they bring together can work relatively unimpeded—unlike, for instance, the Ministry of Information and its subsidiary, the National Council for Culture, Arts, and Letters. Both government institutions regularly face

challenges by the Parliament for performances, exhibitions, or other cultural programs deemed by Islamists to be “Negative Phenomena Foreign to Kuwaiti Society,” the name of a parliamentary committee created by Salafist MPs in 2008 to monitor such practices (Picali and Migron 2008). For instance, in 2004, MPs threatened to grill the minister of information for allowing a *Star Academy* show (an Arab singing competition similar to *American Idol*) to be held in the publicly operated Kuwait Fairgrounds. The KNCD centers have been relatively immune from such challenges and have created an environment in which young creative talents can work freely. The JACC also aims to establish a National Youth Chamber Orchestra to promote music as a social activity. The Diwan al-Amiri has thus become Kuwait’s leading patron of the arts—vividly captured in the headline of a 2019 *Financial Times* article on the KNCD proclaiming “Kuwait’s Royals Court an Arts Renaissance” (Al-Omran 2019)—and the country’s driving force behind youth empowerment. In these multiple ways, the KNCD has neutrally, or at least apolitically, presented the Diwan as the antidote to the country’s myriad problems: the conservatism, the slow-paced development, the corruption, the cultural decline. Thus, while the elected Parliament continuously refuses to pass government-initiated reforms and the government refuses to bend to populist demands for accountability and transparency, the Al Sabah regime has found an alternative strategy to maintain its legitimacy and build consensus directly with the Kuwaiti public.

Indeed, many people in Kuwait regard this new development model as a blessing: the projects were all built rapidly due to the absence of bureaucratic red-tape and parliamentary obstruction, and to a high award-winning architectural design standard that is not often seen in state projects due to the cost-cutting, corruption, and misadministration that plague the state bureaucracy. The ASCC website boasts that its construction involved coordination between 96 specialist organizations from 13 countries. The center won the prestigious architectural ABB LEAF award as Public Building of the Year in 2017. The centers have also attracted a high number of visitors. By January 2020, just two years from opening, the ASCC museums attracted over half a million visitors and earned the government 1.75 million dinars (Aljarida 2020a). Between October 2016 and January 2020, the JACC received over 1.5 million visitors, 750,000 of which attended over 250 cultural and artistic events involving more than 6,000 artists, musicians, singers, dancers, and speakers from 35 countries, netting the government 4.5 mil-

lion dinars (Aljarida 2020b). Public opinion expressed in newspapers, magazines, and social media view the Diwan projects extremely positively, particularly in terms of their design, scale, cleanliness, efficiency, and cultural programming. Ahmed Al-Jarallah, editor-in-chief of the English-language daily *Arab Times* and the Arabic *Al-Seyassah*, credits the former amir directly with pulling Kuwait out of a state of stagnation:

Sabah Al-Ahmad, a man with sensitive national feelings, is the Amir who closely follows up every small and big issue . . . He knows where the supreme interest of the country is, so he works as head of all authorities to give motivation and outline solutions. This was the case when infrastructure institutions failed to launch major projects such as [KU's Shedadiya Campus] . . . in addition to the failure to complete the infrastructure that makes Kuwait an outstanding Arab cultural figure. Jaber Al-Ahmad Cultural Center and other cultural institutions which raised the name of Kuwait in the region, the Arab world and the international community are concrete pieces of evidence. (Al-Jarallah 2019)

Similarly, in a column in *Al-Anba* newspaper, Bandar Al-Mo'tish notes "the prevailing state of frustration in our society, the grumblings and misgivings prevalent in all our forums and gathering places about the mismanagement and delay of projects," which he attributes to systemic problems like the overlapping powers of service ministries, delays in financial payments, poor contractors, favoritism, and political interference. He then thanks Abdulaziz Ishaq, the Diwan's head of financial and administrative affairs in charge of the establishment and management of the new cultural centers, for successfully implementing the KNCD projects without the delays so prevalent in other government agencies (Al-Mo'tish 2018). Numerous articles extol the beauty of the architecture of the projects, describe them as "beacons" or "pedestals" of science, history, culture, education, and civilization, and credit their success to the "wise leadership" and "vision" of the late amir to "support" and "restore" Kuwait's cultural leadership in the region (Aljarida 2020a; *Al-Ostourah Magazine* 2015).

By 2018, it was publicly recognized that the Diwan al-Amiri was "playing a huge role in boosting Kuwait's developmental plan through executing vital cultural, social, entertainment, and judicial projects"

(*Kuwait Times* 2018), stepping in to fill the void created by the confluence of governmental corruption, parliamentary obstruction, private-sector greed, and bureaucratic inefficiency. Moving beyond the realm of culture, the Diwan commissioned and built the enormous 1.8 billion-dollar Jahra Medical City, constructed in a record span of three years, as well as Kuwait Motor Town, a 2.6 million square meter motor racing circuit—both of which opened in 2018. The latest project taken over by the Diwan and currently in the planning stages is Entertainment City, an amusement park established in 1984 in Al-Doha 25 kilometers west of Kuwait City. Entertainment City was formerly run by the state-led Touristic Enterprises Company (TEC), one of Kuwait’s few long-standing SOEs. However, in October 2014, the Council of Ministers allowed the Diwan to take over the park from TEC (*Kuwait News Agency* 2019). The plan for the new Entertainment City, covering an area of 2.57 million square meters, includes outdoor and indoor theme parks, a water park, an activity and entertainment center for children, a gaming arcade, a snow and ski park, a multiplex and open-air theater, a sports center, a museum, an observatory, landscaped parks and trails, a retail mall, restaurants, and villas and apartments (Blooloo 2020). According to the Diwan, this new “mega-project”—more typical of Dubai and the southern Gulf states—“will support and diversify the sources of economic income in the country, as well as contribute to revitalizing the cultural, entertainment and tourism sectors in Kuwait” (*Arab Times* 2020).

## Conclusion

Diversifying its sources of income is precisely the kind of major economic reform that Kuwait desperately needs to forestall its financial collapse, along with the debt law that Parliament refuses to pass out of fear that “the fresh revenue would line the pockets of wealthy merchants and foreign banks” (Aljazeera 2020). The resistance to raising the debt ceiling shows that the old social contract between the rulers and the ruled has been severed. People are not willing to make sacrifices to their own welfare benefits if the government is not willing to make political concessions in return. As articulated by Barrak Algharabally, “Kuwaitis think, why would I contribute my own money if the government isn’t holding anyone accountable? If I can’t see where their money is going?” (Aljazeera 2020). As another political analyst, Moham-

med Al-Yousef, puts it: “People [in Kuwait] have lost their trust in the government. There have been so many scandals and not one minister is in prison” (Aljazeera 2020).

Public faith in the ruling family's capacity and will to fight corruption was dealt a severe blow in December 2020 when Nasser Al-Sabah Al-Ahmed, the former amir's son and whistleblower of the embezzled defense funds, died at the age of 72. In addition to being the main figure in the Al Sabah actively fighting corruption within both the bureaucracy and his own family, he was also one of the leading officials focusing on Kuwait's long-term development strategy. After serving as head of the Diwan al-Amiri from 2006 to 2017 (when the KNCD projects were conceived), Nasser was appointed first deputy prime minister and minister of defense in 2017, and head of both the General Secretariat of the Supreme Council for Planning and Development and the Civil Service Commission in 2018. Nasser championed a plan to diversify Kuwait's economy by developing an ambitious megaproject merging the long-delayed new city in Kuwait's north (the so-called “Silk City”) with five northern islands into an integrated economic free zone and deep-sea port (part of Kuwait's Vision 2035). Though the plan is considered essential to pushing Kuwait's economy away from oil dependency and to preventing the country from falling further behind the rest of the Gulf (where such megaprojects and free zones are commonplace), the project has faced numerous hurdles getting approved by Parliament. Many lawmakers worry that, as a free zone, the project will be beyond parliamentary scrutiny and oversight and will create a state within the state (Westall and Hagagy 2019). This may not be an ill-founded assumption. Before he was ultimately removed from office by his father in 2019 for accusing high-profile Al Sabah officials of financial corruption, Nasser appeared “to be adopting a diversionary tactic toward the state bureaucracy similar to the one taking shape in Saudi Arabia [under Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman]: the establishment of parallel ministerial structures with more flexible rules,” including “the more business-friendly regulatory framework being proposed for the islands project” (Diwan 2018). The Kuwait National Cultural District, first conceived when Nasser was head of the Diwan, constitutes an example of such a “diversionary tactic.” But while appearing “to lean into the structural advantages held by the ruling family-led executive” in his public appointments, by the last year of his life, Nasser also led the charge against corruption within the ruling family (Diwan 2018). With his death, the Al Sabah, therefore, lost a key family member doing

much of the heavy lifting to maintain public support and consent for the regime—both by championing projects meant to safeguard Kuwait's economy and improve its global image, and by fighting regime corruption from within. Nonetheless, it seems unlikely that the regime will deviate from Nasser's "diversionary tactic" (so well exemplified by the success of the KNCD) in its ongoing tilt away from its historical will to govern by political consensus.

The KNCD projects seem to solve several of Kuwait's long-standing development woes, while projecting strong notions of youth empowerment, social progress, and cultural development—a strategic response to many of the youth-based grievances that emerged in the wake of the crises of the early 2010s. But though the public has mostly embraced these projects for their efficiency and quality, this palace-driven development comes at a critical cost. Kuwaiti citizens are losing their right to decide how the country is being developed, what the national priorities should be, and how best to meet the needs of a majority of the population. That is the job they confer on their elected parliamentary representatives, and while it is indeed true that Kuwait's MPs have not always lived up to the requirements and expectations of their constituents, relinquishing legislative control over matters of public concern to the executive branch constitutes a precedent that may prove difficult to reverse, particularly given the Diwan's success in garnering public support for its work. If Kuwait continues down this path, it will no longer be able to proudly assert itself as the only democracy among the Arab Gulf states.

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## 4 | The Decay of Family Rule in Saudi Arabia

*Michael Herb*

For decades, a cautious, and increasingly geriatric, ruling family governed Saudi Arabia. Propelled by its massive oil wealth the Kingdom modernized rapidly, yet social and political institutions changed slowly in a political landscape dominated by an aging ruling family. Sclerosis, rather than dynamism, characterized the regime. Mohammed bin Salman (often referred to as MBS), the Kingdom's crown prince and strongman, has upended all of this. The Kingdom is no longer ruled by the old, for he is in his thirties. Features of Saudi life that seemed immutable, or at least thoroughly entrenched, dissolved: most notably, women at long last secured the right to drive. MBS relaxed repressive religious controls on public life, winning plaudits, especially from younger Saudis.

In other arenas, the new dynamism has been unsettling rather than refreshing. The war in Yemen predictably became a costly humanitarian disaster while achieving none of the initial Saudi objectives of the intervention. The blockade of Qatar, intended to bring Qatar to heel, accomplished little. The Saudi regime, once the beneficiary of broad ties to the United States establishment, threw its lot in with the Trump administration, a choice that undermined a relationship that has been a foundation of Saudi foreign policy for several generations. The Arab Spring did not cause the personalization of the Saudi regime, but the personalization of the regime shaped the Saudi reaction to the Arab Spring. As Toby Matthiesen observes in his chapter in this volume, the Saudi crown prince became the face of the Arab counter-revolution, and internal changes in Saudi Arabia made the Saudi counter-revolution more bellicose than it likely would have been otherwise. The Kingdom's newly aggressive foreign policy came at a time of particular tur-

moil in the region, and had widespread impact in Yemen, Egypt, Bahrain, and elsewhere.

In this chapter I seek to explain the rise of Mohammed bin Salman. My analysis seeks an explanation for the decay of the family regime that has ruled Saudi Arabia for so long, and whose passing—if that is what is happening—is a troubling portent for the future stability of the kingdom. These changes in Saudi Arabia are part of a wider, and troubling, trend toward personalism and autocratic repression in a number of states in the region, as can be seen in several other chapters in this volume, most notably Amr Hamzawy's chapter on Egypt under Abdel-Fattah al-Sisi.

### **The Rise of Mohammed bin Salman**

In November 2017, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman imprisoned hundreds of prominent citizens, among them senior members of the Al Saud ruling family, in the Ritz-Carlton Hotel in Riyadh. Credible accusations were made of abuse, and a number of those detained were hospitalized. One detainee—not a member of the royal family—died. This came on the heels of the dismissal of two successive princes in the established line of succession and the elevation of the king's son Mohammed to the position of crown prince. This struck many observers as a major change in the nature of the ruling regime in Saudi Arabia. In this chapter, I consider several explanations for the ability of Mohammed bin Salman to apparently take personal control of what had been a regime characterized by multiple centers of power.

In making my argument I draw on several useful findings in the literature on authoritarian regimes, and in particular the literature on the emergence of personalist rule in regimes with a strong ruling group that, at least initially, constrains the ruler. In Saudi Arabia, the decay of family rule, I argue, occurred as a result of several factors, the most important of which is that over the past several reigns power has become increasingly concentrated in the king's court, rather than in the ministries. But the authority of those in the king's court ends when he dies. This gave MBS, whose power was entirely derivative of that of his father, a strong incentive to use his father's authority quickly and aggressively to disrupt the family regime.

In this chapter, I employ a type of process tracing. I set out several distinct explanations for the decay of family rule in Saudi Arabia (Ben-

nett and Checkel 2014). I then examine the evidence for and against each of these explanations. While I am primarily interested in one case in this chapter, the case has lessons for our understanding the ruling regimes in other Gulf monarchies and how they might change in the future. And the Saudi case provides some larger lessons for the literature on the emergence of personalist rule in authoritarian regimes.

### **The Emergence of Personalist Dictatorships in the Literature**

The existing literature on authoritarian regimes provides several insights that help us understand changes in the nature of the Saudi monarchy in recent years. That said, the literature's findings about monarchism are less firm than the findings about other regime types, for the straightforward reason that there are not so many monarchs who rule in the modern world. There are many more military regimes and party-led regimes, and this makes it easier to draw conclusions about these regime types.

There is some agreement among scholars of authoritarian regimes that authoritarian regimes with political institutions tend to be more durable than those that lack political institutions. Magaloni suggest that wise rulers will establish “credible limits to dictatorial abuses” (Magaloni 2008, 720, 716) and asks why all rulers do not create parties (2008, 725). Indeed Magaloni argues that wise rulers might create institutions precisely in order to make their rule more stable: “A dictator will possess an interest to uphold a system of credible power-sharing with his ruling clique in order to make his life less vulnerable to conspiracies, military coups, and violent rebellions” (2008, 716).

Barbara Geddes, Joseph Wright, and Erica Frantz (GWF from here on out) find that dictators who invent new parties after coming to power survive longer in power than dictators who do not create new parties (Geddes, Wright, and Frantz 2018, 117). That said, they also find that the impact of personalism on regime longevity depends on regime type: personalism makes party-based regimes less durable and military-led regimes more durable.<sup>1</sup>

Dynastic monarchies, of the sort found in Saudi Arabia, probably

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1. Specifically, this is authoritarian regimes in which the ruling group was a party that existed before the regime came to power (Geddes, Wright, and Frantz 2018, 230, 90).

resemble party-based regimes, in terms of the nature of the institutionalization of the ruling group, more than military-led regimes. Their remarkable record of durability certainly suggests that this is the case. Scholars of authoritarianism generally think that ruling family institutions in monarchies increase the level of institutionalization in the authoritarian regime, and might plausibly confer benefits parallel to those provided by political parties. Milan Svoblik explicitly cites the Gulf monarchies as institutions that “facilitate authoritarian power-sharing” (Svoblik 2012, 91). GWF similarly note that some seizure groups are composed of ruling families, and these families limit “the discretion of the monarch” and can remove him from power in extreme circumstances (Geddes, Wright, and Frantz 2018, 9).

Why then might a ruler in an authoritarian regime choose to personalize, rather than institutionalize, his rule? It appears that there is likely a tension between the interests of individual members of the regime and the long-term survival of the regime. An individual member of the ruling group, if he can personalize his power, can better fend off threats from the remainder of the ruling group. This personalization occurs at the expense of the survival of the regime, since the death of a personalist dictator is more likely to result in the end of the regime than the death of a ruler of an institutionalized regime (Geddes, Wright, and Frantz 2018, 230). But for the dictator himself, the strategy might make sense, especially if the dictator feels insecure within the ruling group.

Svoblik and GWF agree on the basic goal of a ruler who opts to personalize power: it is to remove the capacity of the broader ruling group to threaten to remove him. Milan Svoblik identifies a single remedy that the ruling coalition has against an overweening dictator: “The ruling coalition may attempt to deter the dictator’s opportunism by threatening to stage a coup” (Svoblik 2009, 478). GWF make a similar argument about the relationship between dictators and the group on which they relied to come to power: “. . . only credible threats to oust the dictator deter him from renegeing on agreements and abusing his supporters” (Geddes, Wright, and Frantz 2018, 68).

This gives us a benchmark by which to—roughly—measure the degree of success that a ruler has achieved in personalizing his rule. Most of the Gulf monarchies have, in their modern histories, an instance in which a family coalition removed a ruler and replaced him with someone else. In 1995, the son of the ruler of Qatar overthrew his father; in 2006, the crown prince of Kuwait removed his cousin. In

Saudi Arabia, we need to go back to the deposition of Saud in 1964 by a family coalition headed by his brother Faisal for an example. So, coups are certainly a possibility—they do not need to be frequent for rulers to worry about the possibility of a family-led coup.

Much of what MBS has done over the past several years speaks directly to his fear that the family could remove him, and his determination to prevent that outcome. That is why he imprisoned his relatives in the Ritz-Carlton, and it is why he has been ruthless in suppressing any sign of dissent amongst his relatives, even at the cost of violating long-standing family traditions.

### **Explaining the Rise of MBS and the Decline of the Al Saud**

I consider here five explanations for the decay of dynastic monarchism in Saudi Arabia over the past several years:

- 1 **Modernization.** The ruling families, as governing institutions, were built on norms that prevailed in Gulf Arabian societies on the eve of the era of oil. Modernization has built a Saudi middle class less invested in these norms, a middle class that MBS could appeal to against his family.
- 2 **The Trump administration.** Mohammed bin Salman found a close ally in the Trump administration despite, or perhaps because of, his authoritarian tendencies. Another administration—virtually any other U.S. administration, from either party—would have been less enthusiastic about his assault on his family out of concern for its longer-term effects on the Kingdom's stability.
- 3 **Fiefdoms.** The family institution could not endure once the initial ruling group passed from the scene because subsequent members of the ruling group lacked the fiefdoms within the bureaucratic state that the earlier generation of princes had built. This sapped their power to balance the king's court, controlled by MBS.
- 4 **Family institutions.** While the ruling family has in the past constrained Saudi kings, the formal political institutions give all power to the king. The Al Saud failed to translate its political power into political institutions, and thus left an opening for a determined personalist ruler to transform the system.

Informal institutions—the rules surrounding the succession in particular—also eroded and could not survive a determined attack from the ruler’s court.

- 5 **Sons in the royal court.** Sons of the current king, if allowed to wield his authority from the royal court, have a very strong incentive to use that authority to disrupt the family regime.

## Modernization

Oil-led modernization has created a middle class in Saudi Arabia that is less attuned to the pre-oil norms of Arabian society. The experience of decades of family rule has created, among many middle-class Saudis, a desire for change. While MBS is a product of the Saudi monarchy, he also promised change, and this allowed him to win support from citizens as he moved against his family. The *Guardian* found evidence of this in an article published when the Ritz-Carlton was first turned into a jail, when it was still presumed that the norms of civility in the ruling family would prevail. Abdulkhaleq Abdulla, an Emirati scholar is quoted saying that:

There is a cultural readiness in Saudi Arabia to treat everyone equally . . . If these princes are found guilty then their place will be in jail and rightly so. The Saudis will be more than happy to see them imprisoned.

There are over three hundred million Arabs, I don’t think we’re so tribal anymore. There is a large middle class in Saudi Arabia who is behaving like middle class people anywhere else in the world. They are the ones looking into this more than anyone; they’re yearning for the 21st-century Saudi Arabia. (*Guardian*, November 6, 2017)

It is true that many in Saudi Arabia supported the crackdown on the family. But it is also true that this sentiment is not new (and, to be fair, Abdulla is not saying it is particularly new). Levels of education and exposure to the modern world have been rising in Saudi Arabia for decades. One can identify any number of historical tipping points that might have provided an opening for an ambitious prince to mobilize public support against his family: the initial spread of education in the early days of oil, the later wave of Saudis who studied abroad, the



advent of satellite television, the rise of social media, the Arab Spring, and so forth. The family regime in Saudi Arabia survived them all. Perhaps these changes reached a breaking point of some sort in 2017. More plausibly, it was changes in the ruling family that drove the timing of the breakdown in family rule.

That said, Abdulla's observation does help us understand Mohammed bin Salman's strategy. Like other royals he recognized that it is possible to reach around the ruling group to ordinary citizens, arguing that he will defend citizens against a corrupt elite. MBS took advantage of the ossification and stagnation of the kingdom's geriatric ruling class and leveraged his popularity against the family.

### **The Trump Administration**

King Salman appointed his son Mohammed crown prince in June 2017, not long after the start of the Trump administration. The crackdown on the royal family came a few months later and was met with little resistance in Washington. The timing suggests that the decay of family rule in Saudi Arabia might have been made possible—or at least accelerated—by the results of the 2016 election in the United States.

Some of the facts fit this view. It is clear that Trump felt a strong affinity for personalist dictators, and this is not something he shared with any recent American presidents. Previous American administrations were very concerned with the stability of Saudi Arabia and generally saw the ruling family as a crucial source of stability in the Kingdom. It was widely recognized that the consequences of the failure of the Saudi monarchy could be dire. The failure of the Shah's monarchy in Iran bedevils U.S. policy in the region decades later, and the failure of Saudi Arabia could be, if anything, even worse. These longer-term considerations, which otherwise might have led the United States to push back against MBS and his ambitions, had little weight at the top levels of the Trump administration.

That said, the decay of family norms cannot be laid entirely at the feet of the new administration in Washington. The timing is wrong, because the decay of family norms surrounding the succession started well before Trump became president. Gregory Gause, in an early article on the Ritz-Carlton purge, argues that “although some saw the Ritz-Carlton roundup as a consolidation of power, MBS had already secured his position by then” (Gause 2019, 82). On becoming king—in January

of 2015—King Salman had appointed the current second-in-line, his younger brother Muqrin, as crown prince. He appointed a nephew, Mohammed bin Nayef, as second-in-line. All of this was well within the norms of the ruling family (Mohammed bin Nayef was a grandson of Ibn Saud, the founder of the current iteration of the Saudi state, but the appointment of a grandson was inevitable). The break from family norms, and the clearest indication of decay in the family institution, came in April 2015 when King Salman abruptly removed Muqrin, promoted Mohammed bin Nayef to crown prince, and appointed his son Mohammed as second-in-line.

This violated several family norms. No king had removed a relative from the line of succession since King Saud was deposed in the 1960s. And no king had placed a son in the line of succession. Salman had already named his son Mohammed minister of defense back in January when he became king (Salman had himself appointed to this position after the death of his brother Sultan in 2011).

This occurred during the Obama administration, and it does not appear that the Obama administration objected to the April 2015 change to the line of succession. In part we might reasonably attribute this to the fact that Mohammed bin Nayef had a strongly pro-American reputation: one prominent American former official wrote in 2015 that “MBN [Mohammed bin Nayef] is the darling of America’s counterterrorism and intelligence services . . . [H]e is pro-American, almost certainly more so than any other member of the Saudi leadership” (Riedel 2015).

The addition of MBS to the line of succession coincided with a particularly difficult period in relations between the Obama administration and the Saudi leadership, caused by the administration’s negotiation of what became the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) with Iran. In mid-May, the king was widely seen to have snubbed Obama by pointedly refusing to accept an invitation to attend a retreat at Camp David (Henderson 2015). The long-run implications of the change in the succession did not bode well for the stability of the Kingdom. In the short run, however, Mohammed bin Nayef became the crown prince, and that was easy to see as a win for U.S. interests at a time when American influence in Riyadh appeared to be on the wane.

In some respects, the timing of Mohammed bin Salman’s appointment as crown prince (which occurred in 2017) suggests a direct influence of the Trump administration. MBS quickly and effectively won favor in the Trump administration when it came into office in early

2017. Trump visited Saudi Arabia in May of 2017, one stop in his first trip abroad as president. A few weeks later, the king dismissed Mohammed bin Nayef (his nephew) as crown prince and appointed his son Mohammed in his place. There is abundant evidence that the Saudi regime felt empowered, or unleashed, by the change of administration in Washington. The best evidence of this is that Saudi Arabia initiated its blockade of Qatar shortly after Trump's May 2017 visit, and actually put the pretext in place (via a hack of the Qatari government's website) before Trump left the region. Mohammed bin Nayef's deep ties to the U.S. foreign security establishment did not, of course, much concern the Trump administration.

The question then is the degree to which Trump administration support was crucial in the rise of MBS, or if it simply made a process that would have occurred anyway easier. In other words, in a counterfactual world in which Jeb Bush or Hillary Clinton were president, would Salman have felt empowered to make his son crown prince? And would MBS still have imprisoned so many of his relatives in the Ritz-Carlton? There is evidence on both sides. There is no doubt that the ruling family institution was already suffering from decay even during the Obama administration, most visibly in the appointment of MBS to the line of succession in 2015. Nonetheless, there is also much to suggest that subsequent moves, and especially the timing of the removal of Mohammed bin Nayef from the line of succession, occurred only when MBS had established a relationship with Trump and those close to him. Mohammed bin Nayef was removed a month after Trump's visit to the Kingdom. But one may also wonder if Trump simply made a step that was likely to occur anyway, easier. The appointment of the crown prince is a core question of the allocation of power in Saudi Arabia. The Saudi regime has shown a willingness to cross the U.S. administration on matters that it sees as crucial to its core interests. There is no reason to think that any US administration could have imposed an outright veto on the removal of Mohammed bin Nayef. Instead, overt American resistance to the move would imperil the relationship with an important ally. But MBS has shown his willingness to threaten that relationship for stakes much, much smaller than the succession. The murder of Jamal Khashoggi comes to mind.

The Saudis brought the blockade of Qatar to an end a few days before the start of the Biden administration, on January 5, 2021. The timing, again, suggests that the American attitude can have an impact in Riyadh. The Biden administration has made its displeasure with

MBS clear, most notably in its insistence that the administration would communicate with King Salman rather than with his son Mohammad. There is no sign, as of the summer of 2021, that this has emboldened MBS's enemies in the ruling family or has empowered them to contest the succession. That said, politics in the family can be opaque, and it remains at least possible that MBS's route to full power has become more difficult with the change of administration in Washington, though there can be little doubt that he aspires to be king and will not easily be dissuaded from his goal.

### **Fiefdoms and Faisal's Generation**

Turning to explanations centered on the regime itself, it is sometimes argued that the family regime in Saudi Arabia could not survive the death of the princes who formed the coalition that took power when Faisal deposed his brother Saud in 1964. These princes included all of the subsequent kings, up to and including the current king.

These brothers were mostly appointed to the highest posts in the regime by King Faisal, and largely kept them until their deaths or promotion. Thus, Sultan was the minister of defense from 1963 to his death in 2011, a remarkable span of 48 years. Fahd was minister of interior from 1962 until he became crown prince in 1975. Nayef served as Fahd's deputy in the interior ministry and took it over on Fahd's departure, serving as minister for another 37 years until his death in 2012. Abdullah was appointed head of the National Guard in 1963 (or perhaps 1962) and left the post 47 years later in 2010, a few years after he became king. Salman was appointed emir of Riyadh in 1963 and stepped down in 2011 when he was appointed minister of defense.

These men controlled what Steffen Hertog calls fiefdoms within the Saudi state (Hertog 2010). They were in charge when virtually everyone in these institutions were hired and promoted, and they were in many senses responsible for the construction of these institutions. Often, they placed their sons in senior positions in the ministries. None of these princes were removed from their posts for any reason other than death or promotion.

The literature on authoritarianism suggests that the crucial check on the emergence of personalist rule is the ability of the ruling group to depose the ruler. Many members of this group in fact participated in the removal of King Saud in the early 1960s. That was the last time there

was a real threat of a coup against a king emanating from the ruling group (or, really, anyplace else in the Saudi state). But the durability of these men in their posts, their deep ties to the security forces, and their seniority in the family, all likely kept open the possibility that they could remove a king who acted against their wishes. And despite myriad policy and personal differences, no king ever removed any of these men from leadership of their fiefdoms.

Thus, one plausible explanation for what changed in recent years in Saudi Arabia is simply that the members of the ruling group who could constrain the king all died, leaving Salman. He was the last man standing and felt free to appoint his own son to the position of crown prince, something his older brothers had never felt free to do. Personalist rule emerged because the ruling group could not reproduce itself.

Ali Shihabi (2017), a Saudi sympathetic to MBS, argues that

Saudi watchers have consistently misread a royal family member's command of key military apparatuses, specifically, the Ministry of Interior, the Ministry of Defense, and the national guard, as something that gives that family member independent control over his respective organization. This is a flawed interpretation.

Instead, he writes, power flows from the king, and for any minister “whatever authority they enjoyed had been delegated to them by the king, and once this was withdrawn, that authority ended.” Some members of the Al Saud family have been politically marginalized, but “alienation does not mean that these princes possess the power to threaten the throne or to determine the succession.” But he then immediately adds an important qualification: “This has been particularly true since the passing of the founding generation of princes who originally united the country with the founder, King Abdul Aziz.” So, when the fiefdoms of the original generation put in power by Faisal were at their peak, the king was more constrained than today.

There is, however, some counter-evidence to this view that the deaths of the men who formed Faisal's coalition doomed the ruling family as an institution. These men did in fact attempt to preserve their influence and reproduce it in the next generation. The generation of King Faisal largely passed these fiefdoms to their sons. When Nayef died in 2012 after serving as 37 years as minister of the interior, his son Mohammed bin Nayef took over his role (after an interregnum of a few

months during which Nayef's younger brother Ahmed held the post). Mohammed bin Nayef continued in the post even after being appointed crown prince and was head of the ministry of interior when he was abruptly dismissed from all of his positions in 2017. Abdullah, who became king in 2005, turned over the National Guard to his son Mutaib in 2010. Mutaib continued to command the National Guard until the day he was imprisoned in the Ritz-Carlton.

These princes of the second generation served for decades under their fathers: they inherited their fiefs. And yet MBS could strip them of their power in 2017 despite their seeming control of two of the most important institutions of coercion in the kingdom.

## Institutions

The crucial political rule of the dynastic monarchies of the Gulf is the principle that a ruler comes to power when he receives the *bay'a*, or allegiance, of his family. This is a largely informal requirement and one that, in some cases, is open to the exercise of coercion. In the early years of oil, Gulf rulers found it necessary, however, to build family coalitions to come to power, and distributed posts in the state in order to secure the support or acquiescence of their relatives (Herb 1999). This then led to the creation of ministerial fiefdoms and a constrained ruler.

What did not happen in Saudi Arabia or other Gulf dynastic monarchies was the further formal institutionalization of the principle of family approval of new monarchs. Saudi Arabia lacks a constitution, and has instead a Basic Law which was issued as a royal decree. It can be changed by royal decree at any time. Under the Basic Law, appointments to high offices—including posts such as the minister of defense and the head of the National Guard—are made by the king at his discretion. This gives an extraordinary amount of power to anyone who can influence the decrees issued by the king from the royal court. And MBS now appears to have the ability to determine most or all of what will be in his father's royal decrees. Geddes, Wright and Frantz note that "If dictators can choose the members of the regime's top decision-making inner circle, they can change its composition without taking into account party procedures, the military chain of command, or, in monarchies, the opinions of ruling-family members" (Geddes, Wright, and Frantz 2018, 11). That is pretty much what happened in Saudi Arabia.

The Al Saud were not insensible to the need for a more formal institutionalization of family rule. In 2006, King Abdullah set up an Allegiance Council whose membership consists of one prince from the line of each of the sons of the founder of the kingdom. Abdullah, however, specified that the Allegiance Council would be binding only on his successor, then expected to be his brother Sultan. This did not bode well for the ability of the Allegiance Council to bind the ruler—especially given that Abdullah put the Allegiance Council in place via decree and the next king would be able to remove or alter it by decree. During his reign, Abdullah did occasionally consult the Allegiance Council, but inconsistently, and not in manner that really devolved authority from the king to the council. He did not consult the council when appointing Nayef as second-in-line to the throne.

The potential ability of the king to undermine the family institution was exacerbated by the aging of the sons of Ibn Saud. In the nearly half-century between the start of Faisal's reign in 1964 and the death of Sultan in 2011, no prince appointed to the line of succession (even as second-in-line) failed to become king. In King Abdullah's ten-year reign, however, two princes in the line of succession died before becoming king (Sultan in 2011 and Nayef the next year). Abdullah thus appointed more princes to the line of succession than any previous king in modern Saudi Arabia. Moreover, his appointments also skipped more sons of Ibn Saud than previous appointments. Rather than skipping one or two sons, he skipped six princes when appointing Nayef second-in-line, and another five when appointing Muqrin second-in-line.<sup>2</sup> This last appointment went all the way to the last living son of Ibn Saud. Abdullah's goal, it appears, was to push the family, sooner rather than later, toward a transition to the next generation. The overall effect of this level of change in the succession, however, was to weaken the informal institution of the succession, which centered on the passing of power from one son to another. With that rule weakened, Salman had an easier task of pushing through the series of changes to the line of succession that resulted in the appointment of his own son as crown prince in 2017.

Finally, institutions, perhaps more than has been appreciated, rely on the willingness of political actors to respect them. This is especially true of informal practices and norms. These norms were strong in Saudi Arabia, and they mattered. But MBS shows no signs of any respect

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2. His appointment of Salman as crown prince in 2012 skipped no princes.

for family traditions or norms and this, combined with his position of power in his father's court, makes him a lethal threat to the family institution.

### The Royal Court

Mohammed bin Salman is not actually the ruler of Saudi Arabia. He is the son of the ruler. And in this we find a potential explanation for the weakening of the control of the ruling group over the king. The logic of family rule is that authority is dispersed among the ruling group, and members of this group occupy important positions in the state and control of key ministries. The death of a ruler brings a new ruler to power, but key members of the existing ruling group retain their positions of power in the state.

The Saudi regime, however, is formally constructed as an absolutist monarchy in which power is vested in one person, the king. The Kingdom's Basic Law makes this abundantly clear: no institution, the ruling family or otherwise, constrains the power of the king. Over the past decades, there have been indications that those who are closest to the king—that is, those in his court, rather than those in his cabinet—have amassed more authority than in the past. Those in the court have much to lose when the current king dies and is replaced by the prince next in line. The increasing age of Saudi kings makes the dynamic stronger: elderly kings tend to delegate more of their authority, and they have adult sons who stand to lose more when a new king comes to power.

Thus, the passing of power among members of the ruling group in recent years has not been one in which power clearly passes from the current king to a member of the family who is arguably the second most influential member of the family. Instead, the entire court is bypassed, and one group is replaced by another. This raises the stakes of the succession.

### How Has This Played Out in Recent Reigns in Saudi Arabia?

**King Khalid:** Khalid was not a particularly active ruler during his reign, which lasted from 1975 to 1982. He delegated much of his authority to his brother Fahd, who was also his crown prince (Al-Rasheed 2010, 143). When Khalid died, Fahd was effectively already in charge.



**King Fahd:** Fahd himself grew ill in office and toward the end of his reign, he turned over many responsibilities to his young son Abdulaziz, though his son was not able to use this position to establish his authority over the fiefdoms of his various uncles (Al-Rasheed 2005, 201; 2010, 212). Nor was he named the head of an important ministry that would give him a power base separate from the ruler's court. And he was not appointed to a place in the line of succession to the throne: doing that would have required removing the head of the National Guard or the minister of defense. When Fahd died and Abdullah became king in 2005, Abdullah did not remove Fahd's son Abdulaziz from his post as head of the prime minister's court (the prime minister in Saudi Arabia is the king) until 2011, several years into his reign. In July 2019, Abdulaziz tweeted in support of the deposed Crown Prince Mohammad bin Nayef and there were reports he was arrested in September of that year. The last tweet from his previously very active Twitter account was September 11, 2017. He has been seen very little since, though in 2019, a relative tweeted a photo of him at his palace, with MBS, suggesting a rapprochement with the new regime, or at least that MBS felt it useful to show to the world that Abdulaziz was alive, healthy looking, and at home.<sup>3</sup>

**King Abdullah:** When Abdullah dismissed Abdulaziz bin Fahd from his post as head of the prime minister's court, he also consolidated the prime minister's court with the royal court and put the combined entity under Khalid al-Tuwaijri, who is not a member of the ruling family.<sup>4</sup> Abdullah delegated a good deal of influence to al-Tuwaijri, an influence that was entirely reliant on Abdullah's own authority: when Salman came to power he immediately dismissed al-Tuwaijri, and he was one of the political figures imprisoned in the Ritz-Carlton by MBS in 2017. Abdullah did not appear to delegate control over his court to his sons; instead, he installed Mutaib as head of the National Guard and made Turki the emir of Riyadh—both were jailed in the Ritz-Carlton.

**King Salman:** When Salman became king there was some question as to his mental fitness, though he is not incapacitated, and numerous reports describe him as at least lucid. But he is quite old, and he has delegated the actual administration of the government. Like Fahd, he

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3. Details on Abdulaziz's fate are scarce. The *Middle East Eye*, which has reported on Abdulaziz, appears to be funded by sources close to Qatar (*Middle East Eye* 2017a; 2017b; *Arab News* 2019).

4. Diwan 2019; see also Okaz 2011.

appointed a son—MBS—to run his court. But he also named his son Mohammad to the position of minister of defense and made him the head of a number of government bodies with wide authority in the economy and security services. MBS then used this delegated authority rapidly and aggressively to cement his authority over the state apparatus. Having secured the state, he then turned against members of his family. This culminated in his appointment as crown prince.

MBS had good reason to move quickly. His authority depends entirely upon that of his father. His father, in turn, is elderly and his death could put MBS in a situation akin to that of Abdulaziz bin Fahd or Khalid al-Tuwaijri. The only way to avoid this was to insert himself directly into the line of succession and suppress opposition from the rest of his family. And that is what he did, within three years of his father becoming king. He seems to have calculated that he needed to move fast and decisively, or be swept aside entirely when his father died.

### **The Stability of Saudi Arabia**

The argument proposed in this chapter suggests that the Achilles heel of the Saudi family regime can be found in the concentration of power in royal court combined with the weakness of other formal and informal institutions. The king's power to rule by decree is essentially unbounded. If the king wields this power himself, or delegates it to another prince in the line of succession, the system is stable. But King Abdullah delegated much of his authority to a commoner who was swept out of power when Abdullah died. When Salman replaced him, he delegated power to his son Mohammad. His son recognized that he risked being swept aside himself when his father died, unless he forcibly inserted himself into the line of succession. So he did just that, using his father's essentially unchecked power over the state to repress any dissent from any quarter. The aging of the ruling family provided a crucial assist: the generation of princes that came to power with King Faisal had died off, and frequent changes to the succession when Abdullah was king—caused by the aging of the sons of Ibn Saud—made it easier to imagine further changes to the succession under Salman. And MBS's willingness to take risks mattered too: there was no guarantee that this would not end very badly for him, and he plunged ahead nonetheless. He gambled, and it appears that his gamble paid off, for him at least.

## Can the Family Institution Rebound?

Family institutions in the Gulf—dynastic monarchies—have been quite durable over the past decades. The rise of MBS might mark the eclipse of dynastic monarchism in Saudi Arabia, and his personalism could serve as a model for other rulers in the region. Yet it is too early to entirely write off the family institution. The monarchies of the Arab Gulf show an oscillation of sorts between periods in which a single ruler gains a good deal of authority, and periods in which the ruler is more constrained by this family. Clearly Saudi Arabia is in a period in which one member of the family is ascendant, threatening to fundamentally change the nature of the regime. Yet there remains some possibility that his reign will end with a reversion to family rule. A parallel example might be the reestablishment of the authority of the Politburos in the Soviet Union and China after periods of highly personalist rule in those countries.

What this requires is that the underlying institution of the dynastic monarchy survives the rule of Mohammed bin Salman. The key measure of this is the degree to which MBS continues to appoint his relatives to positions of authority in the regime. Thus far, at least, he has largely continued to do this. Provincial governors (emirs) are still members of the family, as are key ministers. The dynastic monarchy no longer constrains the king, but it has not been dispersed. If MBS wanted to destroy it, however, he probably could. The definitive end to dynastic monarchism would be a provision in the Basic Law, such as those found in Europe and some other (former) Middle Eastern monarchies, that prohibits members of the ruling family from occupying cabinet positions. The Constitution of Libya had such a provision after the last monarch, King Idris, tangled with his family (Herb 1999, 193–97). MBS's assault, thus far, has been on members of his family who can challenge him, not on members of his family for being members of the family.

There is even some outside chance that MBS could fail to become king. His father's death will mark the last best chance for sidelined members of the family to prevent his complete control of the Kingdom. Of course, MBS knows this as well, and his efforts to root out any sign of opposition among his relatives can be explained in no small part by his determination to eliminate opposition to his rise to the kingship. It certainly appears now that his efforts have been successful. There are few certainties in politics, however, especially when predicting political successions in opaque authoritarianisms.

## Consequences

Over the past decades, the dynastic monarchies of the Gulf, of which Saudi Arabia is the leading example, have displayed a remarkable resilience (Herb 1999). In a region beset by upheaval, the monarchies have endured. Their resilience and stability make for a striking contrast with the turmoil of former monarchies such as Libya, Egypt, and Iraq. This resilience is not something to be valued in and of itself: the resilience of monarchism in the Gulf makes the emergence of alternate regime types difficult, especially parliamentary democracy. Yet the alternative to monarchism in the region has not usually been democracy, but instead other sorts of authoritarianism, and often without the benefits of stability that have accompanied dynastic monarchism in the region. The personalization of monarchical rule in Saudi Arabia threatens this stability—and without providing much prospect of greater freedom. This institutional decay has echoes in other regimes in the region, most notably Egypt, as Amr Hamzawy shows in this volume. One sees some initial signs of this in Kuwait as well, as Farah Al-Nakib shows in her excellent discussion in this volume of the rise of an activist Diwan al-Amiri insulated from parliamentary oversight—though Kuwait, to be sure, enjoys much stronger institutions constraining the rulers than Saudi Arabia.

One effect of the erosion of the family institution in Saudi Arabia is already apparent: MBS does not respond to concerns about his family questioning his decisions regarding making his policies more moderate. Instead, he represses dissent in his family, and accompanies this with adventurist policies while appealing to, and encouraging, nationalist sentiment in the wider population. In the past, the presence of powerful members of the ruling family who have, at least potentially, the capacity to remove the ruler has provided a check on monarchical adventurism. The threat of accountability to the family has encouraged rulers to adopt policies that favor the status quo. The war in Yemen and the assassination of Jamal Khashoggi show the downsides of an unrestrained monarch.

Dynastic monarchies have a representational aspect as well: when there are multiple foci of power, more citizens can feel that they have access to decision-makers. In the Saudi Arabia of MBS, power is concentrated, and largely inaccessible.

The decline of the institution of the ruling family is unlikely to be accompanied by the rise of other institutions in an increasingly per-

sonalist Saudi Arabia. Dynastic monarchies can beget other institutions that provide stability and even representation to citizens: the Kuwaiti Parliament, for example, has emerged in the context of the dynastic monarchy of the Al Sabah ruling family. The Parliament in the long run might threaten the rule of the family, but at least it is a competing institution, rather than just a person. In monarchies elsewhere, institutions such as political parties or military establishments have emerged alongside, or supplanted, monarchical institutions. The end result of this has been mixed. But generally speaking, it has been better than outright personalism. If MBS has institution-building instincts, he has yet to show them.

Personalist rulers tend to destroy rather than build institutions. And when they are gone, there is often little left but chaos. The findings of the literature on authoritarianism are quite emphatic on this point: personalism leads, in the long term, to poor political outcomes. A decrease in monarchical stability does not lead to an increase in the chances for a transition to a more democratic regime, but instead to the prospect of authoritarianism combined with instability.

Saudi Arabia is likely to experience a long reign by MBS, who was born in 1985 and is very much a young man. This is a disquieting prospect. Personalist regimes reflect their rulers—that is the point of breaking down institutions, so that the ruler can impose his personal will. MBS has thus far governed in a way that does not suggest restraint or caution. Perhaps he will develop these qualities over time. But the war in Yemen, the blockade of Qatar, and the murder of Jamal Khashoggi, suggest a temperament not well suited for the personalist rule, for potentially many decades, of a country important to the world economy and located in a geopolitically important part of the world.

The challenges facing Saudi Arabia are immense. The citizen population is growing, and the country is almost entirely reliant on a single source of income: oil exports. Saudi Arabia has poor relations with several important neighbors in its region. The historical centerpiece of its foreign policy—good relations with the United States—is threatened both by the decline of American power, and by MBS's substantial bet on Trumpism, and continuing tensions with the Biden administration and Congress.

It is of course true that the regime upended by MBS had many downsides. It supported spectacularly illiberal domestic social policies. It was a gerontocracy that feared change and supported the status quo. It needed to change. The change that did arrive was a transition to

TABLE 4.1. The Line of Succession among the Al Saud

Prince and birth order	Became king	Named crown prince	Named second-in-line <sup>a</sup>	Princes who were skipped when younger brother (or a nephew) was named second-in-line	
Saud	2	1953	1933		
Faisal	3	1964	1953	<i>understood to be second-in-line before 1953</i>	
Khalid	5	1975	1965	1962	Muhammad 4
Fahd	9	1982	1975	1967	Nasir 6 Sa'd 7
Abdullah	12	2005	1982	1975	Bandar 10 Musaid 11
Sultan	15	<i>died in 2011 before becoming king</i>	2005 <i>(died 2011)</i>	1982	'Abdal-Muhsin 13 Mishaal 14
Nayef	23	<i>died in 2012 before becoming king</i>	2011 <i>(died 2012)</i>	2009	'Abd al-Rahman 16 Mitab 17 Talal 18 Badr 20 Turki II 21 Nawwaf 22
Salman	25	2015	2012	...	
Muqrin	35	<i>removed from line of succession in 2015</i>	2015	2013 2014 ( <i>named deputy crown prince</i> )	Mamduh 28 'Abd al-Illah 29 Sattam 30 Ahmad 31 Mashur 34
Mohammed bin Nayef	n/a	<i>removed from line of succession in 2017</i>	2015	2015	n/a
Mohammed bin Salman	n/a		2017	2015	n/a

Note: Turki, the eldest son, died in 1918. Eight died while an older brother was second-in-line: Mansur (8), Mishari (19), Fawwaz (24), Majid (26), Thamir (27), Hithlul (32), 'Abd al-Majid (33), and Humud (36).

<sup>a</sup> The post of second deputy prime minister conventionally designates the second-in-line since Fahd's appointment to the post. Khalid was appointed deputy prime minister in 1962.

personalist rule, and that is a cause for substantial concern for the future of Saudi Arabia.

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## 5 | Syria's Repressive Peace

*Samer Abboud*

A few weeks before the outbreak of protests in Syria in March 2011, President Bashar al-Assad gave an interview to the *Wall Street Journal* in which he sided with protestors around the Arab world and explained unrest in Tunisia, Yemen, and Egypt as a consequence of leaders' failures to meet the political and economic aspirations of their citizens and their abandonment of core Arab nationalist ideals that Syria, alone in the Arab world, continued to give voice to. Syria, al-Assad explained, was stable because its leaders and people were closely linked in their beliefs and the country had embarked on a process of political and economic reform that was addressing people's core concerns (Solomon 2011). Behind these bold statements was a structure of authoritarian rule that had atomized and fragmented political movements in Syria and which prevented, at least in al-Assad's view, the kind of mass mobilization that was being witnessed in other Arab countries. Syrians may have had political grievances, but, according to al-Assad, these were being addressed by the country's leaders, however gradually. In reality, Syrian governance was enacted through forms of violence that ensured Syrians' awareness of the day-to-day consequences of political subversion (Ismail 2018), and which disincentivized political mobilization and precluded political organization outside of state-approved bodies, such as political parties or trade unions. The twin practices of violence and de-institutionalization of political organization, rather than some coherence between Syrians and their president, had more to do with al-Assad's confidence that protests would not reach Syria. In this way, al-Assad's proclamation that Syria stood alone in the Arab world betrayed the consistencies in regime strategies of control across the

region as evidenced in the cases of Egypt, Morocco, and Kuwait explored throughout this book.

Decades of authoritarian rule shaped the Syrian political system in profound ways that would contribute to the spread, structure, and trajectory of protests after March 2011. In this chapter, I ask how the Syrian political system has evolved since the outbreak of conflict in March 2011. I argue that the nature and trajectory of violence in Syria and the absence of a negotiated peace has provided for the emergence of a repressive peace in which authoritarian practices of governance through violence and political exclusion are entrenched around a continued bifurcation of society into the loyal and disloyal. The practices of violence and political exclusion central to this repressive peace are a continuation of a form of rule through violence that has been at the core of Ba'athist governance and state-building (Ismail 2018). In the repressive peace that is emerging, opportunities for political organization or dissent are suppressed under a series of laws and practices that codify any form of anti-regime politics as subversive and thus “terrorist” and “against the homeland.” Such coercive legal frameworks have parallels in countries such as Egypt (Hamzawy, this volume) and Morocco (Errazzouki, this volume) that have similarly resorted to both violence and legal measures to suppress politics. The criminalization of real and imagined dissent is preventing serious structural reforms to the Syrian political system while deepening the regime's reliance on violence as a form of governance. Absent an internationally mandated or domestically negotiated peace process, the prospects for such reforms in the immediate future are limited.

This chapter is divided into three principal sections that track the emergence of a repressive peace in Syria and its implications on the prospects for political change. First, I briefly discuss the pre-conflict period and the impacts of the marketization of the economy on state power and social change. I then explore the background of the protests that began in 2011 and the evolution of the conflict until 2015 on the eve of the Russian military intervention into Syria. During this period, the emergence of a nonviolent internal opposition as well as an external political opposition was shaped by the lack of pre-existing structures of organization and mobilization. Metastasizing violence and armed groups inside of Syria precluded the realization of a genuine political process in which political demands could be negotiated between the regime and the various fragments of the Syrian opposition. Third, I ask how the Russian military intervention provided the conditions of pos-

sibility for the emergence of a victor's peace in which a post-conflict order around continued repression, rather than the cessation of violence, could be constructed. Here, I identify four pillars of Syria's repressive peace by exploring how the processes of "reconciliation" with former fighters and "settlement" with civilians has underpinned the regime's strategy of post-conflict reconciliation. These processes paralleled the emergence of new property regimes that disenfranchised Syrians and punished former real and suspected belligerents. The fourth pillar of Syria's repressive peace has been the Astana Process that has provided a forum for the international management of the conflict. Finally, I ask how the emergence of a repressive peace is shaping the struggle over political change in Syria. Here, I argue that the prospects for short-term political change are limited and shaped by the regime's practices of retribution and continued enmity. The repressive peace in Syria will continue to produce instability and conflict within society. I conclude with a brief reflection on how this instability is, paradoxically, productive of regime power.

### **Prelude to Conflict**

When Bashar al-Assad inherited the Syrian presidency from his father Hafiz, the Syrian economy had been mired in stagnation and political life suffocated by the repressive state apparatus. Piecemeal economic reforms during the late 1980s and 1990s were gradual and targeted, and never seriously undermined the regime's ability to engage in repression or the public sector's hegemony throughout the economy. By the late 1990s and early 2000s, however, momentum from within the Party and state had shifted toward a deepening of economic liberalization and an increasing openness to the Ba'ath Party's historical social nemesis, the private sector. The changes to the internal power structure of the Ba'ath Party produced a "post-Ba'athist Syria" (Hinnebusch 2011) in which the Party, under the leadership of the new president, would be reoriented toward supporting a new economic project for the country. The social composition of the Party's rank and file had dramatically changed from the 1980s when it was mostly composed of corporatized social groups, such as teachers, public sector employees, workers, and soldiers. By the 2000s, an active policy of recruiting from the professional classes had introduced new requirements for leadership positions to be filled by people with higher education degrees. The Party

witnessed a rise in the educated, professional classes and a steady decline of peasants (Hinnebusch 2011, 123)

Changes to the Party's structure were intended to facilitate the reorganization of the Syrian economy around a new approach that would reduce the power of the public sector while introducing new policies that would encourage private capital's investment into the country. The thrust of this new economic project thus centered around the simultaneous preservation of the public sector and the marketization of the economy through the introduction of new laws that decontrolled prices, eliminated subsidies, opened up new spaces for private sector investment, and subjected hitherto protected areas of the economy, such as education, to market forces. Marketization in Syria was deployed as an instrument of state formation in which state power was reorganized throughout the economy. Marketization was not simply a diminishing of state power, but rather its reorientation in fulfillment of a Ba'athist state-building project that sutured marketization and authoritarian regime stability.

The marketization of the Syrian economy was a project underpinned by the continuity of state violence against subversive individuals and actors. There was an expectation that Bashar al-Assad's presidency would usher in a new climate of openness, yet the regime continued to rely on repression and the violent bifurcation of society into the loyal and disloyal through the continuation of emergency law. Cultural forums that sprang up in the early 2000s that led to the Declaration of One Thousand, a statement calling for greater political freedom signed by Syrian activists, leaders, intellectuals, and artists. The forums were quickly shut down and many of the Declaration's signatories arrested or harassed by the security forces. As the Party embarked on a project of state transformation through marketization, the security apparatus simultaneously rejected any comparable political opening. There would be *perestroika* but no *glasnost*.

The social changes produced by a decade of marketization were substantial and led to increased state repression of dissent. As in Morocco, the emergence of a new leader did not usher in a period of promised reform but one of "business as usual" (Errazzouki, this volume) in which elites were enriched in a period of neoliberal reform while the state was forced to resort to violence to quell dissent. In Syria, prices fluctuated beyond the control of average workers, wages remained stagnant, and the promise of private sector-led growth never materialized as most Syrian enterprises remained small and the bene-

fits of marketization accrued to a new class of entrepreneurs. Tethering regime stability to marketization thus required the continued deployment of the security apparatus to mitigate against the articulation of collective grievances. A decade celebrated by many inside and outside of Syria as one of economic openness and reform was in actuality a period of intense repression intended to mask the negative social effects of a project of state transformation.

### **Protest, Violence, and Stalemate**

The Syrian protests that began in March 2011 were rooted in the material deprivation, social changes, and structural violence generated by decades of authoritarian rule that had concentrated wealth and power into a small network of elites. The limitations of political deliberation and negotiation within Syria meant that substantive change only happened from above and that the political system remained mostly unresponsive to collective demands. The formulation and articulation of collective political demands was precluded by the atomization of institutions and associations of collective action that had either been decimated or incorporated into the ruling structures of regime power. Any attempt at establishing autonomous centers of power or collective dissent were violently repressed. Moreover, years of mismanaged land and environment policy exacerbated climate change effects on Syria's agricultural areas (Daoudy 2020) and produced social transformations whose effect would be felt in both rural and urban areas of the country. In the 2000s, the influx of Iraqi refugees placed tremendous pressure on state resources and invited new forms of international intervention into Syria through humanitarian organizations (Hoffman 2016). Meanwhile, a program of accelerated reform and marketization captured in the 'social market economy' project initiated a major structural shift in the economy toward the private sector, which saw its wealth and access to political power dramatically increase (Abboud 2016). In addition to these dramatic internal changes, Syria had to deal with the regional realities of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, its hasty departure from Lebanon in 2005, the continued American belligerence toward the Syrian regime and the imposition of sanctions. The overlapping realities of negative social change, concentrated wealth and power, geopolitical instability, and the contagion effects of the Arab uprisings all contributed to the protests in Syria.

The immediate impetus for the outbreak of protests in Syria was the arrest, detention, and murder of schoolchildren in Dar'a who had spray painted the common refrain of the Arab uprisings—*the people want the downfall of the regime*—on one of their school walls. Although protests had actually taken place in January and February, it was not until this incident that they began to spread across the country. The protests in Dar'a and elsewhere that began after the murder of the children became public were defined by their spontaneity and lack of clear hierarchy or organization. The first national protest was called for March 15, 2011 and was called "*The Day of Rage*." The protest demands were mostly issue-focused, calling, for example, for the release of political prisoners, lifting the state of emergency, and ending corruption. Protests occurred in Damascus, Dar'a, al-Hassakeh, Homs, Hama, and elsewhere. Following this pattern, Friday protests would occur in subsequent weeks throughout the country, with a decentralized activist structure calling for protests around specific vocabularies, themes, and demands. In the very early stages of the protests, the demands remained mostly focused on reforms of the political system rather than its overthrow. The Syrian regime had witnessed a similar pattern in the evolution of protests in Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt and responded to these protests almost immediately with repression. Debate within the regime's decentralized centers of power (Stacher 2012) certainly existed, but those advocating for serious political reform were a small minority. Instead, the regime's response to the protests would be to quell them through violence.

The regime's strategy of confronting the protests involved a combination of repression and the passing of cosmetic reforms. This pattern of repression and reform had been established by pre-2011 governance practices that limited political reforms to measures that sustained, rather than undermined, regime power. Ironically, a form of what Hamzawy calls "undemocratic lawmaking" (Hamzawy, this volume), that entailed the suppression of any semblance of political plurality, emerged as the principal regime strategy to respond to protests even though the declarations of public officials stressed the seriousness of political reform. Moreover, the decentralized structure of regime power concentrated power into the hands of governors and other actors, who were incapable of making larger decisions about political reform but who were able to marshal the security apparatus against protestors (Stacher 2012).

Almost all of the protests in the first wave in 2011 were met with

violence by the army and state-affiliated *shabiha* (militias). The continued violence summoned more protestors to the streets and by the summer months protests regularly erupted around the country in response to state violence. By then, the demands of the protestors had morphed from reform demands to a more comprehensive political transition or regime change. While engaging in repression, the state also passed a series of laws meant to placate protestors and signal to its support base (which at this time remained strong) that it was serious about reforms. These reforms included the release of some political prisoners, the abrogation of emergency law (Decree no. 50), the forced resignation of the governors of Dar'a and Homs, the extension of citizenship to a majority of stateless Syrian Kurds, and other changes in areas of security, justice, and local autonomy. These reforms were not received positively by the protestors, who viewed the continued violence of the state as an indicator of their hollowness and the lack of commitment from the regime to seriously reform.

The protests were initially driven by individual decisions to do so as no pre-existing institutions, associations, or political parties existed to organize and mobilize protestors. Very quickly, however, protestors began organizing into loose associational forms that allowed them to communicate within their own locales and across Syria. In the early stages between March and the summer months, for example, Heydemann and Leenders (2012) have argued that protestors drew on their dense social and familial networks to sustain protests. The fluidity of clan and tribal structures, labor migrant networks, and cross-border ties morphed into social structures that sustained protest against the regime and served as a substitute for formal structures of mobilization. The spontaneous, socialized structure that sustained early protests was similarly reflected in the social backgrounds of protestors that came from all walks of Syrian life. Hassan Abbas (2011) identified five core groups with distinct social and political backgrounds that formed the basis of the uprising in 2011: secular, educated, mostly urban middle classes; tribes; political Islamists; secular activists; and the unemployed and economically marginalized. The early protests were thus defined by their social, political, and geographic heterogeneity and the absence of national institutions from which to organize collective feelings of despair and desire for change.

The creation of *tansiqiyyat*, or Local Coordination Committees (LCCs) provided the first serious attempt at institutionalizing the protest movement inside of Syria, as exiled activists were themselves orga-

nizing into an external opposition body. The LCCs have their roots in the early stages of the protest and the work of activists in disseminating information about the protests to Syrians and the outside world. Depending on the locale, LCCs could count a few or even hundreds of people as members. As they grew, so did the “networks of solidarity” (Khoury 2013) between LCCs that gave the uprising a national character. In areas where regime forces withdrew, many of the LCCs saw their role shift from that of documenting and social media to one of governance. Within a few months of the uprising starting, LCCs had sprung up around the country and had taken on multiple roles within the uprising, first as organizers, and, second, as forms of local governance. The governance holes left by the withdrawal of regime forces and the suspension of government services in some areas meant that citizens turned to the LCCs to fill these gaps. As the LCCs took root in Syria, an external body—the Syrian National Council (SNC)—formed outside of the country and was composed of various exiled individuals and political blocs, that were united in desire for regime change.

As these bodies were forming, the Free Syrian Army (FSA) emerged as an armed wing of the Syrian uprising. In response to growing regime violence, army deserters and average citizens took up arms to defend themselves and their communities. These small groupings eventually formed into battalions and brigades and pledged loyalty to the FSA. In reality, however, the battalions and brigades were materially and operationally stunted and failed to develop serious hierarchical connections to the FSA leadership. While different bodies throughout the country pledged loyalty to the FSA, there was nothing resembling a national command structure and the external and internal actors who sought to provide resources to the FSA were never able to fulfill local demands. Much like the LCCs, the strength of the FSA was very localized. Drawing the vertical and horizontal connections needed to map either the violent or nonviolent trends within the Syrian opposition proved almost impossible.

By 2012, the signs of fissures and fragmentation within the Syrian opposition landscape began to reveal themselves as the external opposition began to split into different factions and new armed groups outside of the FSA umbrella emerged on the Syrian landscape. Indeed, in many ways, the possibility of a unified Syrian opposition was undermined from the very beginning. Regime violence, decades of repression, mistrust between activists, the challenges of providing governance, and a host of other factors, all contributed to the instability of



the domestic opposition and the governance projects they sought to establish in the country. These governance projects were highly localized and could not be scaled to the governorate level easily. At the same time, the FSA never established a hierarchical structure that could facilitate strategy and resource sharing. Infighting between commanders was aggravated by external interventions from regional states, especially Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey, that sought to promote certain visions of the FSA and leaders over others. These interventions contributed to the FSA's fragmentation and the emergence of rival factions and new brigades, often consisting of new armed groups altogether. A series of networked (Carter Center 2013; Abboud 2017) armed groups emerged that developed new battlefield strategies.

The political and military fragmentation of the Syrian opposition led to a proliferation of armed groups, the collapse of LCC governance projects and the emergence of new cooperative governance models between armed and nonviolent groups, and a growing humanitarian catastrophe that accelerated Syrian death and displacement. The Syrian regime was increasingly relying on new forms of violence and support from allies to avoid collapse. In this way, the centrality of the logic of violence that structured regime-citizen relations was continued and reinvented in the post-2011 period. Moreover, the regime and its allies had calculated that transitions along the Libyan or Tunisian models would mean the end of the regime and debate within these circles gravitated toward repression as the only means to avoid these scenarios. The ability of the Syrian regime to maintain some geographic control and the presence of so many armed groups that were fighting both each other and the regime produced a military stalemate that took root around early 2013, thus allowing the regime to avoid collapse. The metastasizing battlefield also meant that new drivers of violence, such as individual deprivation or larger war economy patterns, began to emerge. Violence was no longer being deployed solely to overthrow the Syrian regime. The military stalemate paralleled a political stalemate in which international efforts to produce a political solution to the Syrian conflict failed (discussed below). All parties to the conflict and their regional backers preferred a victor's peace to a negotiated solution. The Syrian regime's external allies wanted to avoid an outcome that involved regime change. These strategies led to a military and political stalemate and a constantly shifting battlefield in which military power and control waned from group to group without anyone being able to secure battlefield victory.

## Evolution of the Political System

The Russian military intervention into Syria that began in September 2015 set in motion the battlefield shifts that would bring an end to the military and political stalemate and produce the conditions of possibility for the emergence of a post-conflict political system. The absence of a deliberative peace process between the regime and opposition groups will have a lasting impact on the evolution and future of the Syrian political system. The emergence of a post-conflict political system independent of deliberation and negotiation between different parties will have lasting consequences on the state, regime power, and post-conflict subjectivities. With the exception of the nascent Syrian Constitutional Committee overseen by the United Nations, there is no internationally mandated or internationally led peace process for Syria. The post-conflict order is thus being crafted (Stokke 2009) largely independently of either international or opposition pressure. Indeed, none of the core political demands of most Syrian opposition groups since 2011, such as a political transition, are being realized.

The Russian military intervention made the crafting of a repressive peace possible through the material decimation of armed groups in Syria, which shifted battlefield power to the Syrian regime and its allies. The decimation of armed groups paralleled two political processes—reconciliations and settlements—that the Syrian regime enacted in place of a negotiated political solution. The settlements and reconciliations regimes that emerged after 2015 serve as substitutes for a political process and are two of the four core pillars of the post-conflict political system. The third pillar is represented in a series of property and absentee laws that are determining who gets to stay and live in Syria and who is cast out of the body politic. Thus, in contrast to liberal approaches to peace-making and conflict resolution that stress power sharing between former belligerents, the Syrian regime's approach has been to bifurcate Syrian society into the loyal and disloyal (Abboud 2020) and exclude the latter from the post-conflict political order, while facilitating wealth accumulation and access to political power among the newly emergent conflict elite. Finally, the Astana Process has supplanted international and United Nations efforts to oversee and facilitate a political process and has become a form of international suzerainty over Syria to manage the conflict. The external management and guarantee of Syria's post-conflict order has been assumed by the tripartite powers represented at Astana; Russia, Tur-

key, and Iran. In this way, the Syrian regime and its allies have been able to avoid political or regime change à la Tunisia, Egypt, or Libya.

The Russian intervention aimed at eliminating the conditions for the material reproduction of the armed groups thus targeted highways, checkpoints, border crossings, and all other mobility arteries that connected armed groups to their, often cross-border, networks of reproduction (Abboud 2017). By attacking the nodes of these reproductive networks, the Russian intervention slowly collapsed the armed groups. Russian aerial bombardment coincided with regime-aligned forces movement into areas formally under rebel control. Whereas armed groups were strong enough to maintain a presence on the battlefield but not strong enough to capture territory, the Russian intervention decimated their ability to remain present and active. As such, the armed groups were often besieged and forced into subjugating truces through so-called “reconciliation” (*musalahat*) agreements (Sosnowski 2019). The process of reconciliation was heavily localized and consisted of hundreds of such agreements between the Syrian regime and armed groups who were “reconciled” after battlefield defeat.

The reconciliation agreements have subjected armed groups to regime-imposed conditions for their capitulation. In the immediate post-intervention period, the reconciliation agreements were imposed deals on armed groups to secure their removal from areas that were returning to regime control. These agreements, contrary to their name, do not involve any serious negotiation between belligerents. Instead, when areas were besieged and encircled by regime forces, armed groups and their families were given two choices: either a secured transfer to Idlib governorate in which they would be transported in buses along with their families, or integration into the regime’s counterinsurgency apparatus in either the fourth or fifth division of the Syrian Army. The principal characteristics of these agreements was to produce displacement, population exchanges, the pillaging of towns, and the alchemic transformation of former “terrorists” from being enemies into friends of the regime. As a peace-making measure, the reconciliation agreements serve to bifurcate society into the loyal and disloyal. As a form of governance, the agreements ensure the suppression of dissent through the legitimized exercise of violence by the regime against recalcitrant populations. The original rationale behind the Astana Process was to ensure the implementation of the terms of these agreements throughout Syria. In February 2016, Russia created the Russian Center for Reconcilia-

tion of Opposing Sides in the Syrian Arab Republic as a joint Russian-Turkish body to monitor the reconciliation agreements. This battlefield cooperation provided the impetus for the inclusion of Iran in the management of the Syrian battlefield and the expansion of tripartite consensus over major military and political issues.

The reconciliation agreements were an important precursor to external cooperation in managing Syria's conflict as well as the regime's construction of a post-conflict order that bifurcated Syrian society into the loyal and disloyal. Reconciliation agreements that provided clear choices to armed groups to accept internal displacement or pledge loyalty to the regime and be integrated into the national army thus produced a mechanism to separate the loyal from the disloyal. This process created new subjectivities (the reconciled fighter), new geographies (reconciled areas), and new political processes (reconciliations) in the name of peace-making. Reconciled fighters were regularly interviewed in various social and public media outlets about their decisions to abandon "terrorism" and state television carried regular reports of renewed life in reconciled areas. As a model of conflict management, the reconciliations provided alternative approaches to de-mobilization and disarmament that allowed for former armed fighters to pledge loyalty to the state through re-mobilization in the counterinsurgency apparatus. Those that accepted displacement to Idlib governorate forfeited all assets and property in Syria and were effectively de-nationalized.

These agreements have substituted for a disarmament campaign while providing a political process for the alchemic transformation of former enemies into friends of the regime. The reconciliation agreements facilitate this alchemy by allowing fighters to both denounce their former battlefield allies by revealing information about them and integrate into the army's counterinsurgency apparatus, ensuring the performance of loyalty as a condition for participation in post-conflict order. These denunciations perform loyalty and demonstrate a commitment to return to the "homeland." Regime discourse around the reconciliations emphasizes the state's benevolence in accepting those who have made "mistakes" but who wish to return to the homeland. The political rationale behind these transformations has been clear: to produce a process that reasonably reflects deliberation and agreement between the regime and armed groups. The political importance attached to the reconciliations is thus significant, as it serves as a substitute for other forms of political deliberation and more substantive reconciliation. In actuality, the reconciliations are a form of conflict

management that also allows the regime to demarcate the boundaries between former fighters and to decide who is loyal to the state and who is not.

The Syrian regime has also established a process for citizens to “settle” with the state by proving that they have not engaged in any “terroristic” or subversive activity against the “homeland” since 2011. This is a process that parallels that of the reconciliation agreements but is directed mostly at citizens outside of the country who are not engaged in active fighting at the time of the application. The settlement process is a quasi-legal regime that allows Syrian citizens outside of the country to apply to a settlement committee to determine whether they are eligible to return to the country. The settlement committees exist throughout the country and are mostly composed of Ba’ath Party officials and local elites (Hinnebusch and Imady 2017). These committees receive applications from Syrians outside of the country that are usually delivered by family members or lawyers. The application process asks citizens a range of questions about their political and military activity during the conflict. Some of the questions ask why they left the country while others ask about whether they know of anyone who engaged in subversive activity. The application provides the opportunity for Syrians to demonstrate their loyalty to the regime by declaring that they have not engaged in political activity while also identifying others they know who have. Settlement committees then forward the applications to local intelligence agencies that decide whether or not the citizens can return. Decisions are published through the settlement committees and applicants are simply told “yes” or “no” about whether they can return (Zaman al Wasl 2019). Those permitted to return are provided with legal documentation attesting to their settlement and are allowed to return to Syria and are extended full rights, assuming that they have not violated other laws. Those told “no” are simply denied entry into Syria and forced to live outside of the country. The settlement process produces legal processes to bifurcate society into the loyal and disloyal.

The regime justifies the settlement process through a fear of a returning “fifth column” that requires rehabilitation and a demonstration of loyalty to prevent a recurrence of violence. All citizens who request settlement must complete a four-page document that provides descriptive information that identifies them, their profession, village of origin, and so on, and any information they have about armed and political activity. There are also 12 open-ended questions that range

from asking for any information they have about individuals engaged in “terrorism,” to their knowledge of mass graves. The document ends with a pledge to “build national pride” alongside the government and to never betray the homeland.

While the regime has engaged in retributions against the reconciled fighters, there is also evidence that “settled” citizens are also targeted for legal prosecution even after receiving settlement papers. The settlement process does not provide immunity and citizens can remain targets of regime violence and prosecution. Haid (2019) has detailed the process of denunciations emerging in Syria today and how the state has encouraged citizens to submit the names of individuals, settled or not, who they suspect of engaging in subversion. These denunciations provide another mechanism for citizens to demonstrate loyalty through the denunciation of their fellow citizens, similarly to the process that encourages former fighters to reveal information about their former battlefield allies. The settlement process also questions citizens about their knowledge of other Syrians’ political activity, providing them an immediate opportunity to denounce others inside or outside of the country. These denunciations produce two important outcomes: first, they automatically initiate legal proceedings against citizens whose name appears on these lists, and, second, they create an inventory of names and clandestine opposition bodies that were suspected of participating in any form of opposition activity. In the short term, Syrians on these lists have to worry about being stopped at checkpoints or being arrested and imprisoned. In the long-term, this makes return to the country virtually impossible, particularly as absenteeism has been criminalized (see below). The settlement process may provide temporary conferment of loyalty on an individual, but this is no guarantee of safety.

While the settlement process has been created principally for Syrians outside of the country, the regime has established a series of laws that aim to similarly produce loyal subjects while excluding the disloyal from the post-conflict order. These new legal regimes aim to punish Syrians for their disloyalty to the regime and “homeland” during the course of the conflict by criminalizing various forms of absenteeism. After a series of presidential amnesties, the state passed an Amnesty Law (No. 18) in October 2018 that criminalized army desertion and created a process for Syrians inside and outside of the country to receive amnesty for not re-enlisting in the army. The law refers to the “mistakes” made by Syrians who can repent through re-enlisting

and paying a fine. Anyone suspected of engaging in “terrorism” or any form of political subversive activity does not qualify for amnesty. For those Syrians who do not re-enlist or claim amnesty, a series of new laws now permit the state to seize assets and property while also, in extreme cases, permitting forms of implicit de-nationalization that prohibit Syrians from living and working in Syria. Law No. 35 (2017) amended Law No. 63 and legalized the confiscation and redistribution of the assets and property of military deserters, thus suturing the crime of absenteeism and property seizure. The military desertion laws create an altogether new category of the “unsettled” Syrian subject, whose absenteeism demands repentance through property forfeiture.

The Syrian regime has similarly criminalized other forms of absenteeism and politically subversive activity through laws that permit property forfeiture. Law No. 22, for example, created new counterterrorism courts that would deal exclusively with violations of Law No. 19 that permitted the state to confiscate the property of anyone charged with acts of “terrorism.” These new courts uphold a very expansive definition of terrorism that includes “every act intended to create panic among people” through violent or nonviolent means. This includes any sort of political activity, from organizing a meeting to posting on social media. Another form of property forfeiture has been legalized through Decree No. 11 (2016) that annulled all property transactions occurring outside of areas of regime control. The law immediately allowed former owners to reclaim their property if they satisfied a set of legal conditions, including property documentation and evidence that they did not engage in “terrorism.” The law effectively created an absentee property system where Syrians who were unable, unwilling, or fearful of applying for property reinstatement lost their property that would then be auctioned off by the state.

These laws are not simply a land grab by the regime, but are intended to create a new form of post-conflict subject that is loyal to the state. Those deemed disloyal through their absenteeism are subject to a range of laws that enact property forfeiture, and which prevent them from opening up bank accounts, working, or even residing in Syria. These laws are not explicitly aimed at de-nationalizing Syrians, but that will certainly be the long-term effect. A series of laws construct post-conflict subjects as loyal through their demonstrated ability to own property or reside in Syria. For example, Laws No. 66 (2012), No. 20 (2015), No. 23 (2015), No. 26 (2015), and No. 10 (2018) all contain provisions for the appropriation, reclassification, and public sale of for-

merly privately held lands. Syrian citizens are required under these laws to demonstrate that they have not engaged in politically subversive or “terrorist” activity to prevent the forfeiture of their land. There is precedent in Syrian law for these practices, which often depend on reference to property laws passed prior to 2011. The post-2011 legal innovations are thus continuations of practices that legally excluded Syrians from the body politic.

Such practices also serve to embolden and strengthen Syria's conflict elite. In response to the pressures of capital flight, economic contraction and international sanctions, the Syrian regime was forced to cultivate a new stratum of elite businesspeople who could support the war. As the traditional business elite slowly left the country or were forced out of positions of political power, such as on the Boards of Chambers of Commerce or holding companies (*Souria* and *Cham*), a new crop of compliant, loyalist elites replaced them. These elites helped the regime circumvent sanctions through various measures while also serving as intermediaries between different armed groups, the outside world, and the regime. Over time, these elites gained proximity to regime circles and began taking over key positions vacated by the old business elite while also entering new areas of the Syrian war economy, such as privatized security. As such, this conflict elite owes its wealth and power to the conflict and remains dependent on its conditions. It is these conflict elite and the militia commanders and warlords that they often financially support who have reaped the greatest benefit from the appropriation of property and its redistribution.

Comparable changes have occurred throughout the Syrian economy that are consequential on the future of the political system. In 2016, the government abandoned its commitment to a “social market economy” and advanced a new model of Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs) as the cornerstone of post-conflict reconstruction and development. While PPPs were an important part of the reform period of the 2000s, they have now been centralized as the government's strategy to attract private capital. In return, the state has committed to a large-scale transfer of public lands and resources to the private sector. Land appropriations and their redistribution to private sector interests often fall within this framework of post-conflict reconstruction. Thus, the production of a post-conflict political economy around the narrow interests of a conflict elite is deeply meshed with the legal strategies of constructing new forms of citizenship and subjectivity.

The reconciliation and settlement regimes intertwine with a new



legal architecture to produce a new form of subjectivity in relation to state and elite power, in which citizens are expected to demonstrate loyalty to the homeland in order to retain rights of residency, work, and property in Syria. These new regimes are productive of various forms of exclusion that target former fighters, the displaced (both internally and externally), and Syrians inside of the country, for casting out of Syria's future. While the laws do not explicitly de-nationalize Syrians, the intended effect is to make the excluded's presence in Syria impossible as all rights are effectively taken away. Absenteeism has emerged as a form of demarcating political subjects in Syria and distinguishing between the loyal and disloyal. While these forms of subject-making are occurring at the national level, they intertwine with the emergence of a guarantor system of external suzerainty through the Astana Process.

The Astana Process has become the principal international forum for the management of the Syrian conflict and the negotiation of a post-conflict order, having supplanted the United Nations-led efforts. The Geneva Process failed to end the political stalemate in Syria and initiate a political process to end the conflict. The United Nations has appointed four envoys to Syria since the conflict began, each with their own approach to peace-making that, ultimately, failed to place enough pressure on the Syrian regime to engage in serious negotiations. The United Nations' efforts to end the Syrian conflict failed because the various centers of power represented (and not represented) at the negotiating table undermined peace-making and instead supported a military solution to the conflict. A political solution could only be arrived at after a decisive military victory or dramatic shift in the battlefield. Bâli and Rana (2017) identify two common explanations for the failure of the Geneva Process. The first is that the United Nations' desire to negotiate a "grand bargain" among all of the parties precluded a military solution that could have ended the conflict. In this view, a military intervention and not an internationally mandated political process was needed to overthrow the regime. The second explanation is that the United Nations' inclusion of the Syrian regime as a peace partner legitimized the regime and prevented the Syrian opposition and their regional backers from taking a political process seriously. Both explanations attribute failure to the design of the United Nations' efforts. A third, related explanation, is that regional actors actively undermined peace efforts through their commitment to a battlefield victory.

The Astana Process emerged in parallel to the United Nations'

efforts to negotiate an end to the Syrian conflict. The Astana Process, however, differed radically from the Geneva Process in its focus on conflict management by tripartite powers (Russian, Iran, and Turkey) and not a negotiated political settlement. As a form of international suzerainty over Syria, the Astana Process has provided external legitimization of the continuation of violence in the name of peacemaking, and has provided a serious alternative to the forms of liberal peacemaking advanced by the United Nations. As such, Astana represents a space for the negotiation and implementation of new norms around conflict management and resolution while providing opportunities for Astana's leaders to shore up domestic support and legitimacy. In Turkey's case, involvement in Syria has been intimately bound up in an expansionary foreign policy and the survival strategies of Turkish President Recep Erdoğan (Alemdaroğlu and Tol, this volume). As Alemdaroğlu and Tol claim in this volume, Turkey's "hard power" intervention into Syria reflected an expansionary, neo-Ottomanist foreign policy that sought regime survival through enhanced militarism at home and abroad. Similarly, Iranian leaders have resorted to new discursive methods to foster hostility to, among other political currents, Wahhabism, in an attempt to shore up domestic legitimacy. These new "culture wars" in Iran coexist with militarized strategies in Syria and elsewhere as pillars of the state's vision of regional order (Milani, this volume).

The trajectory of the Astana Process has been from a series of meetings to discuss the management of local truces and the monitoring of ceasefires toward a process that is now actively negotiating major political issues, such as a post-conflict constitution. The Astana powers have actively ignored the six-point plan that was at the basis of the Geneva negotiations. At the same time, a Syrian opposition, represented in the Syrian Congress of National Dialogue, has been created as a negotiating partner that the Syrian regime has agreed to negotiate with. Importantly, this new Congress legitimizes the Syrian regime as a negotiating partner and thus serves to undermine existing opposition bodies. Similarly, the creation and composition of the Syrian Constitutional Committee, as a body that includes appointments by the Syrian regime, ensures that a post-conflict constitution or political transition would never seriously undermine regime power in the way that a Geneva Process transition may have.

The Syrian political system is instead currently being shaped by the four pillars of post-conflict order: reconciliations, settlements, prop-

erty laws, and the Astana Process. Together, these pillars are productive of a particular constellation of domestic and regional power that is shaping Syria's political system. As the battlefield shifted, so too did the prospects for political change. The Syrian political system has evolved in relation to the battlefield and independent of external pressures for a political transition or a rights-based or power-sharing approach to conflict resolution. As such, the Syrian political system is emerging in relation to the Syrian regime and its allies' ability to craft peace out of the remnants of a brutal, catastrophic war. The crafting of a peace outside of the dual pressures of international organizations (such as the United Nations) or domestic political opponents are the principal factors structuring the emergence of a repressive peace in Syria.

### **Implications for Future Struggles for Political Change**

The future struggles for political change in Syria will be determined by the materialization of the four pillars of repressive peace currently taking root after the Russian intervention began in 2015. The reconciliation agreements, civilian settlements, property laws, and the Astana Process all represent a form of conflict management that bifurcates Syrian society into the loyal and disloyal. Post-conflict order is being constructed out of the Syrian regime and its allies' continued enmity toward populations defined around questions of loyalty and politics, and not sect or ethnicity. The bifurcation of Syrians into these categories will shape the possibilities for political agency in the short term, on the one hand, and long-term structural and institutional change, on the other. The central political factor shaping Syria's post-conflict politics is the absence of an internationally mandated or domestically negotiated political process to end the conflict. This has allowed the Syrian regime and its allies to craft peace in ways that maintain and perpetuate regime practices of governing through violence and exclusion.

One of the principal implications of the peripheralization of international actors in crafting peace is the total absence of a rights-based approach to the construction of post-conflict order. International interventions to manage conflicts and oversee political transitions often produce forms of hybrid peace that reproduce rather than undermine pre-conflict patterns of inter-elite conflict (Richmond 2014). These interventions also reorient national economies along neoliberal lines by, among other things, creating policies that reduce public spending

while facilitating external capital flows. While many of these international interventions thus produce forms of peace that perpetuate certain forms of violence and conflict, they do rely on a political language of rights that advocates for the enshrinement of citizen rights in post-conflict orders. Moreover, internationally mandated political transitions can facilitate refugee repatriation and ensure the return of the displaced. Finally, international interventions provide external resources for post-conflict reconstruction that are otherwise not available to post-conflict states without sufficient tax bases or financial reserves (Bhatia 2005). The goal of international intervention is to produce a specific rights-bearing liberal subject out of the rubble of war. The transition from war to peace is premised on a series of interventions and policies that produce this rights-bearing subject.

Syria's repressive peace is constructed around an alternative subjectivity that seeks to create a subject that is neither rights-bearing, market-oriented, or liberal. The subjectivity of Syria's post-conflict order is instead one determined by political questions of loyalty and disloyalty and the ability of citizens to demonstrate the former through continued subservience to the Syrian regime and the "homeland." This subservience manifests itself in citizens' compliance with newly passed laws that criminalize a range of activities as terroristic. The regime's deployment of such violence as a form of rule (Ismail 2018) aims to produce compliant subjects who are aware of the violent consequences of subversion. The continued deployment of violence and the law against recalcitrant populations and the creation of vague legal categories that criminalize any form of dissent as "terrorism" create subjects in relation to a discourse of disloyalty and loyalty in which the former can be acted upon with violence. The repressive peace advances new forms of enmity, retribution, and political exclusion as cornerstones of post-conflict order. This order cannot serve as the anchor for a more progressive or inclusive political system.

In this context, the prospects for serious political change are circumscribed. The persistence of policies and practices of violence and enmity preclude forms of political deliberation among various segments of Syrian society. The country's landscape is dotted with checkpoints and the threat of violence is a daily reality for Syrians who must contend with the disastrous consequences of the conflict and the knowledge that violence occurs with virtual immunity. The persistence of violence and the absence of a deliberative process or body that could ensure the safety and security of citizens produces a form of instability

that is neither war or peace. Indeed, whereas liberal interveners seek to eliminate all forms of violence as an indicator of “peace,” Syria’s repressive peace is premised on the continuation of violence in the name of securing the state from the return of large-scale conflict. Here, the presence of continued violence by the regime and its allies is not an aberration of a form of peace but central to it.

The regime’s ability to continually marshal violence against Syrians in the name of peace is a defining feature of the post-conflict order. The Astana Process, for example, created a series of de-escalation zones in which armed groups were expected to maintain a ceasefire agreement while the regime and its allies reserved the right to engage in aerial and ground attacks. The regime’s continued imprisonment of Syrians and the violence that occurs in everyday life is an extension and revealing of forms of violent rule that have been at the core of the Ba’athist government in Syria for decades (Ismail 2018). For Ismail, regime violence was central to producing a form of subjectivity that was subservient to the regime. In the conflict and emerging post-conflict period, these new, more apparent forms of violence are producing new forms of subjectivity intended to affect a post-conflict subject that is compliant with the regime. When Syrian President Bashar al-Assad says that “the country belongs to those who defended it,” he is also saying that those who harmed it no longer belong. Maintaining the distinction between who defends/belongs and who hurt/does not belong is a key feature of the post-conflict legal and political system emerging today.

Many Syrians who continue to reside in the country, or who move freely inside and outside of it, have suggested that the struggle for political change in Syria is now a generational one and is not being fought over “big” issues like political transition but rather more granular issues, such as the restoration of individual property rights. Throughout the country, there is an emergent space for political negotiation and deliberation around very localized issues even though the opportunity for national-level deliberation, through Parliament for example, is limited. Thus, while power sharing has been eschewed at the national level, there is still some opportunities for initiating some changes at different levels.

## Conclusion

The regime’s response to the COVID-19 crisis has further eroded its legitimacy among Syrians, who are already suffering from a decade-

long war that has decimated social and public structures of support. As COVID-19 ravages the country, the regime has secured a commitment from the United Nations that all aid distribution is funneled through Damascus, effectively ensuring that resources will be withheld to certain populations. The regime's ability to capture and distribute aid only enhances its repressive capacity. Paradoxically, however, the regime's inability to curtail the spread of COVID-19 amidst a deteriorating economic situation, hyper-inflation, and a deepening of international sanctions, has further delegitimized the regime in the eyes of many Syrians, including the most committed loyalists. The Syrian regime is thus strong enough to divert aid but not strong enough to marshal this aid toward its legitimation, as the multidirectional pressures of COVID-19, sanctions, and war, take its toll on the population. How the Syrian regime negotiates these pressures will determine the future stability of the repressive peace.

International pressure on the Syrian regime remains strong, as Russia attempts to encourage European and Western rapprochement with the regime so that reconstruction aid can be funneled to Syria. The recent passing of the Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act suggests that such a rapprochement will not happen anytime soon and that the United States and European Union are willing to tighten the sanctions as their only means of placing pressure on the regime. The pressures of war, sanctions, inflation, and a global pandemic may be too much for Syrians to handle, but it is certainly not enough for the regime to abandon repression and support genuine political dialogue and transition. The structure of post-conflict order suggests that the regime is interested in retribution and not reconciliation and it is unclear if even the intense, unprecedented pressures being felt in the country today will alleviate that.

Despite Syria's unique circumstances, the post-2011 period demonstrates the consistency of regime responses to political mobilization, dissent, and calls for political pluralism and openness as being rooted in a closure of political space. This closure occurs in Syria, Egypt, Morocco, and elsewhere through the twin practices of violent repression and coercive legal measures. What seems to distinguish these cases is the degree to which each regime can marshal these measures to constrict political space. The Syrian regime has seemingly withstood the worst phase of the militarized phase of the conflict. Crafting and maintaining a form of repressive peace using the same measures may prove even more challenging.

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## 6 | Mobilization without Movement

### Opposition and Youth Activism in Jordan

*Sean Yom*

The Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan weathered a turbulent decade of contentious protests starting with the Arab Spring. Thousands of demonstrations, strikes, marches, and other forms of collective resistance punctuated 2011–12, and hundreds more continued in the years that followed. Driving some was a familiar array of opposition actors that had long tussled with the authoritarian levers of state power, such as civil society associations and the Muslim Brotherhood. However, much of this new resistance also hailed from more marginalized capillaries of society, particularly youth activists who coordinated new grassroots groups and networks of dissent. These *hirak* (an Arabic term meaning, roughly, popular movements) imposed stark demands, calling for the regime to battle corruption, reverse economic neoliberalism, halt repressive abuses, and embrace constitutional democracy.

That Jordan's authoritarian monarchy persists after a decade of such agitation is obvious, as officials reacted to swells of new opposition with survival strategies such as targeted repression, cycling through governments, and vague reform promises. The COVID-19 pandemic also put a temporary halt to popular mobilization for much of 2020, with the kingdom enacting one of the strictest lockdown campaigns in the world. Yet these realities should not obscure the underlying puzzle that emerges through Jordan's recent experiences, one that I call "mobilization without movement." The torrent of participatory actions unleashed by Jordan's youth was not followed by subsequent organization into a permanent national structure. While many *hirak* amalgamated around shared economic and political frustrations under

popular slogans of solidarity, they did not craft a cross-cutting coalition built around defined leadership, cohesive identity, and centralized operations—the sort of institutionalizing features that lend opposition movements everywhere a sense of permanence and power. The Jordanian activists that came of age during the Arab Spring seem to excel in protesting at a quotidian level, but they struggle with building national movements.

The case of Jordan therefore cuts to the heart of this volume's second theme, namely how opposition forces across the Arab world have engaged in popular mobilization since the Arab Spring. What makes the Hashemite Kingdom so trenchant is how it exemplifies the widening gap between the profundity of mass mobilization on the one hand and organized movement-building on the other—a trend that the next chapters explore across different countries. Conventional hypotheses falter in explaining this situation of mobilization without movement. Whereas scholars of protests often speak about repertoires of *contention*, this paradox accentuates what might be termed repertoires of *organization*. As it stands, existing theories do not fully explain the inconsistency of organized movement-building among Jordan's newest activist generation. Structural factors associated with movement-formation in other contexts exist in ample quantity here, such as a deep reservoir of salient grievances as well as technological resources that can knit together enduring alliances. Moreover, whereas prevailing literature suggests that exogenous variables like state coercion, communal fragmentation, and geopolitical pressures have suppressed the capacity of Jordanian activists to build national movements, the simple fact is that most Jordanian activists *prefer* not to do so, even when given the opportunity to scale up and beyond their immediate sites of contestation.

What explains this preference? I argue that the commitments of young Jordanian oppositionists today do not reside in the quest to craft ideological parties, civil society foundations, and other formal organizations associated with democratic defiance under autocratic settings. Instead, *hirak* coordinators see the work of everyday dissent best expressed through localized initiatives centered upon three key traits—horizontality, informality, and ideological distancing. These factors reflect a process of learning and adaptation among the current generation of activists, whose egalitarian commitments see more concrete, institutionalized actors as symptomatic of the authoritarian rot afflicting Jordan. Thus, the absence of large-scale movement formation does

not reflect “failure,” a scathing term that evokes teleological assumptions about how democratic opposition should appear. Rather, it highlights a distinctive worldview that shows that many oppositionists subscribe to a new paradigm of dissidence, one that refuses to follow old rules and nurtures new forms of defiance that resonate with their moral worldview.

Drawing upon a collection of scholarly materials, as well as interviews conducted during several stints of fieldwork, this chapter expounds on this thesis. It proceeds in five sections. First, it explores the relationship between mobilization, movements, and organization in the context of the Arab Spring, and as understood by specialists of contentious politics. Second, it unpacks the contentious decade of Jordan, tracing the new forms of *hirak* activism that have emerged. It emphasizes the fluidity of these youth groups, and notes that grievances, resources, identity schisms, and geopolitical conflicts are not sufficient explanations for their eschewing of national movement-building. Third, it analyzes the horizontal, informal, and non-ideological preferences of this new trend. Such commitments are the result of many youth activists reacting to the perceived failures of older opposition, and adapting against repression and other constraints. The fourth section provides two case studies of *hirak* groups, Shaghaf and the Jordanian Youth HIRAK, to assess whether the style and substance of this new generation can be called successful. The answer calls into question what the meaning of success ought to be. The fifth and concluding section traces the future implications of these dynamics, with a comparative eye toward other Arab countries.

### **Authoritarianism and Mobilization in the Arab Spring**

Jordan’s decade of contentiousness has occurred under a common form of political rule in the contemporary Middle East, namely “liberalized autocracy” (Brumberg 2002). It is liberalized, because unlike more closed autocracies like Saudi Arabia and Syria, many forms of opposition remain legal, citizens have partial freedom of speech and association, and public discussions about government policies are not haunted by the omnipresent threat of violent coercion. Yet it is also authoritarian, because for all the vestiges of democracy presented to visitors—an elected Parliament, active civil society, vocal media—

executive power is tightly controlled by an unelected elite consisting of the Hashemite king, royal court, appointed government, and coercive apparatus (that is, the army, intelligence, and policing organs). The liberalized nature of this political order underlies the kingdom's Western-friendly image as an oasis of moderation in the Middle East.

In reality, the history of Jordan is not so much a chronicle of democratic gradualism as a story of constant contestation against authoritarian hegemony. Popular challengers have often attempted to wrest away power from the royal center, only to suffer defeat due to the regime's trifecta of survival strategies: Coercive violence, Western support, and backing by the Transjordanian tribal minority, as opposed to the Palestinian majority produced by refugee influxes beginning with the 1948 Arab–Israeli War (Yom 2016, 181–208). In the late 1980s, the monarchy under King Hussein reacted to economic crisis with a slightly modified approach by opting for political liberalization. Similar to what the Moroccan monarchy engineered in response to fiscal pressures, the Jordanian regime ended martial law and began tolerating a modest veneer of pluralism. However, while many opposition forces were no longer prohibited, the regime also doubled down on autocratic rule by leveraging new tactics of manipulation, which alongside old tactics ensured the containment of society (Yom 2013).

Jordan hence typified the painful lesson that liberalization is not democratization. Under King Abdullah, who assumed power in 1999, the Hashemite regime has continued to regulate politics within a flexible ecology of institutional control. As before, the palace still sacks unpopular governments, occasionally represses vocal critics, and delivers vague promises for future democracy in a bid to prune the sharp edge off popular frustrations. It also perpetuates divide-and-rule policies through electoral engineering and social interference. National (and, since 2017, municipal) elections occur, but the products are parliamentary and local bodies that have little policy-making authority. In particular, parliamentary elections remain saddled with malapportioned districting that vastly overweighs ostensibly loyal Transjordanian tribal areas, while marginalizing Palestinian-dominated urban areas like Amman. Security forces likewise continue to cast a dark shadow over the citizenry. When it is not curbing protests or detaining dissidents, the coercive apparatus is busy spreading misinformation, intimidating social contacts, and stoking tribal fears of Palestinian domination (Moss 2014).

### *The Arab Spring*

This was the political equation when the Arab Spring erupted. The Arab Spring represented an historical rupture across the Middle East, with its autochthonous rebellions embodying the definition of contentious politics—“episodic, public, collective interaction” driven by social groups confronting political authority (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001, 5). Peaceful mass mobilization in most Arab countries abided by a lesson that theorists of civil resistance know well: While even pacifist crusades have room for militancy, principled nonviolence often succeeds because it encourages popular participation, underscores the brutality of governments, and draws support from sympathetic stand-patters (Nepstad 2015).

One recurrent pattern in the Arab Spring, which some of the other chapters of this book note, rests in the relatively short lifespan of these uprisings. In cases of both regime change (that is, Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Libya) and regime persistence (everywhere else, including Jordan), the millions of people undertaking tens of thousands of punctuating events—protests, demonstrations, strikes, occupations, rallies, and pickets—seldom organized national movements that endured for more than a few years. In no post-revolutionary elections, for example, did the progenitors of the original uprisings convert their victories in the street to dominance in politics through brick-and-mortar parties. In Tunisia and Egypt, for instance, it was not activist networks but Islamists, leftists, and remnants of toppled autocratic parties that filled the electoral vacuum. Of course, this was hardly the only reason why the Arab Uprisings did not produce peaceful democratic transitions outside of Tunisia. Authoritarian learning, social conflict, rentier wealth, and Western antipathy all played a role in sabotaging the febrile climate of democratic emancipation (Brownlee, Masoud, and Reynolds 2015; Achcar 2016). As Toby Matthiesen’s chapter in this volume notes, the Saudi-Emirati counterrevolutionary axis also undermined the prospects for democratization by projecting geopolitical pressures against popular movements in the region, while bolstering allied autocracies.

However, one legacy remains indisputable. While the uprisings constituted impressive episodes of concerted resistance by marginalized citizens, they did not engender large-scale organizations and enduring national movements that could either guide political systems in the aftermath of authoritarian turnover, or else maintain popular

pressures against recalcitrant autocrats who outlived the unrest. Lindsay Benstead's chapter in this book, for instance, shows how political elites from established currents, from Islamist Ennahda to the old ruling party, predominated the transitional process; while this ensured some political consensus, it also sidelined the youth activists behind the revolution, and planted the seeds for future public protests. Outside the Middle East, Western critics picked up on this trends. For some, the Arab world suffered a repetition of the May 1968 problem. Then, mass anti-capitalist insurrections in France were quickly followed by a resurgence of conservative political forces at the ballot box, which appropriated many of their slogans to win over the public (Žižek 2018). In sum, Arab protestors temporarily paralyzed the existing political order, but could not impose an entirely new one.

### *Building Movements Through Organization*

This evokes a deeper question: When does popular activism beget organization into formal movements? Here, turning to theoretical literature provides some guidance. Movements refer to “collective challenges, based on common purposes and social solidarities, in sustained interaction with elites, opponents, and authorities” (Tarrow 2011, 11). They can organically coalesce around localized protests, but to be more than coincidental assemblages of people, activists must *organize*. Organizing refers to not just intermittent management of protests or advocacy claims, but rather “connective structures or interpersonal networks that link leaders and followers, centers and peripheries, and different parts of a movement sector with one another, permitting coordination and aggregation, and allowing movements to persist” (Tarrow 2011, 124). Organization, in total, means scaling up—that is, pooling networks and activists into a larger, collective entity—and creating rules governing that entity so that it can endure.

How much to formally organize reflects the choice that all movement-builders face between two poles of organizational complexity: Centralized versus decentralized, bureaucratic versus adhocratic, hierarchical versus horizontal, and planned versus spontaneous (Piven and Cloward 1977; Gamson 1990). Most large and successful social movements, from anti-colonial organizations to labor unions, tilt to the former pole of complexity and formality. They have a centralized and hierarchical leadership capable of assigning roles and planning operations; a coherent identity or self-conception, which provides con-

stitutive norms and solidary purposes; and bureaucratic mechanisms of coordination, such as charters, agreements, and guidelines that delineate criteria for action and synchronize the boundaries of membership. Such organizing allows small movements to grow into larger coalitions by making credible commitments with other groups, and sustaining the mobilizational energies of members outside of the act of protest. It is also unglamorous work. Humdrum tasks like handling communications, creating documents, taking meeting minutes, arranging committees, and securing funds unfurls far from the street, by operatives receiving little public applause for their investment. But to many, it is necessary.

Academic studies of contentious politics and social movements provides uneven insights in understanding how activists mediate these choices of organizational complexity. Scholars have long explored what variables shaped the success of movements once formed, such as their internal resources, political opportunity structures, and collective frames, while newer studies emphasize the rich microdynamics of movement behavior, such as routine contention, cultural narratives, and social interaction (Goodwin and Jasper 2003; Van Stekelenburg, Roggeband, and Klandermans 2013). If there is any implicit consensus, it holds that chosen forms of organization will generally match the political circumstances of a struggle, from Asef Bayat's idea of "non-movements" among the urban poor of Iran (Bayat 1999), to Douglas McAdam's classic study of black resistance in America (McAdam 2010). By contrast, professional activists in the West speak strongly about this issue, often advocating formal organization over the "tyranny of structurelessness" (Freeman 1972). For many, even ardent opposition cannot overcome unjust authority until protestors on the street transform themselves into a centralized, bureaucratic, and hierarchical front drawing together disparate citizens into a coalition capable of mounting long-term campaigns of resistance, and organized enough to withstand repression, apathy, and infighting (Smucker 2017, 155–86). As Aric McBay warns, "the end point of a structureless group is an inability to escalate beyond consciousness raising, and a surrender to the iron law of involution" (McBay 2019, 205–7).

In this context, the Jordanian case is telling. It illustrates the importance of taking the organizational strategies of activists as a meaningful puzzle rather than the functional outgrowth of external institutions. The relevant inquiry is not why young people in Jordan protested in the Arab Spring, and continue to do so today. It is why they have consis-

tently chosen to not organize beyond those protests, and scale up their mobilizational campaigns to develop permanent opposition groups that have a sense of permanence. A grassroots network of fifty people can conceive itself with a cohesive entity, but movement-building means extending across the national space to create connective structures with other voices, groups, and resources. Such scaling-up is not a foreign idea. It permeates the history of popular struggle in the Middle East. From the early twentieth century onwards, nationalist fronts, pan-Arabism, communism, unions, feminists, Islamists, and campaigns of stateless peoples like Palestinians, Sahrawis, and Kurds have all centered upon the creation of formal, centralized, and hierarchical organizations devoted to achieving long-term goals (Chalcraft 2016). The absence of such far-ranging movement formation in Jordan therefore merits scrutiny. The broader relevance of the puzzle becomes even more apparent when considering that recent waves of popular mobilization throughout the region have exhibited a similar aversion to the workings and logic of organized formal politics, as this volume's chapters on Lebanon, Iraq, and Algeria show.

### **Jordan's Contentious Decade**

The outburst of rallies, strikes, and demonstrations comprising the "Jordanian Spring" has been well catalogued, from its contentious origins to authoritarian responses (Berger 2015). The Hashemite Kingdom experienced over eight thousand protests in a thirty-month period beginning December 2010, with its first demonstrations occurring not long after the Tunisian revolution began. They varied in size and intensity, from tiny gatherings of a few dozens of people to bigger occupations of public spaces involving thousands, and shook every major town and city. The leading actors were youth activists, whose *hirak* groups had little prior experience in politics or civil society. Such mass mobilization was almost all peaceful, excepting a few incidents like the November 2012 anti-austerity riots; given the liberalized climate of authoritarian rule, officials tolerated most protests. The *hirak* groups' modalities of contention went far beyond street marches and often dipped into inventive form, from symbolic art and dance to the physical violation of red lines, such as burning pictures of King Abdullah and accusing his wife, Queen Rania, of plundering the country. While few desired to topple the monarchy, the demonstrators converged on



their demands for political change, such as halting endemic corruption, reversing neoliberal economic policies, reforming the electoral laws, and broadening political rights.

### *Post-Arab Spring Unrest*

Jordan's largest protest campaigns mostly dissipated by spring 2013, due to the regime's battery of counterstrategies: shallow reform promises, legal constrictions against opposition, electoral chicanery, accusations of Islamist radicalization, and increased Western support. Still, protests continued, albeit at a slower pace. While weekly demonstrations subsided after summer 2013, smaller uprisings continued to occur, particularly in rural areas where young tribal activists had established earlier patterns of disobedience. For instance, Dhiban, the tribal epicenter where the first *hirak* group emerged in December 2010, saw its Transjordanian youths continuing to revolt throughout 2016 (*Al-Quds Al-Arabi* 2016). Further, the biggest new demonstrations also erupted within the capital of Amman in response to controversial policies that incensed old and new opposition, such as the importing of natural gas from Israel in fall 2016, rising food and fuel prices in early 2017, the imposition of an International Monetary Fund (IMF)-induced tax law in summer 2018, and the government's refusal to raise teachers' wages in September 2019. On a smaller scale, youths also mounted demonstrations and strikes over more specific issues, as in the March 2019 public march of unemployed men from the impoverished south to the royal palace in Amman.

Yet there is no national *hirak* movement. Rather, over a hundred *hirak* groups since 2011 have espoused a familiar set of demands: less corruption, more jobs, less repression, more democracy (Yom 2014; Amis 2016). They vary widely in size, from a few dozen regular participants to the hundreds in Amman's Jordanian Youth HIRAK. Many take on the local character of their birthplace; the Dhiban *hirak*, for instance, is distinctive from the *hirak* of southern towns like Ma'n and Tafleeh, where different tribal histories and social understandings operate. Other *hirak* congregate around specific issues, such as wages and jobs. Yet for all, the activity of protest serves as the operational centerpiece, with considerable time spent either coordinating a current demonstration or else spreading relevant news that could spark the next one. They do not have physical offices or organizational spaces, like civic associations and parties would. Many have also dwindled; by my own

count, 26 *hirak* groups founded during 2011–12 had effectively stopped coordinating and meeting by 2016, with little evidence of their short but fiery lifespan except for outdated Facebook group pages.

As one of the principal expressions of Jordanian opposition today, youth-based *hirak* activism has helped set the domestic political agenda. That it has not formed a national opposition movement therefore commands significance. As Curtis Ryan has noted, many agreed that political change was necessary after the Jordanian Spring, but no “pinnacle type of moment” emerged that brought leading voices together to create a harmonized, society-wide campaign (Ryan 2011, 386). A Jordanian commentator cynically referred to the absence of national movement-building as a case of “mobilizing for the sake of mobilization,” in that many young activists believed that sparking an episodic protest was sufficient to achieve lasting political change.<sup>1</sup> From a strategic standpoint, Western analysts surmise that only a cross-cutting opposition front that represents different political forces in the spirit of “national unity” could ever force the monarchy to surrender some of its autocratic power (Sattloff and Schenker 2013). The implication from all these perspectives holds that so long as political challenges in Jordan remain fractured into chunks of loud but fast-dissipating uprisings, the Hashemite state will not fundamentally change.

### *Conventional Explanations*

The gap between grassroots mobilization and movement-building hence appears as both a theoretical puzzle and political priority. Conventional explanations do not succeed in accounting for it. For one, there are certainly enough grievances to go around, particularly in terms of socioeconomic privation. During its 2018 surveys, the Arab Barometer found that 85 percent of Jordanians believed corruption plagued the country, 71 percent reported that the economy composed the greatest challenge (with only 23 percent perceived the economic situation was good or very good), and just one-third placed any trust in government (Arab Barometer 2019). Youth unemployment before the COVID-19 pandemic stood at nearly 40 percent, double the overall rate of more than 19 percent; in a country where more than two-thirds of the populace falls under the age of 30, and the median age is 22, this

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1. Personal interview, ‘Ali Omari, Amman, June 30, 2018.

signals widespread material privation. More than a few young Jordanians—socially educated, economically disempowered, and politically marginalized—can relate to what one Dhiban protestor proclaimed: “We are tired of living like the dead” (*Al-Jazeera* 2016).

For another, young activists today have unprecedented tools of communication. They represent the most technologically connected cohort in national history. During the Arab Spring, digital technologies helped diffuse viral images, lessons, and knowledge across the region through emulation and learning (Howard and Hussain 2013). While the role of social media should not be overstated, in the Jordanian case, youths resemble their Arab counterparts in subsisting in a world defined by instantaneous connectedness, allowing them to bypass official media and exploit virtual spaces. According to the Arab Barometer’s 2018 survey results, nearly 85 percent of Jordanians use the Internet; nearly half rely upon social media for breaking news, with Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, and WhatsApp constituting the most popular online venues (Arab Barometer 2019). The regime has labored to keep pace. While revised press and cybercrime laws since 2012 have extended the reach of censorship online, tech-savvy activists have always found ways to circumvent official restrictions (*Global Voices Advox* 2020).

Activists, clearly, are not lacking in terms of grievances or resources. Thus, a third potential explanation holds that exogenous constraints may have hampered the organizational growth of successful movements. One possibility concerns the communal cleavage between Palestinian-Jordanians and Transjordanians, which has historically seeded social and political tension. The latter include tribal communities who comprise a societal minority, but that have long staffed the army and state as the support base for the Hashemite monarchy. Debates about political reform frequently expose the fractious nature of national identity given this demographic divide. Some Transjordanian tribes, often instigated by security agents sent to implant rumors and innuendo, remain suspicious that true representative democracy would result in their permanent marginalization in a de facto Palestinian state. Such frictions are said to have “alienated the majority of Jordanians,” who may agree on the untenability of authoritarian rule but find cross-communal accord elusive, due to endemic mistrust about Transjordanian dominance and the meaning of citizenship (Yaghi and Clark 2014, 253).

Another exogenous factor relates to the domestic effects of geopo-

litical crisis, namely the Syrian civil war. That conflict divided Jordanian opposition, with some activists supporting the Bashar al-Assad regime and others advocating its downfall, but it also created a chilling effect. By mid-2013, many activists reacted negatively to Syria's worsening civil violence. The growing influx of Syrian refugees, in addition to heightened fears of radicalized Islamist terrorism, hammered home fears that "too much" popular mobilization and social unrest might unleash violent conflict not unlike what had befallen Syria (Ryan 2018, 175–79). By the mid-2010s, the rollback of democratization in other Arab states where mass uprisings had succeeded, such as Egypt and Libya, also injected further trepidation about seeking sudden political change. The subsequent de-mobilization of protests hence may have partly stemmed from the begrudging realization among activists that they needed to rein in their civic disturbances, not expand and organize them further.

However, these exogenous variables cannot account for the absence of national movement-building. While fissiparous identity politics explains why some activists may mistrust others, most *hirak* movements arose with the explicit purpose of bridging this cleavage, and its members have always been aware that authorities frequently manipulate the Palestinian–Transjordanian divide to splinter opposition. Likewise, the Syrian civil war has faded in relevance, if only due to the macabre fact—as Samer Abboud's chapter in this volume shows—that most of the fighting has ended and the Assad regime has survived. Indeed, no chilling effect foreclosed the new uprisings that took place during 2018–19, from the anti-austerity demonstrations to the teachers' strike.

In sum, the unique feature of youth-driven opposition in Jordan today is not the unwillingness of youths to engage in contentious acts, but rather in how they mobilize without creating larger formal movements. Material and political grievances abound, and activists enjoy the resources to organize more broadly; identity politics and the Syrian factor have also waned in salience. A new explanatory framework is needed.

### **Horizontality, Informality, and Ideology in New Activism**

To understand the impulse for *hirak* activism, it is necessary to divulge what many youths seek to avoid becoming: Established opposition

forces, the sort legally recognized by the regime and thus allowed to operate under careful limitations within the political arena.

### *Conventional Opposition*

Jordan has a productive lineage of organized opposition groups that exemplify centralized, hierarchical, and bureaucratized movement-building (Larzillièrè 2016, 30–49). One strand consists of groups built upon leftist and Arab nationalist ideologies, which shaped the unrest of the 1950s; then, opposition parties inspired by these platforms so seriously challenged monarchical power through collective action that the regime enacted a vicious crackdown, resulting in several decades of martial law. Those parties, and indeed all parties, would be banned until the 1990s. Another stream of traditional opposition is Islamism. Jordan's Muslim Brotherhood was founded in 1945, and enjoyed supportive ties with the Hashemite monarchy until the 1990s (Boulby 1999). Then, it became increasingly critical over regime policies, such as the 1994 peace treaty with Israel and the highly orchestrated electoral laws that guaranteed conservative, toothless parliaments. A third pathway of older activism was civil society, particularly syndicates like the Engineers' Association. Jordanian civil society enjoyed an efflorescence after 1991, after the end of martial law; in 2010, for instance, 5,703 licensed non-governmental organizations existed (Al-Urdun Al-Jadid Research Center 2010, 26). Of these, the professional associations (including the teachers' syndicate, which came into being in 2012) encompass nearly three hundred thousand members. They are the oldest and largest civic actors affiliated with opposition.

Two trends distinguish these legal and established opposition currents. First, these movements historically sought to organize on a national scale, albeit through different institutional forms and under shifting constraints. For instance, since parties were prohibited between 1957 and 1989, leftist-nationalist forces had to operate either underground or through ancillary organs like the professional syndicates. By contrast, Islamists benefited from their historical coexistence with the monarchy, with their legal status allowing them to amass an impressive fount of popular backing (Wagemakers 2020, 84–119). Still, most of these groups created structured hierarchies of scale, with national leadership and governing councils in Amman directing activities in the other governorates and coordinating formal actions on behalf of membership. Across the board, each trend's ideological well-

spring or professional purpose furnished a collective identity that created boundaries of self-conception separating insiders from outsiders. Most also remain anchored in physical spaces, with well-known headquarters and public offices where charters, constitutions, and rules of behavior are enforced. They are registered entities with the Ministry of Interior—and as such, their financial assets, membership roster, and policy agendas have become easily known to the regime, either overtly or covertly through infiltration by security agents.

Second, these groups often worked together through congruent alliances. When political liberalization began in 1989, the relaxation of repression allowed organized activism within civil society to surge (Abu Rumman 2001). Parliamentary elections and policy issues became flashpoints of mobilization, with opposition against the 1994 peace treaty with Israel providing a case in point. Islamists, leftists, Arab nationalists, and professional associations collaborated through a national coordinating committee to hold large demonstrations and issue joint statements decrying King Hussein's push to normalize relations with Israel (Schwedler 2005). While such efforts failed, the resulting campaign caused severe discomfort for the monarchy. Moreover, while such parties and organizations did not always find agreement on other issues, the will, if not capacity, for creating broader coalitions that could address a national audience always existed (Clark 2010). These groups remain active today. The June 2018 anti-austerity protests were led initially by the professional syndicates, for instance, while the Brotherhood has lent its weight to numerous protests and campaigns over the past decade, albeit in a declining position due to its financial emasculation by the regime.

### *The Novelty of Youth Activism*

Youth activism in Jordan represents a very different vector of opposition, one that began transpiring before the Arab Spring through social change. One source was political disgruntlement within the regime's own Transjordanian base, representing tribal communities upon which the Jordanian political order had been historically built (Yom 2020). Neoliberal policies, including the privatization of state firms and diminishing subsidies, lacerated the economic lifelines that had nourished many tribal communities for generations, with many accusing King Abdullah of violating the monarchy's historical bargain with loyal tribal constituencies (Tell 2015). Tribal leaders and social cooperatives,

including a committee representing retired military servicepersons, called for the reversal of such policies while accusing officials of corruption and malfeasance. A second precursor came from the labor sector. Trade unions have usually been distant sources of protest, because they are governed under a state-controlled entity. However, wildcat strikes among wage-earners, such as day laborers and Aqaba port workers, began venting in the late 2000s as a reaction to the immobility of their politically coopted leadership (Adely 2012). At their 2011–13 peak, workers undertook 2,619 protests, nearly half of them strikes (Phenix Center 2019, 5–6).

When the Jordanian Spring unfurled by early 2011, the *hirak* built on these emergent forms of resistance through protest strategies that evinced horizontality, informality, and absent ideology. Each stemmed from the singular rejection of this older paradigm of building centrally organized national movements. The new youth activists embraced horizontality because they rejected exclusionary structures; informality, in order to sidestep repression, and absent ideology, due to the declining credibility of grand ideas. In short, they learned to adapt against the dual pressures of an opportune present and uninspiring past. Three themes stand out in their actions: Horizontality, informality, and rejection of ideology.

First, *hirak* youth activists emphasize horizontality, rejecting command-based hierarchies of order. These are not “leaderless” movements, a term that scholars have rightfully pointed out can mislead (El-Sharnouby 2017). Coordinators conceive the group and direct activities—but they do so as the center of a circular node linking them with interpersonal clusters of overlapping followers, not as directors vertically transmitting orders down a bureaucratic edifice. Their egalitarian conceit prizes consensus as the principle for decisions. The *zeitgeist* of such horizontality draws upon notions of maximizing inclusion through atomistic connections. There is no political credential or bureaucratic requirements needed to join; such prohibitive barriers are replaced with a spirit of volunteerism, sewn together by common defiance of authority or shared pursuit of an issue. As one planner noted, “The goal is participation without preconditions. If someone wants to join your group, why make them fill out a form or screen [them]? We want as many people as possible to come [to protests] because it may be their first time speaking out. If they show up, we see that as the real victory.”<sup>2</sup>

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2. Personal interview, Amer Tubeishat, Amman, July 4, 2018.

This accent upon inclusion draws from, and reinforces, a reliance upon social media, where “technologically mediated interaction via screens” collapses the imagined distance between participants (Tufekci 2017, 58). Horizontality enables local movements to resemble their online counterparts—no entry cost to join, and whose highly decentralized network has permeable boundaries. Indeed, members of *hirak* groups come and go freely because membership is perceived through two simple criteria: Participate in a protest, and follow the group online. Sara Ababneh’s recollection of the day-waged labor movement (DWLM) within the Jordanian Youth Hirak in Amman is worth considering:

Part of what facilitated the involvement of female activists was the DWLM’s flexible structure. In fact, it is hard to speak of a *structure* at all. The movement did not document its activities or decisions. No minutes were taken at its meetings. It had no headquarters or bank account and did not rent meeting rooms. Furthermore, as workers were permanently hired they left the movement. New members often knew very little about events that took place before they had joined, or even events organized in the directorate where they worked. (Ababneh 2016, 102)

Such flexibility was by design. The DWLM’s organizers had learned that many women, particularly those from conservative families that frowned upon public engagement in politics, could not participate unless they could accommodate them by eliminating strict organizational routines.

Second, contemporary activism is informal. Many *hirak* participants reject binding rules that would impose a highly differentiated structure of organization. Most do not seek to become political parties or other formalized entities. Thus, most of these groups have eschewed organizational tasks like creating charters, recording decisions, assigning committees, and other inscribed charges. Roles are often fuzzy; outside the central coordinators who serve as leaders, for example, there is little functional difference between cadres (that is, full-time activists), auxiliaries (that is, part-time supporters), and frontline resisters (that is, those assigned to confront opponents and authorities). This preference for informality is both a strategy to sidestep repression, and a reaction to the declining prestige of more formalized organizational models.

Repression looms large. Since the late 2000s, officials have



deployed steady tools of intimidation, such as specialized gendarmerie, ever-more tightening laws, and paid counter-protestors, which have “reminded the population of the potential/reality of violence and other forms of coercive action without radicalizing existing or would-be protestors” (Abu-Rish 2014, 305). While not all *hirak* protests during the Jordanian Spring suffered police clampdowns, persistent surveillance and interventions by the security apparatus since then have defanged many voices of dissent. For instance, in July 2020, the authorities arrested the leadership of the teachers’ union—the largest professional syndicate with over one hundred thousand members—and suspended its license for two years. The move was widely perceived as an act of political revenge for the union’s September 2019 strikes, which relented only after a reluctant government promise of wage increases. The Muslim Brotherhood was similarly gutted in 2015, much to the monarchy’s delight (Abu Rumman and Bondokji 2018, 93–94). In this context, youth activists have absorbed a vital lesson: the regime cannot disband a movement that does not legally exist in the first place. Because they are neither licensed charities nor formal parties, *hirak* groups can only be eradicated if their members stop attending protests.<sup>3</sup>

At the same time, the new oppositionists do not hold their older counterparts in high esteem. Rather, they appear so embedded in the authoritarian ecosystem as to not pass the litmus test for being sufficiently militant or innovative. They are, in short, part of the problem. For instance, many *hirak* members regard civil society foundations as irredeemably “tainted” with elitism and Western grant money.<sup>4</sup> For that reason, they desire to break from the “familiar script” of opposition, to borrow Jillian Schwedler’s phrase, in favor of radically new forms of positive action (Schwedler 2018, 2022). For the typical *hirak* participant, the humble idea of meeting other activists in a local cafe aligns with a perspective that situates their work as peripatetic and supple, in which the muggy air of office buildings and hotel conference rooms is rejected in favor of popular (*sha’bi*) environs that appear more authentic to everyday social routines.

Third, most *hirak* groups reject grand ideologies. During the Arab

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3. The Free Assembly, a defunct youth group whose rare plans to become a formal political party were stymied by denials of government licensing in 2016, remains an ominous lesson for many *hirak* activists (Abudalu 2017).

4. Personal interview, Ahmad Awad, Amman, June 27, 2018.

Spring, protest networks did not draw upon Islamism, Arab nationalism, Ba'athism, communism, or any other “ism,” but rather framed their political demands in universal denominators such as *karama* (dignity) and *'adl* (justice). Youth activists today, therefore, are not the usual revolutionary suspects. Although some sympathize with conventional ideologies, they do not consider themselves bound to them. To use a sporting metaphor, many activists see themselves as “free agents,” believing that old narratives of liberation do not make for practical solutions to immediate problems. This makes many youths resistant to forming coalitions with older forces, whom they associate with adherence to ideological blueprints whose unfulfilled promises have resulted in the stagnation of the present. During 2011, for instance, varying calls for unity coalitions linking leftists, Islamists, and youth together by well-known elders who positioned themselves as opposition, such as Layth Shubaylat and Ahmed 'Obaydat, fell flat, as *hirak* groups greeted such announcements with cynicism. “They sounded like more of the same old formula that failed us,” remarked one commentator, “because all their ideologies say the same thing: Join our movement and buy these ideas and everything will be better.”<sup>5</sup>

The result has been little coalition-building with ideological actors. *Hirak* activists see leftist parties, for instance, as unpopular and weak. While all parties suffer from electoral constraints that have long allowed conservative elites to dominate Parliament, their ideological basis does not give them any additional pull over youth; during the Jordanian Spring, only two *hirak* networks outwardly endorsed leftist views, namely Jayeen and the 1952 Constitution Movement. The Muslim Brotherhood, too, has lost much of its allure. In 2018, Islamist-related factions lost control over two bellwethers within civil society—the student union of Jordan University, and the Engineers' Association—with internal elections favoring independent candidates who rejected Islamist sloganeering. Those candidates emphasized bread-and-butter issues, such as keeping student fees down and enhancing employment opportunities (Yom and al-Khatib 2018). As one member (and *hirak* activist) of the victorious student movement at Jordan University averred, “Our message was simple. Why should we go and liberate Jerusalem [a traditional Islamist refrain] when we need a job next year to survive? We felt that students did not want the directions and promises of an outside organization, they needed useful

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5. Personal interview, Amer Sabaileh, Amman, June 30, 2018.

ideas about their lives right now.”<sup>6</sup> For activists for whom the personal is political, ideologies are perceived as relics of a past era seen in black-and-white images—interesting from an intellectual perspective, but not useful as an organizing creed.

Overall, commitments to horizontality and informality, alongside the rejection of ideological ideals, typify *hirak* activism and its orientation toward mobilization without movement. They show learning among many young oppositionists, who wish to include as many protest participants as possible, circumvent the sharp edge of repression, and view established organizations like parties and civic associations as being ineffective. In turn, this imbricates their preferred mobilizational form with the question of whether such novel adaptation can be successful—and what, ultimately, success means.

### Case Studies of Youth Activism

Case studies of two *hirak* groups illustrate how mobilization without movement manifests in Jordan, and how the process of learning and adaptation described earlier has practically shaped the organizational choices of youth activists. The example of Shaghaf exemplifies how maximizing agility over durability can prevent new groups from expanding; the case of the Jordanian Youth Hirak shows how difficulties in coordination can stymie consistent action. Both suggest the overall balance sheet for new opposition as an evolving one with untapped possibility.

#### *The Rise and Fall of Shaghaf*

Shaghaf was a youth network conceived in early 2016 by a handful of activists with a subversive idea. Its members would shadow Parliament and government ministers, holding them accountable to promises made while translating the arcane workings of public administration for ordinary citizens (Yom and al-Khatib 2016). For the first year, the movement enjoyed a meteoric rise to prominence. Its Amman-based coordinators insisted upon informality. They met in various spaces, such as cafes or their own workplaces, and began recruiting a base of

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6. Personal interview, student member of Nashama movement at Jordan University, Amman, July 3, 2018.

volunteers who could fulfill all the myriad new projects envisaged such as creating a website, reaching out to Parliament, collecting citizen complaints, and eventually setting up chapters outside Amman. Knowing well the dangers of infiltration by the security services, they sought to operate a new opposition group without any trappings of bureaucracy—to show, as one of the founders argued, “that Jordanian youths could contribute to politics, and to pressure [elites] to stop ignoring the street by proving how the street could do a lot with a little.”<sup>7</sup>

However, by mid-2017, several problems had become dire. It was not repression, for no Shaghaf member was arrested or detained. Neither did disagreements about national identity enter into internal discussions. Rather, organizational logistics had caught up to national aspirations. Self-raised funds were insufficient to ensure the group’s expansion outside of its relatively privileged core of Amman-based activism; volunteers were confused about role assignments, creating redundancies and gaps with monitoring projects, and disagreements split coordinators over whether to accept outside assistance, such as offers of training and legal support from brick-and-mortar civil society associations.<sup>8</sup> Because some of the founding members had previously worked with in the civil society sector, one argument held that Shaghaf would lose its freshness and flexibility if it became just another non-governmental organization—one dependent upon familiar devices like foreign grants, hotel conferences, and bureaucratic licensing. Others, however, contended that it was impossible to manage an armada of nearly a hundred new activists, some of whom had no job and little experience, with only e-mail blasts and Facebook Messenger. By 2018, Shaghaf had quietly ceased operations.

### *The Mercuriality of the Jordanian Youth Hirak*

The second case study comes from the Amman-based Jordanian Youth Hirak (*al-hirak al-shabaabi al-urduni*), the largest *hirak* movement birthed in the Arab Spring. The Jordanian Youth Hirak outlasted the 2011–12 protest campaigns, with its principal coordinators meeting sporadically during subsequent years while utilizing social media accounts to spread information and call for new demonstrations. The

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7. Personal interview, Odai Harahsheh, Amman, August 3, 2016.

8. Confidential personal interview, former Shaghaf activist, Amman, October 21, 2019.

June 2018 anti-austerity protests, which erupted after the looming imposition of an IMF-authored tax law, represented a triumphant moment for their leaders. The group had not only facilitated the transportation of smaller rural *hirak* groups into the protests of Amman, but also worked with the professional syndicates and other large civic associations in ensuring the week-long campaign remained nonviolent. Those protests notably ended, to public applause, when King Abdullah sacked the technocratic government in favor of a new cabinet under a promising first-time premier, Omar Razzaz.

In the aftermath of this success, two of the more than a dozen people on Jordanian Youth Hirk's coordinating committee called for institutionalizing the movement's operations in more consistent fashion; among the proposals floated was drafting a democratic charter that would be publicized for others to emulate and see, creating permanent regional teams and volunteer cadres that could liaison with other opposition actors, and otherwise turning their online networks and virtual resources into physical, offline structures.<sup>9</sup> While few suggested turning the Jordanian Youth Hirk into a political party, the impetus for such proposals came from the desire to make sure the momentum gained from the protests was not lost—to ensure that a moment lived on beyond memory. However, the committee's decision-making process was one of consensus. There was no internal order or majoritarian rule that facilitated voting on these issues; if the committee could not agree as a whole, then it would usually default to tabling issues altogether. The disputation about whether to organize hence brought many discussions to a halt.

That resulted in a missed opportunity. Upon Razzaz's appointment in early June, the Jordanian Youth Hirk's committee had unanimously agreed to issue a hundred-day deadline to the new prime minister. The incoming cabinet would have a hundred days to make good on its promise to soften fiscal austerity, allow for more popular participation, and otherwise *taghyir al-nahj* (to change the regime's political pathway), or else it would return to the street. When that hundred-day benchmark passed in early September, however, the committee remained incapacitated. Its leaders did not fear arrest or detention; far from it, some committee members had met with Prime Minister Razzaz personally, as part of the government's outreach efforts. Moreover, Jordanians of both Palestinian and Transjordanian lineage sat upon the

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9. Personal interview, Katrina Sammour, Amman, June 18, 2019.

committee, and identity issues did not disturb internal debates. Further, like Shaghaf, the Syrian civil war and its refugee spillover did not foreclose any enthusiasm to mobilize in the first place. Rather, logistical indecisions whether to turn an informal network into a formal organization persisted. As one committee member later rued, it seemed that “some were so intoxicated with the ‘high’ of protest, that the planning and organizing work afterwards just did not appeal. The assumption was that if another controversy came, everyone would just flood the street again and that would be our revival. But another chance for protest did come [the hundred-day benchmark], and nobody did anything.”<sup>10</sup> The Jordanian Youth HIRAK, unlike Shaghaf, still exist and meet, but its membership and activities have not grown since the June 2018 apogee.

### *The Balance Sheet*

Shaghaf and the Jordanian Youth HIRAK signify how youth activists remain able and willing to author dissent, unfazed by repressive fear or identity politics. If the metric of their success is whether either achieved all of their goals and transformed the authoritarian political system, then they fail—but so, too, do the established opposition voices dotting the political landscape, including political parties, civil society associations, and Islamism. Such a steep criterion is thus neither fair nor forgiving. If the benchmark is more modest, namely whether youths could mobilize within the public sphere in creative ways unforeseen by authorities, then the answer is a resounding yes. *HIRAK* networks flourish through horizontality, informality, and non-ideological action because they draw participants not from older opposition platforms, but rather a booming demographic of young Jordanians previously uninvolved in politics.

If, however, the yardstick of success falls in the middle, and concerns whether youth activism allows for the formation of a permanent national movement or universal alliance, the result is mixed. The organizational preferences of opposition entrepreneurs have trade-offs that militate against such an outcome. For Shaghaf, agility took priority over durability. By remaining an informal network rather than licensed organization, its coordinators averted undue pressure by the security apparatus, and reaped early growth thanks to the alacrity of its mem-

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10. Personal interview, Katrina Sammour, Amman, June 18, 2019.

bers. Yet they found it difficult to scale up nationally without any formal structure or external resources. For the Jordanian Youth HIRAK, a horizontal commitment to inclusion and malleability allowed for effective mobilizing alongside civil society syndicates during the June 2018 protests. However, difficulties emerged once that singular episode ended. Horizontality required consensus, and an inability to clarify and pursue a unifying agenda among its leading members scuttled follow-up efforts with the new government.

## Conclusion

As this chapter has discussed, Jordanian activism since the Arab Spring exemplifies the phenomenon of mobilization without movement. Its youth-driven *hirak* protest groups have taken the form of horizontal and informal networks that do not follow previous organizational conventions. While this preference reflects critical learning against the backdrop of past opposition and new political openings, it also marks a conscious rejection of the defining features of established opposition forces—that is, the centralization, hierarchies, and formalization typical of parties and civil society. These commitments should be understood not only as strategic choices, but also the adaptive worldview of youth activists very much aware of their unique positionality. Their dissent fuses the personal with the political, and enshrines the attendant ideal that the virtues of the street can stun, if not defeat, the vices of the state.

Yet though Jordan may epitomize the gap between mobilization and movement-building in exquisite detail, it is not alone in the Arab world. In comparative perspective, Jordanian activists share much in common with youth activists in other Arab countries in their displeasure with established opposition force and preference for informality. As Lina Khatib's chapter in this volume describes, for instance, Lebanese youths have experienced a similar cycle of success and failure in their own battles against entrenched elites. Thomas Serra's mediation on Algeria likewise illustrates the difficulties of the Algerian *Hirak* in effectuating political transformation beyond the deposal of President Abdelaziz Bouteflika, much as David Patel's analysis of Iraq emphasizes the flashpoints of conflict between young Iraqi demonstrators and sectarian networks of patronage. Like these comparative cases, the Jordanian context posits an incisive question for scholars of democratiza-

tion and popular mobilization: If young dissenters can fill the streets with such ease, can they also reconfigure the regime and state?

This question is worth pondering, particularly as the COVID-19 crisis subsides and youth activists reconvene. In Jordan, the structural problems that underlay popular mobilization over the past decade continue to afflict public life, from widespread joblessness and economic privation to hot-button issues like royal corruption and Israeli actions against Palestine. Jordanian participants will continue to recalibrate their strategies and commitments under fresh political circumstances.

It is worth forecasting, however, what an organized national movement—the nightmare of the monarchy and its coercive apparatus—could look like in a hypothetical future. Such a movement would be comprehensive enough to absorb disparate *hirak* and older opposition alike under a common purpose; coordinated enough to feature effective leadership, identity, and routines, with youth activists serving as a vanguard, and resilient enough to withstand repressive assaults and geopolitical pressures. In such a coalition, a central coordinating committee would allocate space to both traditional opposition (such as Islamists and professional syndicates) and grassroots voices like the *hirak*. Jordanians of both Palestinian and Transjordanian descent would enjoy representation. That committee would meet regularly, not necessarily as a proto-party or licensed association but nonetheless as a permanent board in order to establish rules and guidelines. A democratic charter would behold the movement's goals and methods, including an ironclad commitment to nonviolence. Different teams would handle logistical duties, such as managing financial donations, handling social media and press, undertaking outreach to membership, and documenting all decisions. Amman would stand as the organizational hub of this movement, with tightly integrated governorate-based chapters serving as proverbial spokes.

This movement would, in turn, launch long-term campaigns of protest and civil disobedience. The aims would entail not a one-off demonstration or strike, but rather the eventual capitulation of political authority to economic and political demands that come with a credible deadline. For instance, the government would need to restore economic protections (such as price subsidies) or inaugurate revamped electoral laws, or else public institutions might grind to a halt due to solidarity strikes and coordinated occupations. The embattled regime would respond with repressive threats, but the cross-cutting character of the movement, a multiplicity of youth cadres, and the work of auxil-



ary supporters would enable the front to continue orchestrating, authoring, and creating. The end product would be the transformation of an authoritarian political system that follows its own constitutional pretensions, implementing democratic accountability while ensuring that the monarchy and its security institutions no longer dictate the untrammled fate of the populace.

This represents one pathway to change in Jordan. It is not the only one, and appears outside the organizational preferences of many *hirak* activists today. Yet its potentiality shows that however political change occurs in the Hashemite Kingdom, Jordanian youths will certainly play a key role.

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## 7 | Cycles of Contention in Lebanon

*Lina Khatib*

When the Arab world was erupting with protests in 2011, Lebanon did not witness mass mobilization like that seen in Tunisia, Egypt and elsewhere. Some attributed the absence of similar protests in Lebanon to the country's lack of a singular ruling autocrat, its greater margin of freedom of expression than its Arab neighbors, and to the country's relatively better economic condition compared to many others in the region. In 2019, Lebanon became one of several Arab countries whose citizens mobilized for rights (see chapters on Iraq, Sudan and Algeria in this volume).

In October 2019, the Lebanese government announced plans to increase taxes on tobacco, petrol, and telecommunications (BBC 2019). The announcement came after two years of steady economic decline during which prices in Lebanon were rising, debt relative to Gross Domestic Product (GDP) was one of the highest in the world, and foreign currency reserves were dwindling. The latter shortage made importers of essential goods like wheat and fuel unable to pay their suppliers in U.S. dollars, threatening a severe livelihoods crisis in the country. Shortly before the October tax announcement, devastating wildfires had swept through Lebanon's western forests, with the authorities unable to fight them due to lack of state resources. All these crises pushed Lebanese civilians to take to the streets on October 17, 2019 to protest not just the deteriorating economic situation but also the political system. The protests quickly escalated in size and geographical distribution, taking place all over Lebanon, not only in the capital. The protestors labeled their movement the October 17 Revolution.

This movement underlines how despite Lebanon's lack of a single

ruling autocrat, it is plagued by the same political, economic, and social woes that are driving citizens elsewhere in the Arab world to mobilize for reform. These woes are about the existence of political, economic, and social inequalities, which in Lebanon manifest themselves through the country's power-sharing formula. This formula is based on the distribution of power and privileges on the basis of sectarian affiliation. It therefore fosters anti-democratic practices and corruption, and limits government accountability and meaningful citizen representation. As is the case in many countries examined in this volume, the chronic failure of Lebanon's political elite to address widespread socioeconomic discontent has fueled recent waves of popular mobilization. Relatedly, the surge in popular contentious political action has exhibited strong tension with, if not outright rejection of, formal politics and the parties that comprise it. That pattern echoes similar trajectories in Jordan, Algeria, and Iraq, as illustrated in the respective contributions of Sean Yom, Thomas Serres, and David Patel to this volume.

Although the October 17 Revolution has not resulted in a fundamental change in the Lebanese political system, it is an important development in the history of popular mobilization in Lebanon. The country's political system has been in place ever since the creation of Lebanon's modern republic under the French mandate in the 1920s and was consolidated with the National Pact brokered between Lebanon's sectarian leaders when the country gained independence in 1943. It would be unrealistic to expect this long-standing political system to be completely overhauled overnight. However, the October 17 Revolution succeeded in shedding light on issues previously considered taboo in the public domain in Lebanon, such as the corruption of the political elites or their use of thugs to intimidate people. It was also the largest anti-sectarian public action that Lebanon has witnessed.

This chapter maps out the three main "cycles of contention"—or waves of mobilization—that Lebanon has witnessed since the Beirut Spring protests of 2005 (Tilly and Tarrow 2015, 119)—beginning with 2005, then moving to the 2015 "garbage crisis" protests, and finally the October 17 Revolution of 2019. The chapter assesses the proximate effects of the three components of contentious politics in Lebanon. The first component is interaction between different actors during mobilization. Such interaction transforms both the actors and the relations between them. The second component is collective claims. As McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly (2009, 262) put it:

Collective claims [ . . . ] have political effects beyond the immediate outcomes of their calls for action. Compared with those outcomes, they provide information about the future feasibility of similar claims. Successive claims between the same pair of actors and outcomes of those claims thus create cultural material that remains available for later interaction. We can call those materials “collective memory.”

The third component is the government, and how its “organizations, personnel, policies, and practices” both respond to and shape contentious politics (McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly 2009, 263). This chapter argues that while none of the three cycles of contention has resulted in changing the political system in Lebanon, each cycle builds on the experience of the previous one to push the boundaries of mobilization further, culminating in the beginning of a process of significant social change and planting the seeds of closing the abovementioned gap between contentious and formal politics.

### **The Lebanese Political System**

Unlike many other Arab countries, Lebanon’s political system is not typically characterized as authoritarian. However, the system harbors within it authoritarian practices that constitute a fundamental obstacle to reform. The sectarian system of political representation privileges a class of politicians who share power on the basis of exclusionary pluralism that shields national political institutions from meaningful accountability and that limits the representative depth of these institutions.

Ever since Lebanon’s independence from France in 1943, the country has been ruled through consociationalism in which power is allocated on the basis of sectarian affiliation. While the original motivation behind the implementation of this system was meant to be political inclusiveness for all Lebanon’s recognized religious confessions (of which there are 18), the system ended up causing Lebanon to become a modern feudal state, in which political leaders did not work for the national interest but rather for the interest of the sectarian community they represented (Salloukh et al. 2015). Many of Lebanon’s political leaders after independence came from prominent, often feudal, families, and upon their death, their political roles would be inherited by

their heirs. With the Lebanese state itself being institutionally weak and lacking in resources, these political leaders would often control the distribution of state services, such as the provision of electricity, or influence recruitment in the civil service and the army. In doing so, they would allocate these resources and opportunities to members of the sectarian community they represent and/or the geographical area they hail from. Although Lebanon appeared to be a modern state, the country's leaders engaged with citizens on the basis of a patron-client relationship (Hamzeh 2001).

This dynamic continued throughout Lebanon's Civil War, which began in 1975 and ended in 1990 following the signing of the Taif Agreement in 1989. During the war, many political leaders became militia leaders, and the war also enabled the rise of new militia leaders who in turn became political leaders. None of the clashing groups or leaders won the Civil War; it was a struggle over power but after 15 years of conflict, it became apparent to the various opponents that it was not possible for any one side to overwhelm the others. Lebanon's consociational system would remain intact. Instead, the power net was widened to include the warlords who had now risen to join Lebanon's old elites as new political and economic elites. To accommodate this hike in the number of political actors and placate Muslim-Christian tensions, the Taif Agreement increased the number of parliamentary seats from 99 to 128, and allocated them equally between Muslims of different sects and Christians of different sects, but stated that Lebanon would work to end this system of sectarian allocation (Muhanna 2012).

The postwar era was marked by an entrenchment of patron-client relationships. Southern Lebanon came to be dominated by the Shiite militia Hezbollah, which was formed in 1982 following the Israeli invasion of Lebanon. The Lebanese government exceptionally allowed Hezbollah to retain its weapons while disbanding all other militias on the basis that Hezbollah was a "resistance" movement fighting for the liberation of southern Lebanon from Israeli occupation (Khatib, Matar, and Alshaer 2014). Hezbollah's dominance in the south grew even after Israel withdrew from the area in 2000. It capitalized on the weakness of the Lebanese state to present itself as an alternative to the people of the south—who are predominantly Shia—providing them with basic services like healthcare and education as well as security. In other areas in Lebanon, political leaders followed a similar approach. For example, Rafic Hariri, a wealthy businessman who helped broker the Taif Agreement, set up medical centers and an educational foundation in the

1980s and used his philanthropy and closeness to the Saudi royal family to become a leading Sunni political figure in Lebanon (Cammatt and Issar 2010).

Examining the political system in Lebanon highlights a number of problems. Patron-client relationships weakened the state because they overruled the national interest and increased social divisions along sectarian lines. The weakening of the state paved the way for non-state actors like Hezbollah to present themselves as the guardians of the interests of the sect of which they were patrons (in Hezbollah's case, the Shiite community). This further eroded the sense of national identity in Lebanon. Citizen engagement with political representatives on the basis of gaining immediate benefits removed the necessity of holding political leaders in government positions accountable. This in turn paved the way for these political leaders to broaden the scope of their economic activities to increase their wealth and standing. For example, postwar reconstruction was Rafic Hariri's main avenue for increasing his wealth, getting the government to contract his own company Solidere to rebuild Beirut's infrastructure (Blandford 2006).

Although many of Lebanon's government figures were political foes, they eventually recognized that they partly owed their authority to the system of power sharing on the basis of mutual benefit. This instigated inflation in the number of state institutions created under the pretext of supporting the people but which in reality were used as mechanisms for leaders to syphon state resources (Salloukh 2019). For example, in the aftermath of the Civil War, the government created the "South Fund" and the "Fund for the Displaced" as well as the "Development Council" whose remits fell outside of those of ministries and who were meant to be temporary but continued to exist indefinitely. Each such entity came under the informal control of one or more political leaders. For example, Hezbollah controlled the South Fund; the Druze Progressive Socialist Party controlled Fund for the Displaced; and the Shiite Amal Movement controlled the Development Council. Around 15 percent of civil service positions were allocated to ghost employees whose names were used to divert state funds to political leaders and their clients (Rose 2019). The political system therefore sustains the authority of Lebanon's ruling elites who became a key component of the country's economic elites and who operated with impunity. It also enabled the permeation of an economic environment in Lebanon that was taking the country's finances into a downward spiral.

The abovementioned political dynamics continued to play out



largely unchallenged for decades. Popular calls for reforming the political system were modest and limited in impact. This is partly due to the deep divisions in Lebanese society caused by the sectarian political system, which lessened trust among Lebanon's different sectarian groups and therefore limited possibilities of collective action. It is also partly due to the absence of independent political parties who could create and implement a new political vision for Lebanon and of a civil society engaged with policy.

Compared to its Arab neighbors, Lebanon allows freedom of association, whether through the formation of political parties or civil society organizations. The lack of independent political parties and a policy-engaged civil society had less to do with the legal framework and more to do with the behavior of the state, which did not give civil society space to participate in state-building (Haddad 2017) or policy-making. Civil society itself was also largely polarized along sectarian lines, particularly among formal institutions registered as non-governmental organizations. Often, civil society organizations would be owned by politicians or their relatives. Instead of acting as watchdogs holding the state accountable, they acted as either further sources of income for these politicians (and often as a channel for securing government grants) or as mechanisms for the provision of basic services like health and education to the clients of their sponsoring politicians. A 2015 report estimated that up to 60 percent of basic services in Lebanon were provided through such NGOs (Beyond Reform and Development 2015).

Here it should be noted that the concept of the state itself can be approached as a system of social power rather than as entity separate from society (Mansour and Khatib 2021). The complication in Lebanon, like in Iraq, is that state institutions are dominated by ruling elites who act with impunity, making those institutions and their performance inattentive to the needs of citizens.

### **Cooptation of the Beirut Spring of 2005**

These systemic factors created an environment in which Lebanese citizens did not imagine a viable alternative to the prevailing political system. Exacerbating the situation was the presence of external actors who lent support to the country's most powerful politicians and who used those local actors as means of spreading their influence in the

country. By the 2000s, Rafic Hariri had become prime minister in Lebanon, enjoying significant political and financial support from Saudi Arabia, while Hezbollah was Lebanon's only armed political party, supported politically and financially by Iran and enjoying an alliance with the Syrian regime of Bashar al-Assad (and before him, his father Hafez till the latter's death in 2000). As Hariri's stature grew both domestically and internationally, he came to pose a threat to Iran's and Syria's interests in Lebanon, culminating in his assassination on February 14, 2005 in Beirut. Although investigations into his assassination remain inconclusive, evidence points toward Hezbollah and the Syrian regime as the culprits.

The assassination of Rafic Hariri sparked mass mobilization in Beirut against the Syrian regime. At the time, Syrian troops were present in Lebanon having first been invited there to play a deterrent role during the Civil War, which evolved over the years into an occupation. Large-scale protests called for accountability for Hariri's murder and for Syrian troops to leave Lebanon.

The protests were distinguished by being cross-sectarian. People from different backgrounds gathered in downtown Beirut carrying Lebanese flags and shouting patriotic slogans. The scale of the protests was huge and signaled widespread anger about Syria's role in the assassination of Hariri and its meddling in Lebanese affairs. However, what began as grassroots mobilization was soon coopted by the political parties, which were divided into a pro-Syrian and an anti-Syrian camp. Each camp mobilized their supporters to go to downtown Beirut to demonstrate. Rival protests led by pro-and anti-Syrian parties took place respectively on March 8 and March 14, 2005, leading to the labeling of the coalition of pro-Syrian parties the "March 8" coalition (with Hezbollah being the leading party) and the anti-Syrian parties the "March 14" coalition (with Hariri's party, the Future Movement, the leading party, which came to be led by his son Saad) (Khatib 2013).

Resource mobilization theory helps explain the dynamics at play during what came to be known as the Beirut Spring. Although the 2005 protests were initially grievance-led (in the case of the anti-Syrian ones), the involvement of political parties as organized institutions nurtured the participation of citizens in the protests as rational actors mobilizing on the basis of cost-benefit analysis of their participation (Buechler 1993). The United States verbally condemned the Hariri assassination and withdrew its ambassador to Damascus. Mobilizing in support of the March 14 coalition became an opportunity for people to

align themselves with a political agenda that promised more sovereignty for Lebanon in the face of Iran and Syria, increased support from the West, and a liberal economy. In contrast, March 8 mobilization took place on the basis of countering Western intervention and preserving the power of Hezbollah and in turn the political and economic benefits it granted its supporters and allies.

MacAdam, McCarthy, and Zald (1996) explain the development of social movements in a given country through examining both its “organizational infrastructure” and “organizational culture.” Historically, with civil society in Lebanon being weak in its engagement with policy, political parties became the main vehicles driving public action; therefore, the organizational infrastructure in the country, which the authors argue can predict when mobilization might take place, is largely dependent on the interests and actions of political parties. The weakness of Lebanese civil society movements also shows that the organizational culture in the country centered on mobilization that did not evolve into organized grassroots action but remained vulnerable to cooptation by existing political parties (Salloukh et al. 2015). The Future Movement in particular spent significant resources on public relations campaigns throughout the Beirut Spring. Saatchi and Saatchi was hired to install billboards in different areas in Beirut and create catchy slogans and logos for display on printed placards for the protestors to carry. Merchandise displaying the Lebanese flag or Lebanon’s national tree (the cedar tree) was sold in downtown Beirut. The television station owned by Hariri dedicated almost all its coverage to the events, leading Syrian President Bashar al-Assad to accuse the media of exaggerating the numbers of protests through zooming in on them. Protestors responded by carrying placards instructing the cameras to “zoom out and count” (Khatib 2007).

Although some referred to the Beirut Spring as the “Cedar Revolution,” the events did not change the political system in Lebanon, which remains consociational. The protests did result in the withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon, but Syria’s and Iran’s political influence in Lebanon remained. Their opposing foreign powers, Saudi Arabia and the United States, also continued to intervene in Lebanese internal affairs, while Israel attacked Lebanon in 2006 after Hezbollah kidnapped and killed Israeli soldiers. Whenever parliamentary elections took place, political parties did not reach out to constituents on the basis of developed political platforms but on the basis of the same patronage system as before. Civil society remained weak and labor

unions and professional syndicates continued to be coopted by the country's rulers. The only change was the status of the political parties. The 2005 protests paved the way for the leader of the Lebanese Forces Samir Geagea to be freed after eleven years in prison and for Geagea's rival General Michel Aoun, leader of the Free Patriotic Movement, to return to Lebanon from exile in France. Both men had been excluded from the Lebanese political milieu in the aftermath of the Civil War. Their reintegration into Lebanese politics—Geagea as part of March 14 and Aoun as part of March 8—simply gave each rival political coalition a boost, but the confrontational nature of their political rhetoric and the sharp division between the two coalitions persisted. Kurtulus (2009, 195) calls Lebanon's dynamics of domestic divisions against the backdrop of clashing external interests that play out through local Lebanese actors the "independence-integration cleavage."

Despite not changing the Lebanese political milieu significantly beyond the withdrawal of Syrian troops, the protests of 2005 planted the seed of an informal network of mobilization based on countering sectarianism. The movement picked up some momentum in late 2010 and the beginning of 2011, when the Arab world witnessed multiple uprisings, which in the cases of Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen led to the toppling of the countries' ruling dictators. The Lebanese anti-sectarian movement adapted the Arab Spring slogan "the people demand the fall of the regime" to become "the people demand the fall of the sectarian regime," but its lack of a clear road map for change, its limiting of outreach to its own existing supporters, and the entrenched socioeconomic, political, and geopolitical dynamics in Lebanon—the "independence-integration cleavage" as Kurtulus (2009) names it—meant that unlike the Arab Spring protests, the anti-sectarian movement in Lebanon remained small, centered in Beirut, and elitist in terms of composition and reach (Meier 2015). It was not until 2015 that Lebanon would witness mobilization on a more significant scale as ruling politicians became more absorbed in pursuing personal benefits at the expense of the national interest.

### **Social Networks in the Garbage Crisis**

A feature of Lebanon's power-sharing system is that political leaders from different parties often share profits from joint ventures. One such venture was the garbage handling company Sukleen that was set up

after the Civil War and enjoyed a monopoly over garbage processing in Lebanon, having been granted a sole contract by the Lebanese government which enabled it to process garbage at exorbitant prices (thereby increasing the wealth of its shareholders). By 2015, the contract was due to expire and the representatives of the different political parties who served as Sukleen board members could not agree on a new formula for the operation of Sukleen. This disagreement was a direct product of the wider political gridlock between March 8 and March 14 politicians over changing the electoral law. The stand-off led to the indefinite postponement of parliamentary elections and to Lebanon not electing a president after President Michel Sleiman's term had expired in 2014 (Abu-Rish 2015). Garbage collection was consequently suspended all over Lebanon as Sukleen ceased operating, in what came to be known as the "garbage crisis."

The garbage crisis was symptomatic of how Lebanon's power-sharing system was ineffective for managing the country's affairs "because there was a division in economic and political matters rather than inclusive decision making" (Geukjian 2014, 527). As garbage piled up in different areas in Lebanon, presenting a serious public health risk, popular protests broke out in Beirut, which quickly escalated to protests against corruption at large. Protestors called for the downfall of the government and in particular demanded the resignation of the minister of environment for failure to respond to the crisis. They also called for the resignation of the minister of interior in the wake of the government's violent response to the protests. Besides water cannons and tear gas, the Lebanese Army and the security forces used live bullets against protestors on more than one occasion.

The protests diverged from those of 2005 in that they were not led by any political party. They were genuinely horizontal, informal, and grassroots, and carried clear anti-sectarian messages. Unlike in 2005, when social media were not yet a global phenomenon, in 2015, activists used Facebook as a tool of mobilization. The lack of political party oversight gave the 2015 protests space to embrace previously excluded social networks who took to the streets under a shared cause. This led to the formation of new ad hoc activist groups, each with their own take on how best to steer the protest movement and how best to handle the government.

Politicians from across the spectrum saw in the protest movement a threat to the political status quo, particularly as the most prominent group in the movement had named itself "You Stink," in reference to the garbage crisis but also as a clear stance toward those in power.

March 8 and March 14 politicians who had hitherto disagreed with one another coordinated efforts against the protest movement. Besides state violence, the Amal Movement deployed thugs to protest sites to both intimidate protestors and engage in attacks on public property in an attempt at discrediting the protests. Leaders of the nascent activist groups were courted by the media and invited to have meetings with ruling politicians. This divide-and-rule approach, coupled with cooptation, served to foster divisions in an already fragile, young protest movement as various groups disagreed on the way forward. There was no agreed-on list of shared demands or a clear vision for political change (Nader 2015).

Besides violence and cooptation, the government responded to the protest movement by promising reforms in the civil service that eventually took two years to be implemented. The reforms took the shape of a big increase in public sector salaries. Bassel Salloukh (2019, 53) argues that politicians enacted these measures as an attempt to regain the “clientelist sectarian loyalty” of those demanding reform in the lead-up to the 2018 parliamentary elections. The civil service salary increases, he holds, were therefore a proactive measure by the status quo to safeguard itself.

Promising reforms linked to forthcoming elections was a shrewd move by the government because it added to disagreements among protestors regarding those elections. Some protestors believed that the elections are a manifestation of the same consociational system they are rallying against, arguing that taking part in them would legitimize this system. Others saw in the looming municipal elections in 2016 and eventual parliamentary elections an opportunity for political participation for independent voices. The latter group justified its stance as *realpolitik*, arguing that changing the political system can only happen incrementally and that running for office would open up opportunities for reform from within. These diametrically opposed views on how to effect change brought to the fore the tension between what some saw as the idealism of formal, organized politics versus the contentious political sphere in an environment in which opportunities for outsiders and newcomers who operate outside the confines of these sectarian-based clientelistic networks to win elections are almost nonexistent.

A key characteristic of the 2015 mobilization is its concentration in the Beirut area, even though the impact of garbage crisis was felt nationwide. The focus on Beirut, and particularly the downtown area, was because it is where the government sits, and where the 2005 protests had taken place, thereby lending the area an association with

mass mobilization. The group that achieved most prominence in context of the protests was called “Beirut Madinati” (Beirut My City). Founders of the group argued that focusing on Beirut was an advantage because of the centrality of the city geographically, its symbolism as the home of the government and Parliament, and the presence of a quarter of the Lebanese population in the city, which would aid mobilization (Fawaz 2019). Yet, the 2015 protest movement did not endeavor to widen participation beyond the capital. Some activists debated following the model of local councils that rose in Syria after the 2011 uprising through organizing grassroots community governance initiatives in neighborhoods in and outside of Beirut, but there was neither the appetite nor the capacity for such initiatives to be implemented. Key to the failure of such ideas to take off was the lack of trust among citizens, and skepticism about the viability of changing the Lebanese political system. Until 2015, no such attempt had succeeded in changing the system. By the end of 2015, street mobilization had subsided.

As with 2005, the 2015 protests did not instigate change in the Lebanese political system. But the 2015 protests achieved three things. First, they created a frame that linked poor governance in Lebanon to the sectarian system, as people began to speak of the political system as directly facilitating corruption. Second, the protests created informal social networks that brought together people under shared concerns (Geha 2019). Finally, protests planted the seeds of formal mobilization. Beirut Madinati grew to become a civil engagement program. It contested the 2016 municipal elections in Beirut but failed to win any seats. The group debated participating in the 2018 parliamentary elections but decided against it. Meanwhile other new political parties began to emerge. Lacking in experience or a clear agenda and operating within a political culture in which clientelistic practices were entrenched, the new parties largely failed to win seats in the election, except for one candidate—the only independent lawmaker among 128 in the Lebanese Parliament elected in 2018. But the framing and the social networks created through the 2015 protests mutually supported one another, and both would persist over the following years.

### **The “Upward Scale Shift” in the October 17 Revolution**

Lebanon’s political system proved to be resilient in the face of the 2015 mobilization. However, with time, the patron-client relationship

between leaders and citizens that this system entrenched came under stress due to the growing greed of the political elites. They used the Lebanese state as a tool for accumulating personal power and wealth, whether by syphoning state resources or by using concessions granted to state institutions as a means of facilitating their personal business transactions. As this trend grew, many of Lebanon's consociational-political leaders began ignoring the needs of their own constituents, even while those elites became embroiled in public allegations about their own corrupt practices. By 2019, Lebanon was facing a significant economic crisis that had been building up over the years and that the government did not have a viable plan for addressing. Citizens realized that Lebanon was heading toward economic freefall and that their political leaders were expecting them to shoulder the cost of the leaders' disastrous economic policies and corruption, such as through raising taxes on basic goods. "Collective memory" kicked in (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2009). The frame made public in 2015—that the economic woes Lebanon is suffering from have their roots in the country's sectarian system—came to dominate the public sphere. In October, people took to the streets in large numbers demanding the end of the sectarian political system.

Once again mobilizing in a horizontal, informal, and grassroots fashion, the protests led to the resignation of the government then led by Prime Minister Saad Hariri, but they did not change the political system. Protestors called for the implementation of Lebanon's constitution according to the terms of the Taif Agreement of 1989. The Taif Agreement (1989, section II-G, 5) stated that Lebanon would gradually work toward "abolishing political sectarianism" as a "fundamental national objective," but did not give a deadline for scrapping the allocation of parliamentary seats on the basis of quotas for each sect. By 2019, thirty years had passed with no change on the horizon as the political leaders frequently—such as in 2015—overcame their own divisions to support the status quo whenever it faced criticism from citizens. As Osama Gharizi (2020) wrote:

Article 95 of the constitution [ . . . ] calls for the end of political confessionalism through a national transition plan. To date, very little progress has been made on either of these provisions by the political establishment—doing so would begin to dismantle the very system that preserves their authority [ . . . ] the protest movement has a genuine opportunity to convert its street power



into a governance mandate that can push these constitutionally-sanctioned efforts forward.

The prospect of change to the status quo meant that as with 2015, Lebanon's rulers reacted to the 2019 protests through violence and attempts at cooptation. Some leaders, like Hezbollah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah, tried to discredit the protests by framing them as the product of foreign conspiracies against Lebanon, but the protestors quickly dismissed his claims. Although ministers affiliated with the Lebanese Forces and then Prime Minister Saad Hariri resigned in response to the protests, as did parliamentarians from the Kataeb Party allied with the Lebanese Forces, protestors saw these politicians' actions as a tactic to preserve their political currency rather than to genuinely meet the demands of the protestors. The slogan "all of them means all of them"—a reference that no one from the political class should be spared—came to dominate the demonstrations. The survivalist reaction of the ruling politicians in 2015 and 2019, similar to other incidents in which the status quo faced street critique, highlights how in addition to the formal consociational system in Lebanon, the country's leaders also operate on the basis of informal power-sharing agreements that are hard to crack.

The 2019 dynamics are distinct in that for the first time, the fall of the government—following Hariri's resignation—did not result in the formation of a new cabinet representing all Lebanon's political parties, as had been the case following every previous government collapse. Rather, the cabinet formed in January 2020 was dominated by loyalists to Hezbollah and its allies. It included only two ministers who could be described as independent, in a move to placate the street. But the new cabinet retained the sectarian balance of the previous government and was met with further protests. The process of forming the new cabinet also continued the informal practice of creating, merging, or adding ministries and cabinet seats to appease or contain political parties. For example, the Christian Marada Movement and the Druze Lebanese Democratic Party insisted on having two loyalist ministers each, in what was meant to be an 18-minister cabinet, and the solution was to expand the number of ministers to 20 to satisfy the Marada and the Lebanese Democratic Party. These kinds of maneuvers are common in Lebanon as political parties vie for ministries seen as lucrative or influential, or coordinate efforts to guarantee veto rights in the cabinet. Often, informal agreements as well as competition between political

parties led to absurd cabinet configurations, such as the merger of the Ministry of Culture and Ministry of Agriculture under one minister in the cabinet formed in January 2020.

Although the protestors labeled the January 2020 cabinet as a one-color “March 8 cabinet”—because other than the two independent ministers, only parties from the March 8 coalition were represented in it through loyalist figures—it was no longer applicable to divide the Lebanese political landscape according to the formal coalitions of March 8 and March 14. March 14 had been divided ever since Hezbollah’s intervention in Syria in 2012, which then Prime Minister Saad Hariri was not able to stand up to, leading to public criticism of Hariri from his March allies the Lebanese Forces and Kataeb Party. In a complete reversal of the dynamics of 2005, Hariri’s weakness, rather ironically, made him Hezbollah’s favored choice of prime minister. The Lebanese Forces and Kataeb Party came to stand largely alone in the face of Hezbollah in Lebanon but did not have the influence that would have allowed them to effect change in the political system, despite the Lebanese Forces’ open embrace of the necessity to end the sectarian governance system in Lebanon and fully implement the Taif Agreement.

Though the October 17 Revolution did not lead to immediate change in the political system, it is a landmark moment in Lebanon’s modern political history. Unlike 2005 and similar to 2015, the October 17 Revolution was a genuine grassroots movement throughout. Only the Lebanese flag was to be carried in the demonstrations, as there was heightened awareness among the protestors about rejecting all political parties, much like recent waves of popular mobilization throughout the region (see this volume’s chapters on Iraq, Jordan, and Algeria). In 2015, although the protests brought together people from different social classes, they were dominated by the Beirut middle class. The October 17 Revolution protests, on the other hand, were much more diverse in their social composition. Protestors deliberately reached out to people living in poorer neighborhoods in Beirut through staging marches to those areas and including the names of these neighborhoods in their revolutionary chants.

The protests were also cross-sectarian in a broader sense than in 2015. People were chanting anti-sectarian slogans and openly calling for an end to the sectarian political system in Lebanon. What was remarkable in this regard is that October 17 Revolution protests included for the first time members of the Shia community chanting against their own Shiite leaders. In the past, protestors would shy away

from criticizing Hezbollah in particular, partly out of fear and partly out of veneration. With Hezbollah's blatant efforts to discredit the October 17 Revolution and crush it with violence, demonstrators no longer regarded Hezbollah as having exceptional status in the Lebanese political milieu but as part of the problem just like any other party. Unprecedented public criticism of Hezbollah in protest sites and through social media indicated that the wall of fear had been broken and that Hezbollah had lost its aura—critiquing it publicly ceased to be taboo.

This was particularly important as the protests spread beyond Beirut into all regions of Lebanon, from the south to the north to the Beqaa Valley and the Lebanese Mountains—areas considered strongholds of traditional sectarian leaders or Hezbollah. Neither in 2005 nor in 2015 had Lebanon witnessed protests spanning the whole country. People were acutely aware of the symbolism of their geographical location. Tripoli in the north, for example, had come to be regarded in public discourse as a conservative Sunni stronghold, while Nabatiyeh in the south was a Shia stronghold dominated by Hezbollah. Not only did people in Tripoli and Nabatiyeh stage protests criticizing all Lebanese political leaders from every sect, they also mutually gave shout-outs to people from other, far-away cities across Lebanon as an expression of national solidarity. That protests took place in the south was in itself a bold move, given that Hezbollah's dominance over the region had previously relegated such public action to the realm of the impossible.

Civil society groups like Beirut Madinati and others actively took part in the protests, engaging in “direct diffusion,” a route of mobilization “that passes through individuals and groups whose previous contacts or similarities help to spread mobilization” (Tilly and Tarrow 2015, 125). Social media played a huge role in supplementing this through what Tilly and Tarrow call the “mediated route,” “acting as brokers who connect people who would otherwise have no previous contacts” (125). This encouraged people from Beirut to send delegations to protest sites in other cities like Tripoli in the north or Tyre in the south as an expression of solidarity and shared goals. People across protest sites also began to chant the same slogans and engage in similar protest activities, lending visual unity to the different cities. For example, both Beirut and Nabatiyeh had the same sculpture of a fist erected in public squares. Tilly and Tarrow refer to such national coordination of collective action as an “upward scale shift” in mobilization compared with its initiation (125).

A major development in the October 17 Revolution is the establishment of town hall meetings in public arenas. Previously, civil society would organize small-scale meetings about citizen rights or the environment, but attendance was limited to those already engaged in civil society work. As people took over public space during the October 17 Revolution, makeshift areas on the street were created for the holding of public discussions that were open to everyone. That the street itself was reclaimed in this way encouraged people from all walks of life to participate in those debates, which ranged from the right of citizens to spray graffiti to the political future of the country. City squares became physical manifestations of the public sphere. It was the first time that Lebanese citizens at large had sat together to discuss their visions of their country.

Although the protestors did not have a road map for forcing the political system to change, they had a clear idea about the various stages that change should go through. This differed from the protests of 2015 during which protestors simply called for the fall of the government. The October 17 Revolution presented the authorities with clear demands. Specifically, they called for the resignation of the government, then of Parliament and the president, then the formation of a technocrat government from outside the political class, which would revise the electoral law and pave the way for the holding of early parliamentary elections. In that respect, demonstrators were implementing a lesson learned in 2015, “that real change necessitated participating in elections to really get inside the state; civil society activism alone could not hold the state accountable” (Deets 2018, 153). Another lesson learned from 2015 was that protests needed to remain leaderless. This was both to resist cooptation by the ruling politicians as well as to protect the protestors, especially after Hezbollah leader Nasrallah called upon the protestors to send representatives to negotiate with the government.

Both the 2005 and 2015 protests had seen wide participation by women. The October 17 Revolution protests followed suit but saw a greater role played by women. Women were often seen on the frontlines, forming a barrier between the security forces and the rest of the protestors in an attempt at defusing tension. They were also outspoken in town hall meetings about policy reforms including issues such as Lebanese women’s denied right of passing nationality to their children—an issue that activists have been campaigning about for years. Women also led outreach marches to deprived areas to signal that the revolution was inclusive. They were joined by men in chanting feminist slogans in public squares.

October 17 Revolution rallies saw many protestors who were younger than those who had taken to the streets in previous mobilization waves. Such young protestors would not have remembered the dynamics of the 2005 protests during which the dominant political parties absorbed grassroots mobilization. Their exposure to the outside world through social media also gave them a sense of awareness and maturity that bolstered their defiance of the traditional authorities in Lebanon. They could clearly see that there were many alternatives out there to Lebanon's broken political system. They could also see that protests in other Arab countries—Sudan, Algeria, and Iraq—were taking place. The toppling of Omar al-Bashir in Sudan and Abdelaziz Bouteflika's announcement that he would not run for election again in Algeria gave Lebanese protestors hope that mass mobilization was worth pursuing. The persistence of protests in Iraq despite the high level of violence against demonstrators inflicted by both the government and militias there also encouraged Lebanese protestors to keep going.

But the characteristics of the Lebanese protests that protected them from cooptation or decapitation—with their insistence on horizontal, largely informal mobilization—proved to be insufficient in the face of a stubborn, cunning political system adept at renewing itself. This trend echoes Sean Yom's conclusions about protest movements in Jordan in this same volume. As Lebanon's economic deterioration snowballed in 2020, government policy exacerbated the situation, for example through neglecting to impose formal capital controls on the banks, each of which proceeded to implement its own informal capital control measures to prevent citizens from accessing their deposits. This diverted the focus of the street from political change or reform to seeking ways of maintaining livelihood.

The ensuing COVID-19 crisis in 2020 brought street protests to a halt, but also exposed the lack of adequate social safety nets in Lebanon, as the government gave promises it did not keep, such as announcing cash handouts to the poorest segment of society, which were never delivered. This eventually resurrected street protests, as many people lost their jobs as a result of lockdown and the economic crisis and could see that the government had no serious plan to meet even their basic needs. The government continued to ignore their demands in the hope that the protests would eventually die down when protestors saw that mass mobilization was not achieving its objectives. The protests did die down, but the drivers behind the October 17 Revolution were amplified as Lebanon's economy continued to deteriorate and Lebanon witnessed the big-

gest explosion in its history with the Beirut port blast of August 2020. Popular anger at the government in the aftermath of the explosion caused the cabinet to resign, but the government's promise to conduct an investigation into the explosion did not materialize. The government also had no strategy to rescue Lebanon's economy. Meanwhile, the dominant ruling parties stalled the formation of a new government, creating a political vacuum in Lebanon. All those reactions by the ruling elites played a role in encouraging nascent activist and civil society groups to begin forming new independent political parties on the basis that street mobilization was not enough and that changing the system requires engaging in formal, not just contentious, politics. In 2022, candidates from those new parties contested parliamentary elections and in a historic breakthrough, won 10 percent of parliamentary seats.

## Conclusion

The Lebanese political system continues to prevail. However, it would be misleading to regard mobilization in Lebanon as having failed. As this chapter has shown, each new wave of mobilization has built on what came before it. Protestors have engaged in processes of social learning, diffusion, and brokerage as new social networks form and expand. They have adapted their mobilization methods according to the previous experiences of their predecessors and through acting collectively with others from different backgrounds who they had not connected with before. These mechanisms of emulation and attribution of similarity signify an important scale shift in mobilization that, as Tilly and Tarrow (2015, 126) argue, "can create new identities."

Indeed, one can go as far as saying that the cycles of contention in Lebanon are the birth pangs of the creation of a national identity in Lebanon. This is where the October 17 Revolution earns its label as a "revolution," despite the lack of change in the political system. For the first time, Lebanese people from different sectarian groups and geographies felt united. The grievances that had until then been expressed by individuals in isolation were elevated to the national scale. The same could be said about the vision for Lebanon that people originally thought only those in their immediate milieu agreed with, which was now revealed to be shared across the country. Many expressed that to them, this was the true end of the Lebanese Civil War. It may not have been a political revolution, but it was a social revolution that brought

with its elements of national reconciliation and a mission to overcome the difference and divisions that the political system had entrenched.

But just as it is too early to regard mobilization in Lebanon as a failure, it is also too early to forecast when tangible political results of the October 17 Revolution will be seen. The key points here are not to regard the revolution as being about street mobilization only and to track the evolution of political behavior of parties with reform agendas. Though the new independent parties formed in the aftermath of street protests may not be enough to change the political system, they continue to learn from past mistakes. For example, a number of these parties have formed alliances in parliament. They were aware that they were not likely to win the majority of seats in parliamentary elections, and, therefore, they focused on preventing the ruling parties from having a comfortable majority (an endeavor in which they eventually succeeded). In a pragmatic move, some have also accepted the Kataeb Party into their alliance. Such pragmatism may not be the path for reform that any of the cycles of contentious politics in Lebanon over the past two decades had anticipated, but it may be a challenge that the ruling status quo proves ill equipped to maneuver around.

The long-standing frustration of activists in Lebanon with established political parties and with the very idea of advancing change from within those parties exemplifies a region-wide trend that this volume highlights. This is seen in Jordan where activists, as Sean Yom notes in this volume, are resisting organizing around formal political structures or waging cooperation with political parties. It is also seen in the 2019 mobilization in Iraq, as David Patel describes in his chapter, particularly with respect to the aversion to parties in that wave of protests. A similar level of disillusionment is witnessed in Algeria, as Thomas Serres shows in his contribution. What makes Lebanon unique is that the dominance of established political elites over state institutions (and what this symbolizes by way of corruption and impotence) is *the central* target of contentious mobilization efforts, and that these efforts continue to evolve in ways that demonstrate the potential for greater synergy across contentious and formal politics.

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## 8 | Algeria

### Anatomy of a Revolutionary Situation

*Thomas Serres*

On June 1, 2014, after the reelection of Abdelaziz Bouteflika for a fourth term as president of Algeria, Prime Minister Abdelmalek Sellal presented his government's action plan. Bouteflika had been almost absent during the electoral campaign due to a transient ischemic attack he suffered in April 2013, that left him barely able to talk or move. Sellal nonetheless congratulated the people for making the right choice and demonstrating "their commitment to the unity and stability of the nation" (APS 2014). In his speech, he announced plans for constitutional amendments and for constructing a competitive economy that would guarantee social justice. He promised to consolidate the rule of law and promote a national dialogue. Five years later, the constitutional amendments had been adopted. Yet, Sellal was now in jail. Indeed, an historical grassroots mobilization, known as the "Hirak," had led to the resignation of Bouteflika on April 2, 2019.

This chapter examines the structural conditions and the historical processes that led to the 2019 Hirak, arguing that this peaceful uprising must be understood as the outcome of a long-standing systemic crisis, which endangered the country's political, social, and economic equilibrium. While observers highlighted the Algerian regime's ability to survive the turbulence of the Arab uprisings of 2010–11 thanks to a mix of state-controlled reforms, clientelism, and repression (Zoubir 2011; Volpi 2013), the country faced recurring economic and political issues that continued to threaten the status quo. Therefore, I argue that this long-standing systemic crisis led to a "revolutionary situation." By revolutionary situation, I mean an unpredictable and unstable political

configuration, notably marked by the division of the ruling classes, the discrediting of state institutions, socioeconomic unrest, and popular discontent. While this conjunction of factors makes a revolution possible and results in a direct challenge to the established order, it does not guarantee a radical transformation of the system (Lenin 1920; Tilly 1978; Skocpol 1979; Bennani-Chraïbi and Fillieule 2012; Alapuro 2019; Lawson 2019).

The Algerian revolutionary situation was shaped by a specific historical trajectory. Moreover, Algerian activists are often adamant in their rejection of the comparison with the uprisings of 2010–11. Rather, they portray the HIRAK as the continuation of a struggle for emancipation that started with the War of Liberation against the French and the popular uprising of October 1988. Yet, this chapter shows that the movement also has much in common with other revolutionary mobilizations in the region. While unexpected, the HIRAK was shaped by a system of government that used reforms to maintain domination rather than to solve long-standing issues. Thus, chronic socioeconomic hardships played a key role in fueling the discontent that led to the uprising, in a way that is reminiscent of the situation in Sudan, Iraq, or Lebanon during the same period (see the respective contributions of Khalid Mustafa Medani, David Patel, and Lina Khatib in this volume). In Algeria, the widespread desire to prevent a descent into chaos and the constant mobilization of various social groups gave birth to a peaceful yet radical repertoire of contention that proved to be crucial in the early months of the HIRAK. Meanwhile, the regime also enhanced its own tools for the management of dissent. In so doing, it followed a regional trend highlighted in this volume, characterized by the combination of repression and legal engineering to face discontent. The Algerian revolutionary mobilization has thus resulted in a long confrontation, fashioned by a shared commitment to preventing an increase in violence and the lack of credible solutions to end the stand-off. As in the abovementioned three countries, the contestation of the ruling coalition relies on a grassroots horizontal mobilization. This leaderless movement expresses a radical rejection of the political establishment but, as the findings of this volume indicate, struggles to propose a clear path toward change. This configuration explains the protracted and undetermined nature of the process of political reconfiguration that started in Algeria in February 2019.

## From Revolutionaries to Gangsters

The Algerian configuration is the result of a long process of socioeconomic and political transformation. First, a succession of major challenges shaped the ruling coalition and led to the progressive abandonment of their once revolutionary credo. Leaders increasingly adopted a conservative stance. In the process, the Algerian ruling coalition gained a diversified power structure anchored in the state and its peripheries. Even so, it remained firmly organized around a military-bureaucratic apparatus born during the War of Liberation.

### *The First Revolution and the Crisis of the Developmental State (1962–88)*

Between 1954 and 1962, the National Liberation Front (FLN) fought a violent war of liberation, which was also a socialist and nationalist revolution against the colonial order. This claim was validated by the involvement of iconic intellectuals such as Frantz Fanon and the lionization of heroic figures such as Ali la Pointe and Djamilia Bouhired. Yet, despite its revolutionary stance, the nationalist movement subjected ideology to the practical need of defeating the French (Byrne 2016). The FLN progressively turned into a bureaucratic and militarized machine able to wage an asymmetric war against a powerful European army. By drawing on terror, propaganda, clientelism, and discipline, the nationalist organization also positioned itself as an embryo of state apparatus (McDougall 2017, 211–12). This bureaucratic-military apparatus waged a civil war against other nationalist factions and the FLN's own political wing. In the summer of 1962, the external forces of the National Liberation Army (ALN) supported a coup against the Provisional Government of the Algerian Republic and installed Ahmed Ben Bella as the first president of the country. Since then, the implicit basis of national politics has been that “the Army is supreme” (Roberts 2003, 203).

Nonetheless, the hegemony of the military remained limited by the legacy of the War of Liberation. French strategies of disinformation and interpersonal feuds led to open conflicts between different nationalist tendencies, outside and within the FLN (Pervillé 1986). Consequently, the war gave rise to a “deeply secretive and factional system” based on wartime solidarities and intense rivalries among groups of revolutionary actors (McDougall 2017, 237). The factionalization and fragmentation inherited from the conflict shaped the Algerian state

after independence, as it was constantly shaken by internal quarrels between high-level officials (Leca and Vatin 1975).

The state aimed to reorganize a society that had been profoundly de-structured by colonialism and a dependent economy. After the coup of 1965, in which the Army's chief of staff Houari Boumediene overthrew Ben Bella, the ruling elites applied "a technocratic developmental agenda from above to the pressing problems of the economy and society" (McDougall 2017, 256). This strategy facilitated the rise of a "state-class" of technocrats who were especially instrumental in the implementation of development policies and leading economic agencies (Elsenhans 1982). As the FLN became an appendix of the state, technocrats secured the bureaucratization of the regime and its progressive distancing from Marxist ideology. They crafted a strategy of industrialization that relied on the reinvestment of the hydrocarbon rents and gave a central role to Sonatrach, the giant public hydrocarbons company (Entelis 1986, 115–16; Benderra 2005).

Despite some genuine successes (sovereignty over national resources, introduction of mass education, socioeconomic development), these policies also resulted in brutal transformations, both in the countryside and in the rapidly growing urban centers. After Boumediene's death in 1978, the new President Chadli Bendjedid pushed for a progressive, yet limited, liberalization of the economy in a context of growing hardships (Adamson 1998; Entelis 1986, 210). Meanwhile, Islamist and Berberist movements echoed popular discontent and challenged the authoritarian mode of governance prioritized by former revolutionaries.

### *Two Decades of Restructuring (1988–2011)*

Eventually, a popular uprising in October 1988 led to the collapse of the single-party system. In February 1989, a new constitution introduced political pluralism, freedom of association and the liberalization of the printed press. The Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) was the main beneficiary of this political opening. This heterogeneous Islamist party won the 1990 local elections and the 1991 legislative elections. In response to its victory, the People's National Army (ANP) interrupted the electoral process and forced Chadli to resign, subsequently launching a massive crackdown on Islamist activists. Between 1992 and 1999, the cycle of state violence and counter-violence led to a messy civil conflict, which caused more than a hundred thousand deaths and a profound political and cultural uncertainty.

During the so-called Dark Decade (*al-Ashriya al-Sawdâa*), the FLN distanced itself from the rest of the state apparatus, first by challenging Chadli's authority and then by advocating for a political settlement with the FIS. Meanwhile, the regime encouraged the creation of the National Democratic Rally (also known as RND), a new party that compensated for the FLN's defection. This movement incorporated some of the civilian forces that supported the strategy of "eradication" implemented by the Army (public servants, self-defense militias, and the historical workers' union).

In 1994, the government signed an agreement with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to implement a program of structural adjustment. Crony capitalists benefited from the privatization of public companies and the reconfiguration of a rentier economy rewarding predatory behaviors. Their growing influence was rooted in the economic spoils resulting from the dismantlement of state companies and the creation of new privatized monopolies (Aidoud 1996; Dillman 2000). Would-be close associates of Abdelaziz Bouteflika and his brother Saïd, such as Ali Haddad or Réda Kouninef, made fortunes in the sector of public construction. Later, they diversified their empires (which spanned various sectors including cement, telecommunications, real estate, media, and football) and involved their siblings in their flourishing businesses. This political economy, which is based on privileges and monopolies and brings together state and business actors, was a recurring outcome of the reforms implemented in developing countries in the 1990s (Heydemann 2004; Hibou 1999).

During the Dark Decade, the regime was able to diversify its constituency in the name of saving the country from a theocratic turn. It integrated prominent businessmen, leaders of militias, secularist activists, and even moderate Islamists. The Army's Command and the Intelligence Services (*Département du Renseignement et de la Sécurité—DRS*) remained at the center of the power structure, but they relied on the expertise of the state-class to govern. In addition to the technocrats, diplomats also played a key role. After the coup, the country was isolated internationally and targeted by an arms embargo. Following, diplomats contributed to the rehabilitation of the regime and normalized its "democratic" struggle against terrorism. As the iconic minister of foreign affairs under Boumediene, Abdelaziz Bouteflika's rise to power was part of this effort to restore Algeria's international reputation (Belkaïd 2009).

Upon his accession to the presidency in 1999, Bouteflika suffered from a lack of legitimacy resulting from the collective withdrawal of

his challengers during the election. He immediately strove to restore the power of the presidency in a political system dominated by the Army's command and the DRS (Addi 2002). Before the 2004 presidential election, then Prime Minister Ali Benflis challenged the president's authority with the support of a fraction of the military's leadership and the FLN. Bouteflika and his allies eventually prevailed by relying on their legal and constitutional powers, and the support of the DRS. The former single party was disciplined and placed under the control of close allies of the presidency. Ahmed Gaïd Salah was appointed as the Army's new chief of staff, while many key figures of the military aristocracy were forced to retire (Mortimer 2006).

In the pursuit of a more stable position, the president presented himself as the guarantor of peace. To support his policy of reconciliation and amnesty, he organized two referendums for "Civil Concord" (1999) and "National Reconciliation" (2005), which received genuine popular support. These polls were nonetheless organized as plebiscites and supported by the full weight of the state apparatus. The subsequent adoption of the Charter for National Reconciliation in 2006 further confirmed the empowerment of the presidency at the expense of political parties and parliamentary institutions (Djerbal 2005).

In early 2011, three men controlled the main poles of power in Algeria: Bouteflika in the presidency, Mohamed Mediene (aka "Toufik") as the head of the DRS, and Ahmed Gaïd Salah as the ANP's chief of staff. A multitude of state and parastatal agencies gravitated around them, forming an increasingly diversified ruling coalition that integrated high-ranking technocrats, heads of security agencies, ministers, party leaders, businessmen, but also union organizers and Sufi brotherhoods. The cartelized nature of the regime served its resilience, by shaping networks of clientelism and regulating the competition between its members. Nonetheless, the ensuing heterogeneity reinforced the ideological weakness that had been apparent since 1962. The regime brought together leftists and neoliberals, Islamists and secularists, civilians, and high-ranking officers, without any common goal but to maintain stability. The emphasis on development and the nation was stripped from its emancipatory meaning. Meanwhile, at the core of the state apparatus, the presidency, the DRS, and the Army's command competed to assert their domination. Their endless Titanomachy only confirmed the pervasive fragmentation of a regime seemingly deprived from political convictions.

*The 'Isaba (2011–19)*

The protest movements that shook the Middle East in 2010–11 espoused a common regional temporality but were also shaped by specific historical and social dynamics (Bayart 2014). During this period, Algeria reacted to the uprisings in light of its own political history, which was most clearly expressed by the widespread fear that a disaster similar to the Dark Decade would erupt. While the country did not face an actual revolutionary movement, it did witness a limited but intense urban uprising at the beginning of January 2011. The government was seemingly able to navigate this wave of contestation. Yet, much like in the case of Morocco (see Samia Errazzouki's chapter in this volume), the combination of cosmetic reforms, cooption, and repression undermined political institutions without putting an end to the continuous expression of discontent.

In early February 2011, as Zine El Abidine Ben Ali had already left Tunisia and nationwide protests were now threatening Hosni Mubarak's grip on Egypt, a weakened Bouteflika pledged to end emergency laws, which had been in effect for 19 years. On April 15, the president appeared on television to announce reforms aimed at "reinforcing democracy." This package included another series of constitutional amendments, a modification of the law on political parties, and the liberalization of the audiovisual media sector. Retired Major General Mohamed Touati, one of the masterminds of the ANP during the 1990s, was appointed to lead the newly created commission for political reforms. The presidency nonetheless remained in control of this effort to "consolidate democracy." Some reforms were impactful, notably the legalization of private television networks that reinforced media pluralism (Bozerup 2013). Others opened the door for new repressive measures, such as new laws on associations and information (Dris 2012).

Spokespersons for the ruling coalition strove to depoliticize the urban uprising and disconnect it from the regional revolutionary tide. The protests were labeled as "a crisis of sugar and oil," a jacquerie resulting from the evil deeds of speculators. In opposition to this unrest, the government presented the forthcoming legislative of 2012 with the advertising phrase "Our Spring is Algeria." These elections were framed as a final moment of democratic consolidation under the watch of the administration and the presidency. This moment of civil expression allegedly stood in opposition to the chaos associated with



the Arab Uprisings (later rebranded as “Arab Winters”). The regime appealed to the youth by staging a transfer of power to the next generation, and to its international partners by contrasting its successful and peaceful transition to the chaos in Syria and Libya (Belkaïd 2012; Dris 2013; Holmsen 2016). Eventually, the outcome of this “consolidation” was the electoral “triumph” of the FLN, which received 17.35 percent of the votes but 208 out of 462 seats, thanks to the disproportionality of the first-past-the-post voting formula, political fragmentation, and low voter turnout. Two years later, Bouteflika was reelected for a fourth mandate despite his repeated promise that his generation was ready to pass the torch.

While seemingly successful in navigating the upheavals of 2011, the ruling coalition nonetheless suffered from a credibility crisis aggravated by Bouteflika’s 2013 stroke and his subsequent incapacitation. The consecration of a zombie-like president for life and the instrumentalization of electoral processes weakened the already declining legitimacy of political institutions. While the presidency had initially benefited from its role in the demilitarization and pacification of Algerian politics in the 2000s, Algerians increasingly viewed it as another pole in a factionalized game of embezzlement. As the ailing president disappeared from public life, his brother Saïd was portrayed in the private press as the real power figure and the patron of a network of crony capitalists and corrupt politicians.<sup>1</sup>

Under the single-party system, crony capitalists served as intermediaries between the state and multinationals. While facilitating foreign investments and ensuring profitable contracts to foreign partners, they also developed their own clientele networks (Bennoune and Hayef 1986, 54). Despite their dependency on state protection, some of them acquired genuine political power. After 2013, given the drop in hydrocarbon prices and the subsequent shrinking of the currency reserves hoarded over the previous decade, they supported international pressures for a liberalization of the economy while protecting their privileges. Prominent businessmen thus positioned themselves both as supporters of the political order and promoters of economic reforms (Boubekeur 2013). Some of these figures were notoriously close to the presidency, such as construction mogul Ali Haddad, who also became

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1. In the summer of 2017, the critical private press notably accused Saïd and his affiliates of undermining Prime Minister Abdelmajid Tebboune, who was fired after only three months (El Watan 2017).

the president of the country's main businessowners association (FCE—*Forum des chefs d'entreprises*) and a key interlocutor of the government on socioeconomic issues.

The growing influence of businessmen was notorious in the political field, especially within the FLN, which had become a catch-all structure welcoming a wide-range of profiteers. Local big men had long used the party to turn their social and economic capital into political influence, but their lack of moral and ideological compass became blatant. Infamous figures like Bahaeddine Tliba epitomized a new generation of politicians who were solely committed to their own success. A business partner of Gaïd Salah's son, Tliba was elected as an independent parliamentarian without any prior political experience. He rapidly joined the FLN and became the vice president of the People's National Assembly. The commodification of politics led to the proliferation of actors who barely dissimulated the economic motives behind their commitment. Eventually, politics were perceived as a realm populated by a collection of *khobzistes* (eaters), *shyatine* (brushers), *kashiristes* (sell-outs), and *'aranib/lièvres* (hares, that is, decoy candidates).

The technocracy, which was in theory the embodiment of the neutrality and rationality of the state apparatus, was not left untarnished. The corruption scandals revealed in the press demonstrated the key role played by high-ranking public servants in embezzlement schemes. From 2010 onwards, the Sonatrach affairs revealed the insertion of that company's executives into transnational networks of corruption, along with American, Canadian, and Italian subcontractors. This unprecedented scandal also revealed the strategic position of several businessmen of Algerian origin—including the nephew of a former minister of foreign affairs—as intermediaries between state officials, foreign firms, and offshore companies specializing in money laundering. A major figure in the state-class, the former Minister of Energy and Mines Chakib Khelil, was also involved. Despite his indictment, Khelil was able to leave the country in 2013. An international arrest warrant was issued and subsequently withdrawn, and Khelil came back voluntarily in 2016 after the charges were inexplicably dropped.

The signs of corruption at the highest level of the state also accompanied growing tensions between two major poles in the ruling coalition. Indeed, the investigations that led to the downfall of Khelil, a close ally of the presidency, were directed by the DRS, which was legally in charge of anti-corruption. Between 2010 and 2015, the con-

flict between the intelligence services and the presidency was a recurring feature in Algerian news, with the Army's Command portrayed as the arbitrator. While both Toufik and Bouteflika remained remarkably silent, their respective associates traded accusations of betrayal in the public space. Eventually the presidency prevailed, and Toufik was forced to retire in the fall of 2015. A few months later, the DRS was dismantled. Some of its services were placed under the direct control of the presidency and the rest were attached to the Army's command. In this context, political opponents, but also bloggers, union organizers, or ordinary citizens, increasingly portrayed the regime as an *'isaba*, a gang whose sole purpose was to plunder the country.

### **The Hirak and the Revolutionary Situation**

Eventually, the ruling coalition came to be seen as an alliance between violent military officers, inept elected officials, corrupt public managers, and voracious businessmen. At a time of budget scarcity, as government figures were pushing for reforms of the labor code and pensions, popular culture and social movements targeted the *'isaba* that had seemingly usurped the state inherited from the first Revolution against the colonial order. The regime maintained the uncertainty surrounding Bouteflika's potential bid for a fifth mandate. Eventually, in a written message to the nation released on February 10, 2019, the president—or those speaking in his name—announced that he would run for a fifth term. This move sparked the Hirak, a revolutionary mobilization that started in the north-east and rapidly spread to the rest of the country.

#### *The Hirak*

The rejection of successive electoral processes had long given birth to non-conventional forms of contentious political participation (Belakhdar 2013). As a symbol of the political dispossession of the people, the 2019 presidential election presented an opportunity for the expression of the discontent accumulated over the last decade. It gave rise to a movement that brought together different sectors of society in a dichotomous yet non-violent confrontation between the “people” and the *“'isaba.”* In addition to spontaneous gatherings throughout the week, mass demonstrations followed the afternoon prayer every Friday,

while students flooded the streets on Tuesdays and local diasporas in France, the UK, and Canada organized rallies on Sundays. The presidency first tried to maintain its bid for another term, before canceling the election in the name of preparing a transition. As protests continued, in late March, the Army's Command expressed its support of the Hirak. Bouteflika eventually sent his letter of resignation to the Constitutional Council on April 2.

The Hirak continued after this first victory, as protestors called for the downfall of the system in its entirety. They forced the ruling coalition to offer a series of concessions until mid-June. Powerful figures such as Saïd Bouteflika and Toufik Mediene were accused of treason and sent to a military prison in Blida. Notorious cronies and former ministers were also among the most iconic victims of the unfolding judicial backlash. On the eve of Bouteflika's resignation, 12 prominent businessmen were forbidden to leave the national territory. Ali Haddad was arrested while trying to cross the Tunisian border with two passports. He was then sent to El Harrach prison, with several other iconic associates of the presidency, such as transportation tycoon Mahieddine Tahkout and former Prime Ministers Ahmed Ouyahia and Abdelmalek Sellal. All of them were prosecuted for corruption and squandering public funds.

Following a well-known pattern, these anti-corruption procedures were used to advance intra-elite struggles and to facilitate a pragmatic reconfiguration of the power structure (Hibou and Tozy 2009; Zhu and Zhang 2017). For this reason, protestors were weary of a potential instrumentalization of the justice system for the benefit of the military leadership. Their suspicion betrayed the tension opposing the revolutionary potential of the Hirak and the limited re-ordering prioritized by the bureaucratic-military apparatus that still controlled the state. On one hand, protestors demanded a complete uprooting of the system, not merely the prosecution of a handful of corrupt actors. On the other, the bureaucratic-military apparatus focused on the removal of the *'isaba*, understood as a limited pool of iconic figures in Bouteflika's entourage.

As the country's new strongman, Gaïd Salah strove to protect the interest of the Army. Indeed, in addition to its political power and its responsibilities in matters of national security, the ANP remained a key economic actor in the country (Nemar 2010; Mira 2019). As of 2019, its budget was one of the largest in Africa and drafted without accountability. It represented almost 25 percent of state spending and more

than 5 percent of the country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP).<sup>2</sup> In other words, high-ranking officers had major economic interests to protect, which explains their eagerness to sacrifice Bouteflika's cronies.

The Army's command continued to rely on the tools that had been characteristic of Bouteflika's rule. The Noureddine Bedoui government, initially appointed by Bouteflika a few days before his fall, managed the country on a day-to-day basis. It was mostly constituted of high-ranking public servants who performed their duties, notably crafting the country's budget, without any accountability. At the same time, Gaïd Salah gave the green light for a return to state repression in mid-June, when he denounced the actions of Berberist activists and protestors allegedly manipulated by the enemies of Algeria to destroy the country.

All in all, the bureaucratic-military apparatus followed a legalist strategy by pushing for the prosecution of former members of Bouteflika's close-knit circle and a new presidential election. On December 10, 2019, former Prime Ministers Ahmed Ouyahia and Abdelmalek Sellal were respectively sentenced to 15 and 12 years in prison for corruption. On December 12, Abdelmajid Tebboune, another former prime minister and ally of the Army's chief of staff, was elected president in the first round despite an historically low voter turnout (under 40 percent). As the country was headed toward a new era of bicephalous governance, with an official head of state ruling with the head of the Army, Ahmed Gaïd Salah died from a heart attack on December 23. In early January, Tebboune announced that he was willing to negotiate with opposition forces and released many of the imprisoned activists. Yet, he also strengthened his grip over the military and continued cracking down on protestors (Séréni 2020). Consequently, the Hirak continued and celebrated its first anniversary in February 2020.

### *Reforms and Pervasive Weaknesses*

To understand the unfolding stand-off between the bureaucratic-military machine and the mobilized groups who speak in the name of the Algerian people, one must look at the *longue durée*. As a revolutionary mobilization, the Hirak was shaped by a system of government

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2. That is, according to the World Bank. Data are available at <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/MS.MIL.XPND.GD.ZS> (accessed June 20, 2020).

that resulted from a succession of upheavals. The fragmentation and traumatization of Algerian society during the colonial period, the economic and political breakdown of the 1980s, and the Dark Decade all contributed to the formation of the cartelized regime that characterized Bouteflika's Algeria. Similarly, the feeling of dispossession and the denunciation of structural injustice express the egalitarian and populist political culture inherited from the first Revolution, a culture that has been challenged by successive waves of economic liberalization. From this perspective, the Hirak is not only an exceptional event that breaks with the monotony of governance-as-usual, but also the intensification of long-standing critical conjuncture. Under Bouteflika, the structure of the regime allowed for the management of instability through the inclusion of diverse elite groups and the establishment of clientele networks (Werenfels 2007). The management of a long-standing systemic crisis was aimed at maintaining control over the polity and preventing the occurrence of a disaster similar to the Dark Decade, but instead it contributed to the advent of a revolutionary situation (Serres 2019).

Confronted with the collapse of its historical legitimacy, the rise of Islamist and Berberist opposition movements, and the failure of the state-centered model of development, the Algerian state has undertaken a process of “authoritarian upgrading” since the end of the 1980s (Heydemann 2007). The adoption of new constitutions (in 1989 and 1996), the transition to political pluralism, the economic restructuring and the diversification of clientele networks were part and parcel of a reconfiguration of governance to “accommodate and manage changing political, economic, and social conditions” (1). Yet, this restructuring failed to solve the pervasive structural weaknesses of the political system.

The systematic appropriation of the narratives and procedures attached to human rights and democratization bolstered the resilience of the Algerian regime. This transformation was facilitated by international partners who supported its integration in the global economy and sought its support in the “War on Terror” (Cavatorta 2009). Nonetheless, this hijacking emptied the official discourses on democracy, popular sovereignty, and human rights from any meaning. Rather than providing a space for political debates, the public sphere showcased the disunion of the ruling coalition. The two main parties of the regime, the FLN and the RND, were plagued by internal divisions. Struggles for

the control of the FLN made headlines repeatedly in 2003, 2010, and 2012. In 2014 and 2016, the national congress of the party led to physical brawls captured on camera. In addition, the alleged manipulation of politicians by the bureaucratic-military apparatus dissipated what was left of public trust in the institutional processes. The mistrust and lack of representativeness were major shortcomings for a political system that was officially made “for the people and by the people.”

These political weaknesses went hand in hand with pervasive economic vulnerabilities, notably linked to the dependency on hydrocarbons rents. At the beginning of 2019, leading economic indicators suggested that Algeria was facing a situation of emergency. Unemployment (11.7 percent), inflation (4.2 percent), and trade deficit (1.14 billion dollars) were all on the rise. In addition, a budget crisis had been unfolding for more than five years, following the drop in hydrocarbon prices in 2013. The reforms implemented by the government failed to create a productive and sustainable economy. Despite the support of its foreign partners (and notably the European Union), efforts to reindustrialize by prioritizing local production over imports were undermined by the actions of cronies. For example, in 2017, transportation tycoon Mahieddine Tahkout, an associate of former Prime Minister Ahmed Ouyahia, was accused of using a phony assembly plant in Tiaret to hide the importation of already-built Hyundai cars.

The economic slowdown had major consequences for a society that was already impacted by state restructuring, unemployment, and urban disorders (notably the lack of housing and leisure activities). Combined with the feeling of entrapment and claustrophobia among the youth, the lack of economic opportunities fueled the desire to emigrate. Moreover, actors taking part in the ongoing movement of protests, riots, sit-ins, and occupation of public buildings justified their mobilization in the name of fighting the regime’s *hogra* (abuse of power, disdain, and exclusion) (Safir 2012; Souiah 2012; Messekher 2015). Far from being limited to the disaffected youth, the discontent also spread to the state apparatus, notably with recurring strikes in the education and health sectors that had been deeply impacted by the reforms implemented over the past 20 years. In short, rather than solving problems, reformism was a way to exercise power by re-creating the conditions for bureaucratic control (Hibou 2006). As such, it was part and parcel of a government of the crisis that had reproduced structural weaknesses for more than 30 years.

### *A Revolutionary Situation*

In the last years of Bouteflika's rule, Algeria showed many signs of a revolutionary situation that could result in a direct challenge to the established order. A long-standing systemic crisis weakened the cohesion of the regime, discredited its main authorities, and provided the structural conditions for the mobilization of diverse social groups in favor of radical change (Skocpol 1979). The succession of reforms supported the regime's resilience but also kept the country in a constant instability, which was aggravated by Bouteflika's illness and the drop in hydrocarbon prices. Given the fragmentation of ruling elites, their ideological incoherence and growing illegitimacy, and the discrediting of politicians and bureaucrats alike, the political system seemed unable to offer a solution to this systemic crisis.

The 2019 mobilization also echoed the widespread conviction that life in Algeria was unbearable, despite the policy of national reconciliation and the return of economic growth, and that the regime was responsible for this state of affairs. Countless songs, documentaries, YouTube videos, and cartoons described the suffering of the youth, their boredom, alienation, unemployment, and, as a result, their desire to leave the country. The idea that the regime had captured the state and abandoned its people fueled defiance. When they did not echo the self-derision characteristic of Algerian humor, cartoons and popular jokes relentlessly targeted the president or the corrupt politicians in his entourage. Laughter thus undermined already weakened political authorities (Arendt 1970, 45). Confronted with widespread insubordination, the state retreated from the country's margins and securitized the centers of powers by relying on swollen security apparatuses. When the regime's spokespersons complained about the people's immaturity and unruliness, they in fact admitted their own illegitimacy. As Arendt (1973, 228) explains "in politics, obedience and support are the same."

Until 2019, the absence of a cross-sectoral movement prevented the emergence of a genuine revolutionary confrontation. Charles Tilly explains that "a revolutionary situation begins when a government previously under the control of a single, sovereign polity becomes the object of effective, competing, mutually exclusive claims on the part of two or more distinct polities" (Tilly 1978, 192). For a long time, such "dual power" was missing. Formal competing claims existed in the



public space, but opposition coalitions were never in the position to actually threaten the regime's domination. Nonetheless, various social movements revived the egalitarian and nationalist discourse inherited from the war. According to this narrative, the people owned their nation state and the rights that came with it (McDougall 2017, 233). If the dual power failed to hold in the sphere of formal politics, it took shape at the symbolic level, in the confrontation between a heroic people and its tormentors who had captured the nation state (the *'isaba* or the *Pouvoir*). This dichotomous understanding of the country's state found its expression in the Hirak.

This explains the specificity of the revolutionary situation in Algeria and in other countries in the region that experienced similar horizontal and seemingly leaderless mobilizations. Despite the dichotomous political configuration, the revolutionary effort is not embodied by a limited pool of charismatic figures or organized by a vertical structure. The dual power is shaped by overlapping networks that prioritize horizontality and consensus (see Sean Yom's chapter in this volume). In Algeria, a grassroots populism shaped by the legacy of the War of Liberation compensated for the "post-ideological" nature of the movement and allowed it to last over time while pushing for radical change (Bayat 2017). At the same time, the cartelized regime has severed its most compromised components and can thus proclaim its support for a reformist version of the Hirak. All this results in a revolutionary situation that can easily be negated by observers. According to a figure of the Algerian left interviewed by the author at the end of 2020, such negation "validate[s] a colonial mode of thinking that presents Arabs as incapable of organizing themselves and carrying out a revolution" (Serres 2021).

The mobilization that started in February 2019 certainly had an explicit revolutionary purpose, as protestors demanded a complete change of political system and the departure of all those who had been associated with the regime. Revolutionary situations are nonetheless dynamic and undetermined. They bring together long-standing processes and chains of actions, decisions, and interpretations, and can result in reformist, reactionary, or revolutionary outcomes (Tilly 1978, 193; Bennani-Chraïbi and Filleule 2012, 793). Following the election of Abdelmajid Tebboune, protestors reiterated their rejection of the results and continued their demands for radical change. After the acceleration of political time that characterized the early phase of the Hirak and led to the demise of Bouteflika and his cronies, the confron-

tation evolved toward a political deadlock. The bureaucratic-military apparatus that had learned to manage a crisis clashed with revolutionaries who had appropriated the repertoire of contention developed by social movements. This resulted in a protracted stand-off characterized by the commitment of both sides to avoid a rise in violence.

### **Modes of Nonviolent Contention**

On its first anniversary, in February 2020, the Hirak had resulted in the death of three protestors. In comparison, the list of martyrs of the Tunisian revolution published by the High Committee on Human Rights and Fundamental Liberties in October 2019 accounted for 129 *shuhada* (martyrs) after two months of state violence. While the Hirak was rapidly rebranded as the *silmiya* (peaceful), its claims were nonetheless radical. Since 2011, myriad individuals and groups questioned the exercise of authority and the legitimacy of the ruling elites (Chena 2011; Dris-Aït Hamadouche 2012). Organized social movements complemented the widespread use of riots to denounce state brutality and structural injustice. In so doing, they contributed to the development of a modular repertoire of contention adapted to state practices in an unstable political and economic environment (Tilly 1986, 2). Largely based on nonviolence, this repertoire was instrumental in the 2019 mobilization, but it was also met by an experienced repressive apparatus that based its response on nonlethal policing and the instrumentalization of the law.

### *The Political Conundrum*

The profound discredit of the representative system was a crucial feature of the revolutionary situation in Algeria, which echoes recent contentious expressions of dissent elsewhere in the region (see chapters on Lebanon and Jordan in this volume). The rejection of formal politics had taken an increasingly contentious turn in the early years of Bouteflika's tenure, after the brutal repression of a popular uprising in Kabylia in 2001. The "Black Spring" gave birth to the movement of the Aârch, which was the first mass mobilization to result in a radical rejection of partisan politics and to advocate for self-organization and local democracy in opposition to the violent and bureaucratic ways of the regime (Dirèche-Slimani 2006). The movement published a call to boy-

cott the 2002 legislative elections, in the name of “expressing a definitive break with a rentier and corrupt system” and “refusing compromises” (Inter-Wilaya Coordination 2002). Without surprise, Kabylia was again at the forefront of the struggle during the HIRAK. The town of Kherrata was one of the birthplaces of the mobilization against the Fifth Mandate, and the region remained a stronghold of the movement even after the lockdown resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic.

The mistrust for institutional politics also plagued political parties. Despite the tolerance of radical dissent when expressed within the proper institutional framework, opposition movements remained profoundly divided. Under Bouteflika, they were weakened by the regime’s strategy of cooption and suffered from their own organizational shortcomings (Dris-Aït-Hamadouche and Zoubir, 2009). They also faced the strategic conundrum posed by electoral participation. Berberist movements such as the Rally for Culture and Democracy (RCD) and the Socialist Forces Front (FFS) oscillated between participation and boycott. In 2012, the RCD decided to boycott the legislatives and lost its 19 deputies. As for the FFS, it participated in the electoral process for the first time in more than a decade and received 27 seats, but it suffered intense criticism from boycott supporters. Islamist parties faced a similar dilemma. The Movement for the Society of Peace (MSP) had once supported the regime in the name of pragmatism, but it decided to return to outright opposition in 2012. As a result, it lost some of its seats and failed to erase the suspicion resulting from its reputation as an ambiguously loyalist party.

Despite their difficulties, opponents repeatedly called for regime change in the public space. Yet, their fragmentation and discredit remained crippling. In January 2011, a group of political organizations, associations and unions founded the National Coordination for Change and Democracy (CNCD). The CNCD was nevertheless rapidly weakened by internal divisions, for its social and political poles disagreed on the objectives of the movement and the strategies to implement. Eventually, the coalition broke up in two CNCDs (namely “political parties” and “Barakat”) (Baamara 2012). The 2014 presidential election led to another attempt to unite opposition parties in one single structure. Once again, the National Coordination for Freedoms and Democratic Transition (CNLTD) suffered from the diverging strategies of its members. In 2016, a long-standing advocate of such a coordination and spokesperson of the liberal party Jil Jadid (New Generation), Soufiane Djilali, announced the withdrawal of his organization from the CNLTD

due to the decision of other member parties to participate in forthcoming elections.

It is therefore not surprising that the protestors in 2019 repeatedly expressed their refusal to be manipulated for political reasons. In the press and during demonstrations, the Hirkak was portrayed as an “autonomous” movement. Signs of partisan belonging were extremely rare among protestors, who prioritized the Algerian flag as a way to assert their unity (and later the Berber flag to challenge Gaïd Salah). As Tunisian revolutionaries preoccupied with “making a people” (*faire peuple*) once saw the Dark Decade as a reminder of the risks resulting from division (Laarcher and Terzi 2012), their Algerian counterparts frequently portrayed the violent outcomes of the 2011 in Libya and Syria as illustrating the dangers of factionalism. Meanwhile, political organizations remained on the margins of the movement. De facto, the Hirkak was an attempt at grassroots self-representation, largely committed to framing the people as an example of civism, in opposition to the political elites that had failed to act in an exemplary manner.

Some political figures tried to develop an organization that could respond to the need for political efficiency and the desire of grassroots democracy expressed by protestors. The Pact for a Democratic Alternative (PAD), a coalition of leftist parties and human rights organizations, was created in September 2019 to structure a network of local committees throughout the country. The PAD strove to regain an influence on the political agenda and to formulate a set of concrete propositions. It published its platform on January 25, 2020. In the document, the coalition of parties and associations demanded a national conference in order to establish the rules for a period of democratic transition, the abrogation of economic laws squandering national wealth, the end of the restrictions on democratic freedoms, and the liberation of all prisoners of conscience. Yet, these more traditional forces had to cope with the growing influence of newly founded movements that called themselves political but rejected the “party” label. Organizations founded abroad such as Rachad (conservative) and Ibtakar (liberal-leftist) acquired a certain influence in the Hirkak, notably because of their activism on social media and their rejection of ideological divides.

Meanwhile, tensions with “pragmatic” opposition parties remained high. The president of the MSP (Islamist-conservative), Abderrazak Makri, was repeatedly portrayed as a traitor for his denunciations of Berberist and secularist actors in the Hirkak. For the MSP, the strategy of compromise was appealing, given that it could benefit from the

political void to fill in as the new leading party in the country. Protestors feared the regime's ability to coopt critical voices in the name of putting an end to the crisis. In the first weeks of January 2020, the choice of liberal opponent Soufiane Djilali to meet with newly elected Tebboune led to a torrent of criticism. Similarly, the Hirkak faced increased criticism from international observers (Roberts 2019) or national figures, such as journalist and novelist Kamel Daoud, who went so far as to proclaim the failure of the movement. The horizontal and grassroots structure of the Hirkak and its difficulty in proposing a clear political alternative to the regime echoed the widespread mistrust for institutional politics. A year after the beginning of the movement, calls to normalize the country's political life thus gained traction. Activists committed to radical political change nonetheless refused to negotiate with Tebboune, who they viewed as illegitimate. Despite the pandemic, the various networks and organizations linked to the Hirkak continued to demand the fall of the *'isaba* and a transition to a civilian state based on the rule of law.

### *Contention by Other Means*

Under Bouteflika, the shortcomings of political parties led to a displacement of contentious discourses toward social movements. These mobilizations played a crucial role in reshaping the national repertoire of contention and creating horizontal solidarities. Many of the strategies experienced throughout Bouteflika's tenure proved instrumental in the Hirkak. Students were particularly active in this respect. As early as 2001, autonomous collectives of students had expressed their solidarity with the movement of the Aârch in Kabylia and denounced the violence and illegitimacy of public authorities (Collective of Student Autonomous Committees 2001). Later in 2010–11, local committees in universities led a protest movement that culminated with the first mass protests held in the capital since 2001. Students denouncing a reform of higher education challenged the police forces and tried to reach El Mouradia, the presidential palace. Again in 2019, autonomous student committees played a central role in the Hirkak. In addition to showing up in large numbers for the weekly marches on Friday, they set up their own Hirkak of the Students (*Hirkak al-Talaba*) which continued for more than a year. They also organized workshops and national conferences to discuss issues such as grassroots activism, citizenship, and local democracy.

Organizations driven by socioeconomic grievances also contributed to the reshaping of the repertoire of contention. They conceptualized nonviolent forms of mobilization that broke with the cycle of rioting, which had long been instrumentalized by the regime to legitimate its security-based and paternalist response to popular unrest. Autonomous trade unions were especially important in the structuration of protests. In the 2000s, they attracted hundreds of thousands of workers, notably in the public sector. They eventually announced the constitution of a federation of 13 autonomous trade unions in November 2018. The rise of the autonomous unions coincided with the routinization of peaceful mobilizations in the public space, notably in the name of preserving public services (Beddoubia 2019). They also contributed actively to the constitution of cross-sectoral forms of solidarity and did not shy away from politically contentious claims, notably by supporting the CNCN in 2011 (National Council of Professors in Higher Education 2011).

After 2011, social movements combining economic claims and a very contentious political message moved southwards, notably with the National Coordination for the Defense of the Rights of the Unemployed (CNDDC) and the 2015 anti-fracking mobilization in the oasis town of In Salah. Local activists emphasized the need to avoid urban rioting and prioritized peaceful ways to occupy the public space (sit-ins, occupations, demonstrations, and blocking roads). They merged local practices with attempts to insert their movement in the national landscape by denouncing broader issues such as unemployment or the environment crisis. In their effort to reinforce networks of solidarity, they facilitated the collaboration between social classes, and brought together experienced labor organizers, political activists, and unemployed youth. In addition, they denounced the marginalization of southern regions and demanded better public services and the redistribution of hydrocarbon rents appropriated by the regime and foreign companies. In short, they developed a repertoire of contention based on the peaceful occupation of public spaces, demonstrations of patriotism anchored in local contexts, and demands for rights that had long been ignored by the state (Belakhdar 2015, 2019).

These social movements developed close partnerships with non-partisan organizations that articulated explicitly political goals, such as the Rally Youth Action (RAJ) or the Algerian League for the Defense of Human Rights (LADDH). Often targeted by state repression, these movements “favored networking with other organizations” and tried to

mobilize the youth (Hadj Moussa 2019, 14–16). During the Hirak, the LADDH and RAJ were notably instrumental in facilitating the creation of the Pact for a Democratic Alternative. Non-partisan political movements also organized workshops to reflect on the regime’s resilience and examples of other revolutions in the Arab world and beyond. For instance, the movement Rachad and its affiliates published research on the strategies of peaceful uprisings around the world. While some of its founders were linked to the FIS, the movement rejects ideological conflicts and developed a theory of peaceful resistance. While Rachad’s involvement was viewed with skepticism by many in the Hirak and beyond, it nonetheless became increasingly visible as a leading force of the movement after 2020.

The peaceful repertoire of contention developed by grassroots movements was massively appropriated and expanded during the Hirak. In addition to the strategies aiming to occupy the public space and the dichotomous discourses denouncing predatory elites, protestors promoted new forms of grassroots organization. In the early days of the movement, groups such as the “green armbands” and the “orange vests” were created following minor incidents in order to prevent physical confrontations, channel protests, prevent sexual harassment, and provide emergency care. Responding to officials who constantly invoked the chaos in Syria and Libya, activists strove to collectively demonstrate the “civism” of their society, for example by implementing clean-up operations after the marches (Derradji and Gherbi 2019).

The Hirak also relied on the massive production of online content, which complemented the mobilization in the streets. Under Bouteflika, Algerians expressed discontent in various ways, including on social media. The discrediting of the regime fueled a tragic-comical repertoire of dissent, expressed in jokes and songs. Before each election, photomontages mocking the ruling elites circulated online. In response, the regime targeted isolated online activists, notably those who uploaded videos calling for the boycott of upcoming electoral processes. This did not prevent the Internet from becoming a hotbed for dissenting voices that developed non-conventional ways to speak about politics (Hadj Moussa 2019, 18–20). During the first months of the Hirak, online content was instrumental in fueling the movement. In the week prior to the first national marches on February 22, 2019, the images of protests in Kherrata, Bordj Bou Arreridj, and Khenchela went viral. In March and April, jokes mocking the president’s hospital-

ization in Switzerland and songs proclaiming the urgency to liberate the people flourished on social media. In addition to spreading information and undermining what was left of Bouteflika's authority, activists also used the Internet as a space for grassroots organizing. For instance, a Facebook post which first called for people to help assure the security of demonstrators led to the constitution of the "orange vests," groups of easily recognizable volunteers who accompanied the protestors, clearing the streets and preventing clashes with the police.

### *The Law, its Force, and its Limits*

Nonetheless, these various means of nonviolent contention met the nonlethal policing apparatus that had also been developed under Bouteflika. While state officials have routinely praised the "blessed Hirak" for saving the state from a handful of corrupt actors, the regime has also reverted to its usual strategy of arresting handpicked protestors and maintaining them in judiciary limbo. With the support of a complicit justice apparatus, it implemented a seemingly legal repression by relying on exceptional laws targeting subversive activities. Since the repressive turn of June 2019, hundreds of activists have been detained for motives ranging from undermining the Army's morale to threatening the safety of the state. Among them were figures of the groups that had been long-standing opponents of the regime. Hadj Guermoul, a member of the CNDDC and of the LADDH, was among the first to be arrested when he denounced the Fifth Mandate at the end of January 2019. As the regime ramped up its crackdown on protestors in the fall of 2019, Abdelouahab Fersaoui and Hakim Addad, two leading figures of RAJ, were also imprisoned. Most political prisoners were detained for several months as they awaited their trial.

After a year of stand-off in the streets, the Hirak was seriously impacted by COVID-19. Shortly before Tebboune ordered a lockdown at the end of March 2020, prominent figures of the movement already demanded a suspension of the marches. Yet as the Hirak went online, the state was able to intervene and punish virtual activists. In this context, the Internet proved to be another revolutionary battlefield, a space of dissent and surveillance. Relying on tools developed during the previous decade, security apparatuses targeted Facebook page administrators or isolated individuals accused of spreading fake news or inciting public gatherings. Several news websites were blocked and some journalists were arrested. Media censorship reached levels that



far exceeded the Bouteflika era. Meanwhile, opponents continued to be subjected to police harassment, as the pandemic allowed security apparatuses to implement a double crackdown targeting both online and in-real-life activists (Bounab 2020).

Overall, the tools for nonlethal policing and the legal management of subversion developed under Bouteflika proved critical in the regime's response to the revolutionary mobilization. The government nonetheless created additional laws to quell dissent. In April 2020, the Law No. 20-06 modifying the penal code was promulgated. It included new measures to restrict foreign funding for local associations, giving the state discretionary power in determining what is foreign propaganda. This law also increased the fines and prison sentences for disrespecting state agents and institutions. Lastly, it introduced a new crime of "spreading fake news," which once again gave public authorities extensive power to determine what qualifies as fake.

By weaponizing the law and relying on nonlethal repression, the ruling coalition expanded the reach of a permanent state of exception. These measures can be viewed as a tacit acknowledgment of the revolutionary situation by a regime fighting for its survival. Yet, the constant reliance on legal and police violence also fueled discontent. The liberation of political prisoners and the denunciation of cases of torture became central themes in the mobilization of the HIRAK. In response to the regime's use of the law to limit expressions of dissent, activists demanded investigations into police brutality, the independence of the justice system, and a genuine rule of law. As the HIRAK celebrated its second anniversary in February 2021, radical slogans could be heard in the streets of Algiers (such as "*mukhabarat irhabiya*" or "intelligence services terrorists"). A few months later, the government introduced a new law amalgamating binational protestors with terrorists and stripping them from their citizenship. In the permanent state of exception created by the protracted struggle, each side regards the other as illegitimate and criminal.

### **A Revolutionary Situation Without a Revolution?**

The revolutionary situation in Algeria was the product of structural conditions and contingencies, conscious strategies, and miscalculations. The HIRAK took shape as an unexpected reaction against a ruling coalition that had dilapidated its historical legitimacy and was increas-

ingly viewed as a disorganized gang. Popular discontent and the crisis of representation further contributed to the advent of a cross-sectoral, cross-generational, and cross-class mobilization bringing together various social groups (students, the unemployed, and middle-class urbanites). The movement appropriated and expanded the repertoire of contention developed by social movements under Bouteflika. The performance of civility and nonviolence was a crucial feature in this repertoire, fashioned in opposition to the Dark Decade and the counterexamples of the uprisings in Syria and Libya. In response, the regime relied on the same tools that it had long used to control change: electoral processes, limited reforms, nonlethal policing, and the criminalization of activists portrayed as subversive agents.

As the latest manifestation of a long-standing crisis, the Hirak has brought to light a set of deep structural issues, notably the failure of institutional politics, a phenomenon that is by no means unique to Algeria. This volume shows that grassroots mobilizations have challenged flawed pluralist systems throughout the region. From Morocco's manipulated party system (see Samia Errazzouki's contribution to this volume), to Lebanon's "exclusionary pluralism" (see the chapter by Lina Khatib), or the relatively inclusive yet corrupt parliamentary system of Iraq (see the chapter by David Patel), pluralist institutional frameworks have fueled mistrust for politicians. Following, popular mobilizations reject political influences and prioritize horizontal structures. They appropriate a sense of patriotism and civism that has seemingly deserted the political sphere. Yet, protestors also face repression and the resilience of ruling elites. Interestingly, one of the most autocratic regimes in the region, that of Sudan, gave birth to a mobilization that combined both vertical and horizontal mobilization and was able to push for a partial transfer of power (see Khalid Medani's chapter). This points to one of the greatest paradoxes of the Algerian configuration. On the one hand, the profoundly discredited political system fuels the rejection of ruling elites and the revolutionary situation. On the other, it also prevents the construction of an alternative.

Another key element to explain the protracted stand-off in Algeria is the nonviolent nature of the struggle, which has allowed the core of the ruling coalition (the Army's command and high-level public servants) to continue managing the state in an autonomous fashion. Meanwhile, the government tried to cultivate international support by opening hydrocarbon exploitation to foreign companies. It also set the stage for the return to external debt, a reform of pensions, and further privatiza-

tions. The apparent autonomization of the state apparatus is reminiscent of the practices of Maghrebi states in the 1970s (Camau 1978, 196), or the model of the bunker state (Henry 2004; Henry and Springborg 2010). Yet, the lack of representativeness and legitimacy of this autonomized machine also reproduces discontent.

The revolutionary situation in Algeria thus remains largely uncertain. Undoubtedly, both the regime and its opponents (moderate and revolutionaries alike) agree on the necessity for profound changes. Yet, the constitutional referendum organized by Tebboune in November 2020 attracted a very low voter turnout (less than 23 percent). Similar top-down institutional makeovers have occurred multiples times (in 2002, 2008, and 2016 for the current constitution) without solving the profound popular mistrust in the institutions and formal politics. Meanwhile, more radical supporters of the HIRAK demand that a national conference pave the way for the election of a constituent assembly in charge of crafting the constitution of a Second Republic, but they lack the organizational capacity to impose this agenda. Another crucial stake is to build a new political economy that would be sustainable and ensure social justice. Public deficit represented more than 10 percent of Algeria's GDP at the end of 2020, and almost 14 percent one year later. In this regard, the process of economic restructuring is far from being over and the pandemic has only worsened the situation. Thus, even a legitimate government would still have to balance the demands for social justice and popular sovereignty with the de facto economic precariousness of the country.

The regime has proven in the past that it can survive a revolutionary situation without addressing its structural causes. Yet, even without an immediate revolution, the nonviolent repertoire of contention displayed by the HIRAK since 2019 has bolstered the movement's resilience. Despite the pandemic, the creative processes that fashion and re-fashion Algerian activism are still ongoing. Efforts to promote radical change continue to draw on existing modes of struggle and invent new ones. While Algerian revolutionaries have successfully crafted a model of peaceful mobilization, their attempt to conceptualize an alternative form of political organization and representation is still a work in progress.

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## 9 | The Nexus of Patronage, Petrol, and Population in Iraq

*David Siddhartha Patel*

The largest and most sustained protests in Iraq's post-Ba'ath era began in early October 2019. Sparked by the perceived demotion of a widely respected general in the Counter-Terrorism Service, demonstrations quickly came to focus on endemic corruption, high unemployment, and inadequate public services and blamed Iraq's ethno-sectarian system of power-sharing for the country's plight. Protestors in Iraq's "October Uprising," like participants in concurrent contentious movements elsewhere in the region, distanced themselves from organized politics and formal parties and instead relied on horizontally organized popular mobilizations to challenge the system. After two months of protests centered in Baghdad's Tahrir Square—and violent attempts by security forces and Iran-affiliated militias to suppress them—Adil Abdul-Mahdi, Iraq's prime minister for just over a year, announced his resignation.

There are two common perspectives on these mass protests. The first sees them as a revolt against foreign interference in Iraq and emphasizes anti-Iran slogans and attacks against symbols of Iranian power and influence in Iraq. The second views the protests as part of a decade-long wave of evolving uprisings—perhaps an unfolding revolution—by Iraqis against sectarianism and the entire post-2003 political system that is seen as benefiting a corrupt and entrenched political elite. In this view, anti-foreign sentiment in Iraq today is largely a by-product of anger with the Iraqi political system, directed at Iran as the current chief guarantor and beneficiary of that corrupt political order (Young 2019).



Although there is truth in both of these perspectives, much of Iraq's domestic unrest and political instability over the past seven years can be traced to the 2014–16 collapse in oil prices and the inability of Iraq's political system to adjust to governing amidst austerity. Many of the protestors in 2019–20 were angry about austerity measures—particularly the hiring freeze—that were implemented as a result of a need to govern in hard times. In this sense, the demonstrations echo those in 2015–16 and 2018, but, by late 2019, oil prices had rebounded and the expensive war against the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) was seen as nearing its conclusion. Many protestors did not want so much to overturn the system as they did to benefit from it, as they had expected to before the 2014 downturn.

This chapter argues that these protests and the current state of the Iraqi political system cannot be understood without examining the interplay of three factors: an inclusionary and patronage-based electoral system, periods of relatively low oil prices, and demographic change. Iraq's post-2005 electoral system has proven to be resilient, surviving numerous crises and incorporating both rejectionists and new actors. Its resiliency is partially built on an informal quota-based system, known in Iraq as *muhasasa*, whereby parties distribute state resources, most notably access to public employment and contracts, to supporters and those who pay. But that system had the additional misfortune of being baked during a time of extraordinarily high oil prices, from 2005 to 2014. Iraq's patronage-based electoral system was flush with cash for its first decade; public sector employment rose dramatically, and both parties' and the Iraqi people's expectations were largely set during that time. And most of those people are young: About 40 percent of Iraqis were born after the 2003 invasion. Young people in Iraq know only the *muhasasa* system, and they came of age in an era of high oil prices in which “their” government doled out jobs widely. It is this generation of Iraqis—those under 30—who bore the brunt of austerity after the collapse of oil prices in 2014 and have been at the forefront of protests in recent years. Iraq's protestors want opportunities—an end to austerity measures, renewed public sector hiring, improved provision of services—that the previous decade led them to believe they are owed and that low oil prices and a corrupt political system and elite denies them. They demand an end of the *muhasasa* system because it is seen as the barrier to better services and employment.

These three factors are structural, and the situation appeared to be

on the verge of improving in late 2019 as oil prices rebounded and austerity measures were relaxed. But the COVID-19 pandemic and unexpected collapse of oil revenues in 2020 deepened the impasse between Iraqis' expectations and the ability of the country's national political institutions to address widespread social and economic discontent, regardless of who is at the helm.

Iraq's experience speaks to this volume's findings in two respects. First, it reflects the growing divide between elite-led formal politics and contentious popular political action that is characteristic of several countries of the region. Iraq also informs the volume's findings regarding the extent to which chronic government failure to meet popular demands for social and economic rights can impede the stability and democratizing potential of participatory politics.

### **Iraq's Resilient Political System**

After the overthrow of President Mohamed Morsi in Egypt and the resignation of the Ennahda-led government in Tunisia, a leader of the Moroccan Justice and Development Party told a group of foreign government officials in 2014 that, "We're the one last Islamist party remaining in government in the region" (Spiegel 2017, 69). That leader was wrong: Islamist premiers and parties had governed Iraq for almost a decade at that point. In comparative analyses of the Middle East and North Africa, it remains common to forget about Iraq—as the Moroccan politician did—or to stereotype it as a failed state whose politics are predominantly driven by sectarianism or external intervention or both (Patel 2019). Far too often, Iraq is seen as not useful for comparative purposes and only appears in books' indexes under the terms "Kuwait, invasion of" and "U.S., occupation of." This belittles the fact that Iraq's parliamentary democratic system—despite the perceived "original sin" of having been birthed during the U.S.-led occupation and its failure to yield effective governments at times—has been remarkably durable, competitive, and inclusionary.

Iraq's political system has survived 17 turbulent years, which included sectarian civil war, intra-sect conflict (for example, 2008's Operation Charge of the Knights), the withdrawal of U.S. forces, eight years of a venal premier in Nouri al-Maliki, the collapse of much of the Iraqi Army and the rise of ISIL, the storming of the Parliament complex by protestors in 2016, and a Kurdish independence referendum.

Any one of those events might have been a “critical juncture” in Iraq’s political history, leading to the collapse of the post-2005 system. Yet Iraq held six parliamentary elections in those 17 years, and each was competitive and meaningful. They were competitive in that they included wide arrays of actors competing for the same seats—secular and religious, parties and individuals, old and new movements—and, in recent years, increasing cross-ideological and cross-sectarian electoral cooperation. They are meaningful in that elections have led to real transfers of power (for example, Ayad Allawi to Ibrahim al-Jaafari in 2005; the Da’wa Party surrendering its hold on the premiership; the confirmation of Mustafa al-Kadhimi, despite him not having a background in Iraqi Islamist parties). Iraq has been led by six different prime ministers during this time.

The system also has had an uncanny ability to draw in (and, arguably, coopt) both rejectionist and new actors. Muqtada al-Sadr, an infamous critic of the political establishment during the U.S.-led occupation, became a central component of that establishment as his followers competed in elections and won seats. The most prominent militias from the Popular Mobilization Forces, including those closely affiliated with Iran, formed political wings and compete in elections. Over time, Sunni Arabs participated in elections in greater numbers, and many Sunnis who had opposed the occupation and initially rejected the political system later ran for office and accepted government positions. Similarly, Kurdish challengers to the two main Kurdish parties joined and carved out electoral constituencies. Many new parties and blocs formed since 2003 have won seats, and the so-called “big seven” exile parties that dominated the Iraqi Governing Council in 2003–04 no longer exclusively control Iraqi political institutions. Vote share in Iraqi parliamentary elections became more dispersed over those six elections; regionally, the closest analogue might be the Israeli Parliament.

### Patronage

Iraq’s *muhāsasa* system was originally a sectarian apportionment system. Most analysts link the multi-ethnic and cross-sectarian consociational arrangement to the occupation period and claim that the U.S. enforced ethno-sectarian representation at different levels, including the Governing Council, leading to an informal quota system that came to be known in Iraq as *al-muhāsasa al-ta’ifiya*, or sectarian apportion-

ment. Others, however, date the system of ethno-sectarian apportionment to earlier plans made by the Iraqi opposition in exile in the 1990s, when they allocated positions on their governing bodies according to estimates of the percentage of Iraqis who were Shia, Sunni Arab, and Kurdish (Alkhudary 2019). Regardless of origin, central elements of the *muhasasa* apportionment system persisted even as sectarian competition in Iraq waned over the years.

Tracing Iraq's shifting politics of sectarian competition, Fanar Haddad (2019b) argues that Iraq is no longer in an era where its major groups fear extinction or deliberate exclusion. Sectarian competition is no longer existential, and the changes brought in 2003 are now understood by all to be irreversible. Haddad notes that no one in Iraq imagines anymore that the system could be overthrown in a sect-coded revolution; the rise of what he calls "Shia-centric" actors to power is accepted. Everyone knows, more or less, their group's relative size and place in the system, and the distribution of power and influence across sects is only minimally contested. Haddad (2019b, 50) quotes a television appearance by former Speaker of Parliament Mahmud al-Mashhadani after the elections of 2018 to express this reality, "Our share [Sunni Arabs] is known: six ministries, nine commissions, and more than sixty other positions—special grades. So, what do we care who comes and who is the largest bloc and who is Prime Minister? What do I care? Whoever comes, we will say: this is our share, give it to us. He cannot say no, because this is agreed upon."

What was originally a system of ethno-sectarian apportionment became, over the past decade, a system of party apportionment. Haddad (2019a) argues it is now best understood as a *muhasasa hizbiyya* ("party," rather than "sect," *ta'ifiyya*) in which parties divide ministerial positions, government contracts, and the power to appoint key civil service positions. Competition is now primarily within sect: Sunni Arab notables and parties, for example, compete against one another to control the power to fill those positions mentioned by Mashhadani. But the legacy of pre-2003 authoritarianism and post-2003 sectarian conflict created an enduring impetus for inclusivity—governments of relative national unity and widely distributed spoils. There has been little organized government opposition within Iraq's Parliament, which partly explains the inability or unwillingness after the 2018 election to identify the largest bloc, constitutionally responsible for nominating a candidate for the premiership. It also helps explain the selection in 2020 of Mustafa al-Kadhimi, a politician without a party or natural con-

stituency, to serve as an ostensibly interim premier after the protests forced Adil Abdul-Mahdi to resign. This is one reason why many Iraqis today see the *system* as the problem, not specific parties or only the former exiles or those who worked with the U.S.

“*Muhasasa*” is now a catch-all word in Iraq for the system that evolved from one of ethno-sectarian apportionment to party-based clientelism. State resources are dominated by ethno-sectarian parties, and party patronage networks are built on and sustained by the distribution of government employment, contracts, and benefits. After each election, the dominant parties haggle behind closed doors and divvy up ministerial positions and, since at least 2014, the right to place loyalists in senior civil service “special grade” positions (*al-darajat al-khasa*, often referred to by Iraqis as *wikala*, the ostensibly temporary contract by which the appointments are made). These party-filled positions encompass perhaps five hundred to a thousand jobs, including directors-general, deputy ministers, and heads of some state-owned enterprises (SOEs). Toby Dodge and Renad Mansour (2021) argue that the systematic politicization of these special-grade positions has created a type of deep state in Iraq, in which senior civil servants are often more powerful than ministers, especially in the awarding of contracts. These party-aligned officials funnel government contracts to companies connected to their party and serve as bureaucratic bottlenecks to block actions that harm their party’s interests. Such political connections provide companies protection from investigation or prosecution when they deliver inadequate goods or services. Some job-seekers pay a bribe to party officials to obtain public employment. Others use personal loyalties or party allegiances; party leaders can provide letters of recommendation to help get jobs in government agencies in which party loyalists hold senior positions. In general, ministries have not become fiefdoms for specific parties or particular individuals, and control of them can change. Once hired, most public employees remain on the payroll, although their specific position might change, meaning that layer upon layer of different parties’ supporters bloat agencies’ staffs. Public sector workers can also often use party connections to obtain supplemental payments, such as for travel and having children, and contracted wage earners at SOEs can secure permanent employment with ministerial approval. During the 2016–19 hiring freeze, many sought this route to become fully-fledged state employees.

## Petrol

Iraq is similar to other Gulf states in that oil dominates the economy; Iraq is the second-biggest oil producer in the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC). Crude oil exports fund almost the entire state budget and has led to a bloated public sector and large subsidies. It is a typical rentier state, in this sense. Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance Ali Allawi openly admits that oil exports provide 92 percent of Iraq's resources, saying in July 2020, "We don't have any other revenue. The whole country, the state finances, and the economy of Iraq as a whole are dependent on oil prices and the volume of oil exports" (GOI 2020).

But Iraq's political system also had the misfortune of both arising and consolidating—of being "baked"—during a time of extraordinarily high oil rents, from 2005 to 2014 (Patel 2018). When the U.S.-led coalition toppled Saddam in April 2003, a barrel of crude oil was approximately \$36 (inflation adjusted). A steep and protracted climb ensued. By the time Jaafari became Iraq's first post-invasion elected prime minister in April 2005, oil had risen to \$50. Except for a dramatic but relatively brief crash in 2008 during the global recession, the price of oil would not be that low again for a decade, until 2015. Oil rose to over \$100 a barrel in September 2007 and, for the most part, stayed in the broad range of \$90–120 for several years. In comparison, oil prices rarely rose above \$50 prior to 2005. Throughout this decade, Iraq's crude oil production steadily rose: from 1.8 million barrels per day (bpd) in 2004 to 3.1 million bpd in 2014.

It is now widely believed that the effect of resource wealth on governance depends on whether or not high-quality state institutions existed in a country *before* the exploitation of oil (Mehlum, Moene, and Torvik 2006; Robinson, Torvik, and Verdier 2006; Ross 2015). Oil-rich Norway, which discovered oil only in the late 1960s, does not suffer from a so-called "resource curse" of poor governance, high levels of corruption, and dependence on oil revenues. In contrast, Iraq's post-2003 political system is notable in that it was formed and evolved in a period when oil prices were historically high and when its state institutions and fiscal capacity were extremely weak. Patronage and corruption became part and parcel of Iraq's political order: Transparency International listed Iraq as the 17th most corrupt country in the world in 2020.

Fueled by this decade-long deluge of oil revenues and the patronage imperatives of the *muhasasa* system, public sector employment in Iraq



Fig. 9.1. Crude Oil Prices, 2000–2021. West Texas Intermediate Crude (WTI) Month-End Prices (inflation-adjusted), Units: USD/Barrel

Source: Data from U.S. Energy Information Administration (EIA), U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), via <https://www.macrotrends.net/1369/crude-oil-price-history-chart> (accessed March 2021).

expanded dramatically from 2003 to 2015, more than tripling from under one million to over three million. Estimates of the size of Iraq’s public sector vary widely, depending on how fixed-term contracts, security forces, “ghost employees,” and the 176 SOEs that existed as of 2015 are counted. Information on the latter are particularly difficult to obtain. Ali al-Mawlawi (2019, 10) estimates that 633,000 Iraqis worked for SOEs in 2010, including contractors and daily wage earners. According to one study, the total number of government employees in 2013 was six million out of a total labor force of 8.5 million, or 71 percent of the labor force (Jiyad 2015). This figure includes 3.5 million permanent civilian employees, another one million employed on fixed-term contracts, and 1.5 million in the defense and interior ministries’ security forces (including an unknown number of “ghost” employees and soldiers who exist only on paper).

This public sector expansion led to a steady growth in state expenditures on salaries, benefits, and pensions. The wage bill is, by far, the single biggest item in Iraq’s annual state budget, rising from 7 percent of expenditure in 2004 to almost 40 percent by 2015. Spending on

employee compensation rose nine-fold from 2005 to 2019, from \$3.8 billion to \$36 billion (Al-Mawlawi 2019, 9). Public sector workers receive salaries but can also be eligible for supplemental payments, such as for travel, for seniority, and to support children. Government expenditure averaged 52 percent of GDP from 2005 to 2012, and the public wage bill from 2005 to 2010 averaged 31 percent of total expenditure or 18 percent of GDP. Since oil revenues remained high from 2005 to 2014, parties could hire freely and Iraq's post-Ba'ath crop of elected officials gained no real experience in governing in hard times.

Global oil prices plummeted dramatically in mid-2014, falling by more than 50 percent from \$114 in June to \$53 by year's end. This was one of the largest declines since World War II and was initially driven by a growing supply glut linked to booming U.S. shale oil production. The resulting loss of state revenue in Iraq coincided with a need to increase military expenditure to fund the war against ISIL; Mosul fell to ISIL in June, just as prices crashed. Much of Iraq's domestic unrest and political instability over the past seven years can be linked to the severe budgetary and fiscal crises that resulted from this decline.

Iraq's GDP contracted by 2.4 percent in 2015, despite continued growth in oil production. The current account deficit widened, and official foreign exchange reserves ominously fell. Total government debt ballooned from 32 percent of GDP (\$75 billion) in 2014 to 55 percent (\$98 billion) in 2015 (IMF 2017). Iraq appealed to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank and agreed to reduce its wage bill, pension payments, government expenditures on goods and services, direct transfers, and non-oil investment expenditures (IMF 2016, 12). Perhaps most importantly, a partial hiring freeze was instituted. New government employment was suspended outside of a few exempted sectors, such as health, electricity, and the security services. Consequently, the total number of public sector employees fell slightly, from 3.03 million in 2015 to 2.89 million in 2018, and salaries as a share of overall spending slid from 35.5 percent in 2017 to 33.4 percent in 2018 (Al-Mawlawi 2019, 9).

Oil prices recovered somewhat in the first half of 2018, rising above \$70. As Ahmed Tabaqchali (2020a) notes, the expansion of Iraq's public sector pauses when oil revenues decline but resumes its upward growth after prices rise. The imperatives of Iraq's political system mean that whenever there is a budget surplus, the majority of it has been spent on public sector payroll. Adil Abdul-Mahdi's government was formed in October 2018, several months after the May general elections. Buoyed



by increasing oil revenues, he began to reverse many of the structural reforms put in place in 2016 as part of the IMF's Stand-By Arrangement for Iraq, including the hiring freeze. In 2019, the prime minister decreased the retirement age, freeing up positions for new hires but also adding to the pension roles. About 400,000 new jobs were added in 2019, and spending on salaries and pensions consequently rose 13 percent from 2018 to 2019 (Tabaqchali 2020b).

## Population

A majority of Iraq's population does not remember the Ba'ath regime. We can say this with confidence because approximately 45 percent of Iraqis were born after the U.S.-led invasion. If you include those who were ten years old or younger in 2003, about 63 percent of Iraq's population have no personal memory of Saddam Hussein or the pre-invasion era. Iraq's population is approximately 39 million and grows by about one million per year. It is an extremely young population; in the Arab world, only Yemen and the Palestinian Territories have such pronounced "youth bulges." More than 800,000 Iraqis enter the workforce each year. This demographic shift is already profoundly shaping Iraqi politics.

Even with rich data, it is difficult to estimate cohort effects separately from age and period effects. Cohort effects are the difference between groups rooted in the consequences of having been born at different times and having unique experiences. This is different from changes that result from the process of aging or a period effect, experiences that affect all age groups similarly. But there are theoretical, historical, and anecdotal reasons to believe that Iraqis of different age groups have been profoundly shaped by different life experiences.

The 1980–88 Iran–Iraq War had an enormous impact on Iraqis who are today in their sixties. For Iraqis in their forties and fifties who remained in Iraq, the 1991–2003 sanctions period likely was formative. But the 65 percent of Iraqis who are under the age of 30 mostly came of age in an era of relatively high oil prices and know only the post-2003 *muhassasa* system that doled out jobs freely. Faleh Jabar (2018, 23) notes that this generation has had little contact with any coherent secular ideology, after the decline of the late twentieth century's populist ideologies (for example, pan-Arabism and leftist movements). Their greatest ideological exposure has to been to Islamist influences in sectarian

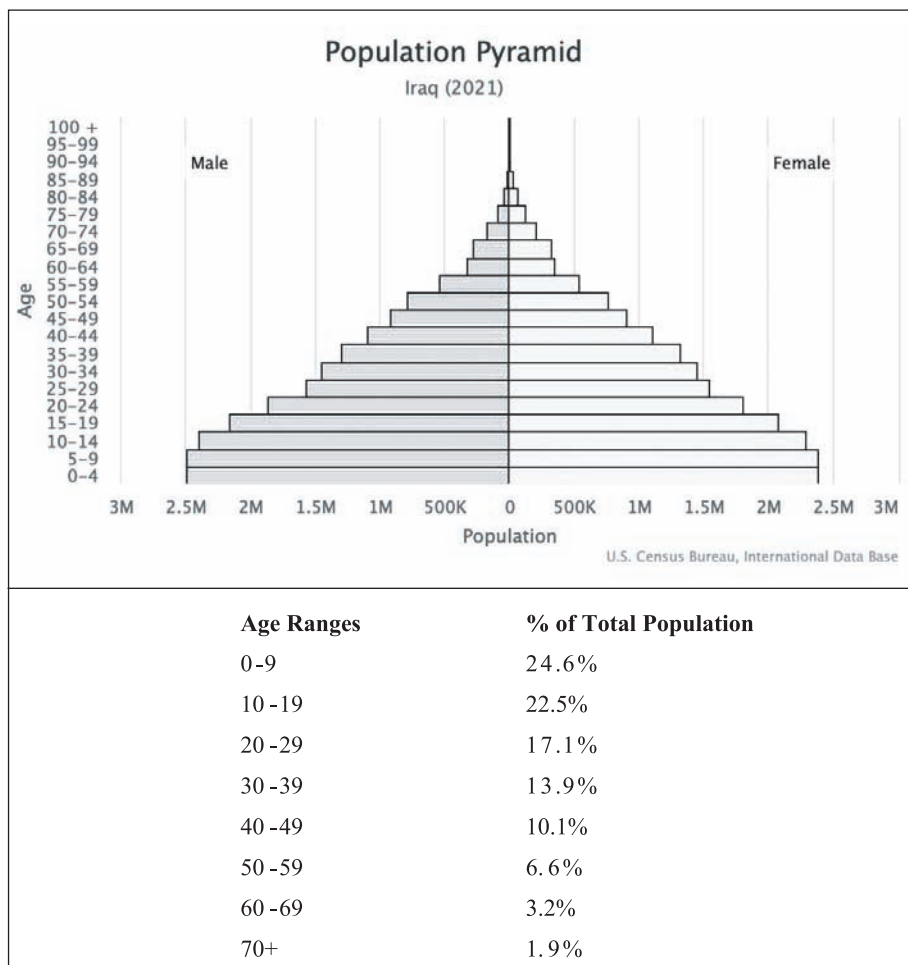


Fig. 9.2. Iraq’s Population by Age

Source: Data from U.S. Census Bureau, International Data Base, and estimated from data last updated in December 2019 <https://www.census.gov/data-tools/demo/idb> (accessed August 25, 2021).

forms, which they seem to reject. Unlike previous generations, they have had access to satellite television, mobile phones, and the Internet during their formative years. They saw their older cousins and siblings land lucrative and permanent jobs in the public sector, and they expected—based on what they had known over the previous decade—to follow in their footsteps.

It is these Iraqis—those under 30—who bore the brunt of austerity.

Estimates vary, but about 2.5 million Iraqis are unemployed. Iraq's national unemployment rate might be around 16 percent, while youth unemployment is likely closer to 36 percent. Jabar's (2018, 23) survey on the 2015 protest movement found that Iraqis under 30 constituted 60 percent of the protest movement. Many of them are from middle- and lower middle-class families, groups that heavily depend on state employment for stability and advancement. One of the main causes of the protests since 2015 is youth anger at austerity—particularly the hiring freeze—that was implemented as a result of decreased oil revenues.

### Protests

The 2019–20 protests were sparked by the demotion of Lt General Abdul-Wahab al-Saadi, second-in-command of Iraq's Counter-Terrorism Service (Golden Division) and prominent in the war against ISIL. Saadi is widely considered to be nonsectarian and uncorrupted. As proof of the latter, many Iraqis mention his modest apartment in Baghdad and the fact that he did not help his son advance when he joined the army. These characteristics place him in stark contrast to the perception of most of Iraq's political (and military) elite. These protests were part of a larger wave of protests that have recurred in Iraq since 2015, although there are important differences from earlier mobilizations.

Jabar (2018, 17) distinguishes the Iraqi protest movement that emerged in 2015 from previous mobilizations, including those in Iraq linked to the 2011 Arab Uprisings. He says, "The 2015 action was different from all the previous post-2003 protests; it was neither sectoral (by workers, professionals or students) nor local (confined to a certain geographic area) nor factional (solely owned by a certain community or sect). It was an all-embracing protest against the entire political system as an institution, culture and practice." It notably was also an intra-sect struggle, with predominantly Shia citizens demonstrating against a Shia-dominated political class. All the post-2015 protests have focused on demands for jobs, better public services, and the opportunity to have a decent livelihood, as well as true statehood for Iraq and fundamental political reform.

The protests in 2015–16 and in 2018, however, largely began in Basra during the summer, when anger over the city's woeful sewage and sani-

tation system, limited electricity, and high unemployment is exacerbated by humidity and temperatures that reach 125 degrees. Protest had become almost a summer ritual. In July 2018, for example, two months after Iraq held parliamentary elections, protests began in Basra before spreading throughout the south and Baghdad. In contrast, the 2019 wave of protests began in October, after the summer heat had subsided, and were centered in Baghdad. After facing annual summer protests in Basra, Iraq's security services and paramilitaries developed a set of practices that proved effective in controlling protests in that city and southern towns. These include intimidation and assassination of activists and lawyers, surveillance of individuals and physical locations, and the use of tribes and religious connections to contain protests and pressure individuals to remain home. This adaptation by the security services is one reason why summer 2019 was relatively calm in Basra. But those security practices proved less effective in preventing and controlling protests in Baghdad. Protestors had also learned logistical and tactical lessons from earlier protests, including organizing first aid and gas masks, and coordinating after the government cut the Internet and telecommunication services.

Compared to earlier mobilizations, the 2019–20 demonstrations were less connected to established political parties and organizations. Both unaffiliated grassroots organizers and experienced political activists played a role in organizing the 2015–16 protests. Zahra Ali (2019) sees the 2015 protests as related to “other initiatives and mobilizations mushrooming in Iraq at the time, especially among the youth who were experimenting with creative new forms of activism,” but she also notes that the leadership that emerged during those protests came from an older generation, mainly men with activist experience and affiliated with civil society or political organizations, such as the Iraqi Communist Party (ICP), other leftist organizations, and the Sadrist movement. Jabar's (2018, 23) survey of protestors found that the dominant demographic of protestors under 30 was “remarkably under-represented in the leading bodies of the (2015–16) protest movement.” But many of the protestors from that time came to resent the political parties that participated, especially the Sadrist movement, after they tried to appropriate the protest movement to serve their own interests. Muqtada al-Sadr participated in at least one sit-in himself, and his followers led the group of protestors in April 2016 who breached the barricades of Baghdad's Green Zone and stormed the Iraqi Parliament building. Most importantly, however, was the political alliance that

leftists formed with the Sadrists in the lead-up to the 2018 parliamentary elections. The ICP, some of whose Politburo members had been prominent leaders of the protest movement, entered into an electoral alliance with the Sadrist Integrity Party for the elections. The name of their electoral coalition—*Saairoon* (“On the Move” or “Marching Towards Reform”)—is anchored to the protest movement.

Many youth activists at the time felt betrayed by the decision of the older generation of protest leaders and the political movements they came from to participate in the elections. Some took to social media to call for a boycott of the 2018 elections. Voter apathy was a key feature of that election: Compared to Iraq’s four previous parliamentary elections, official turnout was a shockingly low 44.5 percent, and many Iraqis believe it was far lower (Patel 2018, 3). Two months after the elections, and while parties were still in the process of negotiating the formation of a new government, new protests erupted and political parties—especially local groups of Sadrists—used the unrest as an opportunity to storm rival political groups’ headquarters. The 2018 protests had less formal leadership than those in 2015–16, parties were less involved, and a prominent chant was “No, no to political parties.”

Based on that experience, protestors in 2019–20 largely rejected the participation of parties in their demonstrations and other actions. Although youth activists from earlier protests played a key role in organizing and coordinating efforts, they eschewed formal organization. Jabar (2018, 13) traced the evolution of the social movement that grew out of the 2015 protests and mentions that in early 2016 the movement began “institutionalizing itself as it held its first conference and adopted a plan of action.” Protestors in Iraq today reject that path; over a year after protests began, they remain without formal leaders or organization. Older politicians who were protestors’ comrades in 2015–16 now seem defensive. Jassem al-Hilfi, for example, was a member of ICP Politburo, a key figure in earlier protests, and one of the architects of the ICP-Sadrist alliance. Their electoral coalition, *Saairoon*, did surprisingly well in 2018, winning the largest overall number of seats (54) and placing first or second in ten of Iraq’s 19 governates. That success would come back to damage their credibility with protestors in 2019. In November 2019, al-Hilfi said

There are those who have been trying to confuse the youth in order to prevent these young people from organizing themselves. They claim that the involvement of political parties

should be rejected, in the hope that when the protests come to an end one day, and the elections are due, these same young people will find themselves structurally unorganized. This will allow the usual suspects to return to parliament. (Rudolf 2019)

Trying to justify his bloc's support of the government, he pointed out that *Saairoon* was only 17 percent of Parliament and its stance "was to give the [Adil Abdel-Mahdi] government a year to prove its capacity to govern." The ICP announced that it would boycott the scheduled October 2021 elections. In contrast, the protest movement's informal leadership since 2019, with no structured organizational patterns, is similar to *Hirak*-style protest movements elsewhere in the Arab world (see chapters on Jordan and Algeria in this volume), although the 2015–18 experience in Iraq is far more important for explaining that structure than learning from uprising experiences from other countries.

Protestors in 2019–20 "followed the [2015, 2018] Basra model in their form and demands," but their composition is far more diverse than those earlier mobilizations (Ali 2019). The 2015 protestors were mostly young, educated men; both Taher al-Hamoud (2019) and Jabar (2018, 23) characterized it as a middle-class protest. Jabar described participants as "providers of knowledge as opposed to sellers of material commodities." His sample of protestors found that over 50 percent had a university education or higher (2018). The 2019 protestors were also disproportionately youth under 30, but it also included many newly mobilized people and was more diverse in terms of educational background and profession. Workers and the disenfranchised joined students, teachers, and members of professionals' unions. Tuk-tuk taxi drivers became a symbol of the protests, driving around roadblocks to transport injured protestors. Some Iraqis who had fought against ISIL in militias participated in protests and acts of civil disobedience. Women participated in a more visible and central way. Zahra Ali (2019) sees this inclusivity as a strength of the current protest, one that is taking it from protest to revolution—going beyond "redistribution" to "developing original ways to express a sense of belonging to the country and proposing creative modes of sociability that transgress social and political hierarchies." She states, "They are not only demanding, but actually making a country." And, indeed, patriotic and Iraq-specific slogans were a prominent feature of the 2019–20 protests, including "there is no homeland" and "we want a country" (*nuriyd watan*).

But another prominent slogan—"Joining the fight to take what I am

owed” (*nazil akhudh haqqy*)—also helps explain why so many young Iraqis joined this mobilization. This slogan—which was a common thing for Egyptians to post online on the eve of their January 2011 revolution—captured the prevailing moment in Iraq. The word *haqqy* can be understood here as either “my rights” or “what I am owed.” And *nazil* has a strong connection to what it means to be in the street, in public space, in the city. The phrase is something one might say when going into a fight with someone who humiliated them or stole something from them. The protests in Iraq did not aim to remove Adil Abdul-Mahdi or hold early elections, and they certainly were not primarily about the immediate spark. The mostly young protestors of all backgrounds want opportunities—an end to austerity measures, renewed public sector hiring, improved provision of services—that the previous decade led them to believe they are owed and that a corrupt political system and elite deny them. Survey evidence is limited, but before the resignation of Abdul-Mahdi, one study found that 86 percent of protestors said they would not stop protesting even if the current government was dismissed (Dagher 2019).

The hiring freeze was a key issue for protestors in 2019; oil prices had rebounded and the war against ISIL was seen as nearing its conclusion. Many protestors knew that members of the Popular Mobilization Forces were being or soon would be integrated into the Ministries of Interior and Defense and feared that other areas of public sector employment would remain frozen as a budgetary consequence. Some of the protestors were contractors from SOEs demanding job security and pension plans. Since the 2016 hiring freeze, “it became almost impossible for contractors” to become fully fledged state employees (Al-Mawlawi 2019, 12).

## A New Downturn

After two months of protests—and violent attempts to disperse them—Prime Minister Adil Abdul-Mahdi announced his resignation at the end of November 2019, and the political establishment took over four months to agree on his replacement, Mustafa al-Kadhimi. Oil prices unexpectedly plummeted during this interim from over \$50 a barrel to around \$20 in March 2020 as a result of a global slowdown caused by the coronavirus pandemic and an expansion of production by Saudi Arabia. The dual challenges of a continued collapse of oil prices

and the COVID-19 pandemic threatened to bring Iraq's budget crisis to a head.

According to the World Bank (2021), Iraq's economy shrank by 10.4 percent in 2020: "the largest contraction of its economy since 2003." GDP per capita contracted by 15 percent. Over 90 percent of the 2020 provisional budget was slated to come from oil exports, which were estimated to be at \$56 a barrel. But federal crude oil revenues collapsed in March and April. In May, Iraq brought in \$2 billion, less than a third of what it expected. Iraq's new Minister of Finance Ali Allawi, who had previously served in that role in 2005–06, said that when he took office this second time, in May 2020, he was shocked to find out that Iraq only had a tenth of the financial reserves it should have had. He warned in June that "If we do not amend the situation throughout the next year, we may face shocks we cannot fix." The Iraqi government needs approximately \$4.2 billion each month for public salaries and pensions, which were 47 percent of total expenditures in 2019 (Raydan 2020). Facing economic catastrophe in 2020, the Iraqi government drastically cut discretionary spending, especially public investment; delayed and, in some cases, failed to pay public sector workers and contractors; and, in December, devalued the Iraqi dinar by 18.5 percent against the U.S. dollar.

Although oil prices rebounded in 2021 and rose further in early 2022, if they decline below \$50 a barrel again or otherwise remain relatively low, Iraq will not be able to fully pay wages or distribute pledged benefits and services. Capital spending will need to be deferred yet further, and Iraq's expenditures will quickly overwhelm its limited foreign reserves. Iraq's fiscal burden remains high—a deficit of approximately 6.4 percent of GDP—and the currency devaluation increased inflation in 2021.

The COVID-19 crisis threatened to overwhelm Iraq's badly underfunded health system and could do so again. The Ministry of Health has been badly mismanaged in Iraq over the past 17 years, particularly when it became highly politicized under Sadrist control. Iraq allocates a smaller percentage of its state budget—just 2.5 percent in 2019—to its health ministry than do other states in the region. Over the past decade, the World Health Organization calculates that Iraq spent on average \$161 per citizen per year on healthcare, compared to \$304 in Jordan or \$649 in Lebanon. The lockdown to limit the spread of the coronavirus further damaged the economy and Iraqis' livelihoods; 20 percent of Iraqis already lived in poverty, and that figure might have



doubled in 2020. The World Bank (2021, ix) found that in mid-2021 unemployment remained ten percentage points higher than it was before the pandemic.

During Allawi's previous stint as finance minister in 2005–06, Iraq paid public salaries to one million people. Depending on which official is speaking, Iraq today pays between 3.9 to 4.5 million workers, 2.5 million retirees, and between 600,000 and one million social security or welfare recipients. New austerity measure seem inevitable, and any solution involving international lenders is likely to include a renewed hiring freeze and cuts in salaries and compensation. The Kadhimi government considered slashing public servants' cash bonuses, cutting monthly disbursements to ex-political prisoners and retirees who earn a double-wage, and ending or reducing payouts to Iraqis exiled or jailed under Saddam who now live outside of Iraq. Iraq's budgetary reckoning is coming. In June 2020, the new prime minister acknowledged that about one million pensioners would not receive their full allowance for the month. He told reporters that this was caused by a "lack of liquidity" and was not a deliberate cut.

Almost everyone in Iraq admits that sweeping economic reforms are needed. Kadhimi's government released in October 2020 a 96-page White Paper for Economic Reform that it called a comprehensive and integrated program for the reform of the Iraqi economy. The White Paper dates Iraq's economic crisis to the 1970s and links it to 50 years of reliance on oil revenues to expand the public sector. But the difficult-to-achieve goals of reducing that reliance on oil, growing the non-oil sectors, developing the private sector, and reforming the public sector are likely to take a backseat to short-term solutions to manage budgetary and fiscal crises. The Kadhimi government's initial attempts to curtail corruption and cut government payrolls and benefits were quickly abandoned. Demographic pressure and the political system create tremendous pressure to expand the public sector, but Iraq's reliance on oil, which has been particularly volatile since 2014, appears to have made the system unsustainable. Iraq's political status quo is dependent on high oil prices, which again approached \$100 a barrel in early 2022 following Russia's invasion of Ukraine. But a variety of factors could once again drive the price of a barrel of oil down and keep it relatively low for several years.

During downturns in oil prices, most of Iraq's political elite simply try to muddle through until oil prices rebound, as they did in the first half of 2021. They circle the wagons because they share an interest in

preserving the system and see youth protests as an existential threat. Most of Iraq's established parties tolerate militia violence against protestors, activists, and journalists, and they may come to accept a limited concentration of coercive capacity in a politically weak prime minister (one strong enough to repress protestors but not sufficiently powerful to move against them or their interests). Kadhim's mandate has been limited: Most of the elite initially viewed him as a deliberately weak and interim premier meant to guide Iraq through the immediate crises until elections.

But a prolonged financial crisis could result in budget cuts that disrupt rents and patronage networks. Such a disruption might force the elite to compromise and possibly lead to the end of the 2003 political arrangement. If the political elite splits, the most likely fissure is not sectarian but "exiles" versus "insiders." Yet such a split has become less likely over time because of demographic change: The youth do not remember who were exiles, and insider elites are now implicated by the system. This cleavage could quickly become generational. Another possible route to reform would be to abandon the long-standing norm of "inclusion" and unity governments, allowing for the formation of real parliamentary opposition. But such a change is likely to be caught up in other states' concerns about Iran controlling or not controlling the Iraqi government, and the U.S. and Iran share a goal of Iran not "owning" the Iraqi government. Finally, a prolonged financial crisis could deepen the already widely held feeling that, after 17 years, the "*muhasasa*" system is not working and that rotating or even replacing the elite is insufficient; the system needs radical re-formation. Parliament could be dissolved and never reconvened. Most worryingly, Mar-sin Alshamary (2018) wrote about Iraqi youths' nostalgia for an authoritarian past, a time they do not know personally, that symbolized Iraqi national unity and strength. Strongman nostalgia among Iraq's youth might be growing.

## Conclusion

As tempting as it is to describe today's economic crises as a transformative moment in the history of Iraq, it is important to remember that Iraq's political system—its parliamentary democracy—has been remarkably durable. Earlier post-2005 critical junctures were neither critical nor junctures. The *muhasasa* system survived the recent crises

and wave of protests, but the underlying demographic, political, and economic challenges will continue and are likely to intensify year by year.

The waves of protests that Iraq has experienced, particularly the 2019 October Uprising, suggest that Iraq is, to some extent, experiencing a broader trend found in several countries in the region. As stable and resilient as Iraq's national political institutions have been, general disillusionment with them continues to grow. And the 2019 mobilization in Iraq echoed those in Lebanon and Jordan in several ways, such as protestors' avoidance of established political parties. Thomas Serres's analysis in this volume of the Algerian HIRAK's skepticism toward elections and organized politics as a means of advancing transformative social change may foreshadow Iraq's future. Iraq held parliamentary elections in October 2021, and although turnout reached a new low (43 percent of registered voters, 38 percent of eligible voters), it was not as low as many had anticipated. Many of the same established political parties dominated the elections and, once again, haggled behind closed doors over ministries and special grade positions. It seems inevitable that—after months of jockeying—they will form a not-so-new government clearly designed to protect their interests instead of seriously addressing Iraq's structural challenges.

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## 10 | Understanding the Roots, Dynamics, and Potential of an “Impossible” Revolution

### The Prospects and Challenges of Democratization in Sudan

*Khalid Mustafa Medani*

In 2021, the Sudan witnessed a military coup that has threatened to reverse the country’s post-2019 path toward a transition to democracy. In April 2019, popular protests successfully toppled Omar al-Bashir from power. The popular uprising was a culmination of over six months of protests that included Sudanese across the social and regional divide. This chapter examines the underlying causes and consequences of this historic popular uprising, shedding light on the prospects for the resumption of a democratic transition considering the ongoing wide-scale pro-democracy protests. In empirical terms, the significance of this chapter lies in the fact that conventional analysis of authoritarianism, particularly in the Arab context, has generally argued that autocratic regimes are “durable” and generally immune to regime change even in the context of popular protests (Bellin 2004; Heydemann 2007).

Recent scholarship on democracy has centered on the increasing pattern of democratic reversals, decay, and deconsolidation (Foa and Yascha 2017), or the turn toward hybrid-regimes characterized by a form of “competitive authoritarianism” (Gyimah-Boadi 2015; Levitsky and Way 2010). This in turn has led many analysts to contend that the only way to promote democratization in authoritarian contexts is to encourage a negotiated “pact” between military and civilian elites to promote a transition from authoritarianism to democracy (Wahman 2014). While this line of argument represents a great measure of truth

in light of the negotiated pact between military and civilian leaders in Sudan, this chapter delves further to examine the extent to which Sudan's political transition will lead to a process of democratization that results in yet another example of a hybrid authoritarian regime (Bogaards 2009), or whether it may signify a relatively exceptional case in the region of a transition leading to the consolidation of democracy (Cheeseman 2015; Svolik 2008). My central premise is that the ongoing and tenuous transition from autocracy to civilian democracy in Sudan will be greatly influenced by three overarching factors that will drive political developments in the future: the level of cohesion and coordination of actors in civil society, the coercive and institutional capacity of the military and security apparatus of the state, and the evolving role of regional actors, vis-à-vis the current interim coalition government composed of a transitional military council (TMC) and civilian leaders. Taken together, these factors represent the core analytical framework of this chapter. I argue that these factors are presently playing a key role in the transition to civilian government and, potentially, multi-party democracy in Sudan.

In broader terms, this chapter draws upon recent scholarship on popular mobilization to explain the causes and potential lessons of Sudan's popular uprising for other countries in the region. As the editors of this volume note in the Introduction, all the cases of opposition mobilization, including that of Sudan, share important common elements. These include the extent to which activists learned from the legacy of the Arab Uprisings, the ways in which horizontal modes of mobilization superseded a previous reliance on hierarchical networks and formal political parties as primary avenues of opposition, and the degree to which elite fragmentation in combination with the onset of deep economic crises provided the context for protest. Taken together, these factors not only influenced the mobilization strategies utilized by youth activists; they also determined variations in cross-sectional participation across countries, influenced the course and divergence of opposition mobilization, and crucially influenced both the obstacles and prospects for reform.

This chapter builds on these important insights as well as on previous publications (Medani 2012, 2013a, 2013b, 2019), which examined the factors associated with the weakening of Omar al-Bashir's authoritarian regime and the emergence of a cross-sectional protest movement that ultimately ousted him from power in April 2019. These included the role of South Sudan's secession and the loss of oil revenue,

divisions between the Islamist ruling elite, and the changing dynamics of protests in Sudan over the last decade. In these studies, I argued that the roots of the unraveling of authoritarian rule in Sudan was already in evidence as early as 2011. By that year, deep divisions had already emerged within the state security forces and the then-ruling National Congress Party (NCP) over the potential pitfalls for Khartoum associated with South Sudan’s secession, the ongoing negotiations with the insurgent South Sudan’s Sudanese Peoples Liberation Movement (SPLM) over the oil-rich border regions, and on the conduct of the ongoing military campaigns in South Kordofan and Darfur. Far from representing a unified front as in the early years of the Bashir regime, there was increasing dissent within the ranks of the security establishment. That led Bashir to sack several high-ranking officials for the sake of his self-preservation.

Beyond tackling the roots of Sudan’s uprising and the causes behind the fall of Sudan’s authoritarian regime, this chapter also addresses another equally important question, namely the prospects for a democratic transition. In the case of Sudan, while the 2018 intifada clearly demonstrated that after 30 years in power the Bashir regime’s capacity of coercion was weaker than most had assumed, in the aftermath of the fall of his regime, the issue of the role of the military and security forces remains an open empirical question requiring further research. Consequently, to evaluate the prospects for a democratic transition, another important premise of this chapter is that it is vital to evaluate the relative strength of the current regime’s capacity for coercion vis-à-vis what is a resurgent civil society opposition in the country. Moreover, what the examples of popular protests in other Arab autocratic contexts have demonstrated is that the answer to this question also depends on the state’s fiscal health, the degree to which the state security sector (that is, the “deep state”) is entrenched in civil society, and the level of international support to military leaders. These factors will determine whether the levels of popular mobilization, civil society cohesion, and political party autonomy and legitimacy will outweigh the capacity of the coercive apparatus of the current hybrid regime forged out of a tenuous alliance between military and civilian leaders.

Thus, in addition to unpacking the key factors explaining the fall of autocracy in Sudan, this chapter evaluates the prospects of two divergent outcomes: Democratic transition or democratic reversal. I will address this question by focusing on four factors likely to determine political developments: The fiscal capacity of the state which is a key



element in generating legitimacy for civilian politicians vis-à-vis groups in civil society, the level of cohesion and coordination between youth and other groups in civil society, the institutional capacity (that is, autonomy) of the security forces with respect to shaping military-civil society dynamics, and the nature of external support on the part of regional actors. Taken together, changes along these dimensions have played a key role in the ongoing democratization process. But these same developments, if not closely linked to governance and certain pro-democracy policies in the future, may lead to disillusionment and popular disaffection, and further divisions in society and the major political parties. Such an outcome may yield a reversal of democratic gains for a country and region which has yet to witness a robust democratic transition.

### **The Fiscal Crisis of the State and the Roots of Revolution (*thawra*)**

One of the least addressed issues influencing the prospects of popular opposition mobilization has to do with the extent to which deep economic grievances and social discontent is addressed by state elites, and how these grievances are understood more generally by activist leaders in ways that, as Serres notes in his study of Algeria in this volume, influence the level of cross-sectional mobilization and hence play an important role in determining the success (or failure) of protest movements. In the case of Sudan, the key factors that came to play in the Sudan's 2018–19 popular protests and the fall of Omar al-Bashir's authoritarian regime stemmed from the economic and social consequences of the secession of South Sudan in 2011. This resulted in a deep fiscal crisis of the state after over a decade of relative economic growth. Ultimately, it was the end of the oil boom era which served as a critical juncture in the country's history, directly resulting in the unraveling of al-Bashir's authoritarian regime. The decline in oil revenue resulting from the secession of South Sudan on July 9, 2011, led to a deepening of the economic crisis in the country and eroded the authority of the state over the economy. This, in turn, eroded the patronage networks of the former regime, strengthened the rivalries among the ruling National Congress Party's (NCP) leadership, and exacerbated social and economic grievances across a wide spectrum of Sudanese in both urban and rural areas, laying the background for the popular uprising of December 2019. Between 2003 and 2011, during the pre-partition period, oil accounted for 50 percent of

domestic revenue and 95 percent of export earnings (NPC 2012, 1–2). The South’s secession led to the loss of 75 percent of oil revenue for Khartoum since two-thirds of the oil resources are in the South, and consequently are the source of approximately 60 percent of Sudan’s foreign currency earnings.

If the national economic crisis in the post-oil boom era points to the general context of grievances leading to the December 2018 uprising, the unprecedented regional spread of the uprising can be explained by long-held grievances in the rural areas. Indeed, the legacy of these developments is that worsened poverty and unemployment in rural areas, because upwards of 50 percent of the rural labor force is engaged in agricultural activities. As of 2009 (a decade before the uprising), the incidence of poverty among the urban and rural population stood at 26 percent and 57.6 percent respectively. Moreover, figures in this period indicate that poverty levels were far higher in Darfur and in the East in comparison with Khartoum and the central states (NPC 2012, 13). This deepening inequality across regions and between the center and the peripheries of the country explain why the initial protests that led to the popular uprising of December 2018 first erupted, for the first time in Sudan’s history, in the periphery of the country rather than in the capital of Khartoum.

### *Regime Response and the Failure of Upgrading Authoritarianism*

Nevertheless, despite the deep fiscal crisis of the state, when wide-scale protests erupted in December 2018 and continued unabated, calling for President Omar al-Bashir to step down, few scholars of authoritarianism in the Arab world predicted that this latest iteration of a popular uprising in Sudan would pave the way for a transition interim period ushering in the possibility of a multi-party democracy. This is because, not surprisingly, as with similar protests in the past, the Bashir regime sought a military solution to quell the protests, deploying the police and para-military security forces against peaceful protestors in Khartoum and throughout the country.

Significantly, and despite the government’s frequent pronouncements that the protests were relatively small and would therefore have little impact on the regime, or that the demonstrations were essentially sponsored by saboteurs, thugs, or “foreign elements,” the popular *intifada* not only produced significant policy changes on the part of the regime; it clearly undermined the rule of al-Bashir in ways that ulti-

mately led to the overthrow of his 30-year authoritarian rule. By April 11, 2019, in the wake of continued and sustained demonstrations, strikes, and sit-ins across Sudanese civil society, Bashir was compelled to put in place policies to upgrade his authoritarian rule. He was forced to postpone a constitutional amendment that would have allowed him to run for a third term in office, declare a state of emergency in Khartoum, disband the federal structure of the government, and replace local governors with senior army officers to maintain his power. However, these policies of both appeasement and repression emboldened anti-government protestors further. The measures were essentially designed to give carte blanche to the security forces to use greater violence against the protestors, and to further restrict political and civil liberties, as well as to crack down on activists and opposition political parties. However, immediately following Bashir's announcement of a state of emergency, protestors went back on the streets in over 50 neighborhoods throughout the country, and particularly in Khartoum and Omdurman, calling once again for Bashir's removal and chanting, among other slogans, one of the most uncompromising and popular refrains of the uprising: "*Tasqut Bas*" ("Just fall, that is all").

To be sure, when the uprising began in December of 2018, there was scant evidence that it would lead to the fall of authoritarianism in Sudan. There was, indeed, little indication that the full range of policies utilized by autocratic leaders in Sudan to "upgrade authoritarianism" would not once again stamp out anti-government protests as has occurred in other countries in the region. However, as the protests continued unabated, they highlighted deep divisions within the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) as well as the ruling NCP. These developments compelled Bashir to implement policies designed to safeguard against a scenario in which segments of the military establishment would take the side of the protestors and essentially wage an internal coup against his rule. At the time, this was clearly evidenced in several ways. Most notably, by Bashir's attempts to quell the protests through the imposition of a state of emergency, the dissolution of the federal and provincial civilian governments, and the appointment of loyal military and security officers as governors of the country's 18 provinces. But despite these strategies—so effective in quelling protests in the past—this time the balance of power had shifted markedly toward the street (*al-shari*). The first signal of the significant unraveling of authoritarianism was when, as a direct result of the protests, Bashir resigned from the ruling party. He appointed a close ally, Ahmad Harun, as deputy head of the

NCP in a thinly veiled attempt to suggest he was intent on implementing political reform even as Bashir’s emergency courts imposed over 800 sentences of imprisonment and fines against anti-regime activists. Harun, like Bashir himself, was indicted for war crimes in Darfur, but this time he announced a national dialogue with the opposition in a bid to both maintain and consolidate the NCP’s rule in the country by coopting segments of the opposition. The hope was that he would ultimately preside over managed elections where he, or Bashir himself, would stand for election.

This was a formula designed to upgrade authoritarianism through the deployment of a combination of repression, dividing the opposition, and coopting some key leaders of the traditional political parties into yet another *hiwar watani* (national dialogue). More specifically, the vision was not only to stem the tide and popularity of the uprising, but also to safeguard against the potential, and more threatening, scenario, in which middle-ranking segments of the military would ultimately take the side of the protestors, oust Bashir and the NCP, and oversee a transition to a multi-party democracy. This would be a process that would have been supported by the majority of those in the opposition, but one in which Islamist supporters of the regime would be sidelined. Moreover, not surprisingly, the regime continued to emphasize that the grievances behind the protests were economic and not political and was in fact banking on curbing soaring inflation, but particularly, attracting investment and foreign financial assistance from the Arab Gulf countries with the view that this would quell the protests. In addition to seeking support from his Gulf benefactors, Bashir was counting on rebuilding relations with South Sudan. His objective was to restart production of oil in South Sudan to halt the deterioration of the Sudanese pound and refinance the regime’s patronage networks by generating revenue from transit and pipeline fees under stipulated financial arrangement between Khartoum and Juba.

### **Popular Mobilization and the General Determinants of its Success**

At a general level, the mobilization strategies of Sudan’s opposition to the Bashir regime mirrored those of other Arab countries in two important ways, namely the mode of organization, and the ways in which activists learned from past uprisings in devising new dynamics of popular mobilization. Specifically, and as Sean Yom shows in his study of

Jordan in this volume, like their Jordanian counterparts, Sudanese activists, disillusioned with the role of formal political parties, chose to organize via informal and horizontal structures for two important reasons. These were to encourage more inclusive channels of participation, and to adapt new strategies aimed toward evading state repression which had been effective in stifling protest movements in the past. Moreover, another common element, and one noted by Lina Khatib in her study of opposition mobilization in Lebanon, is the extent to which Sudanese activists learned from previous cycles of protests. In the case of Sudan, these previous protests threatened the durability of Omar al-Bashir's regime throughout the 2010s, yet failed to dismantle his regime.

Nevertheless, the Bashir regime's measures to reconsolidate power, while effective in the past, did not halt the December 2018 protests. This was because the protestors, having learned from previous failed protests, clearly articulated political demands, and disseminated a clear message to the protestors warning them against the regime's efforts at what they perceived as *ikhtitaf al-dawla* (state capture) by a minority of military and security officers that must be ousted from power. But most importantly, the leaders of the uprising showed remarkable ingenuity in sustaining the demonstrations against the regime. For example, in response to Bashir's decrees and pronouncements, the Sudanese Professional Association (SPA) advanced its mobilization and coordination capacity across the professional, socioeconomic, and regional divide. The SPA called on protestors and anti-regime activists throughout the country to combine street protests and acts of civil disobedience with a one-day national general strike which was led by doctors, lawyers, engineers, and pharmacists, as well as civil servants in coordination with *lijan al-muqawwama* (resistance committees), that organized the extremely vital *muthaharat al-ahyah* (neighborhood protests) throughout Khartoum and outlying regions of the country.

Another general determinant of the success of the uprising had to do with the utilization of both informal and horizontal networks of mobilization. However, it is important to note that the successful coordination of highly effective oppositional networks and organizations in civil society would not have been successful were it not conducted in the context of elite fragmentation and the grave weakening of the regime's cohesion and coercive apparatus. Importantly, as anti-government protests continued through 2019, they highlighted the

deepening disintegration of the ruling party itself and Sudan’s relatively “weak state.” This was clearly evidenced by strategies underpinned by divisions and subdivisions between individuals belonging to the NCP and the fact that the regime’s Islamist political discourse had lost its legitimacy among the population. In late February 2019, in a last-ditch effort to maintain his power, Omar al-Bashir imposed a year-long state of emergency and dissolved the federal and provincial governments, appointing 16 officers from the army and two from the feared National Intelligence and Security Service as governors of the country’s 18 provinces. The emergency courts established by President Bashir continued to impose various sentences of imprisonment and fines on people who participated in anti-government protests which, this time, only served to sustain the protests.

### **Coordinating the Uprising: New Networks of Protest and Popular Mobilization**

As with previous uprisings, the 2018 demonstrations began in protest of a deep economic crisis compounded by the implementation of economic austerity measures that resulted in the rise in the prices of bread and fuel, and a severe liquidity crisis. But these demands quickly evolved into calls for the ousting of Bashir from power. Importantly, the SPA, which took the lead in organizing and scheduling the protests, initially marched to the Parliament in Khartoum in late December 2018 demanding that the government raise wages for public sector workers and for the legalization of informally organized professional and trade unions. However, after security forces used violence against the peaceful protestors, these demands quickly escalated into the call for the removal of the ruling NCP, the structural transformation of governance in Sudan, and a transition to democracy.

Even though political grievances were at the forefront of the 2018 uprising, there is little question that the protests were first sparked by economic grievances that date back to the consequences of the secession of South Sudan in 2011. However, the protests were not only rooted in opposition to economic reforms. They were primarily a result of a wide opposition to decades of rampant corruption that transferred assets and wealth to the regime’s supporters, and the theft of billions of dollars of profits from the period of the oil boom. What is noteworthy, however, is that these economic crises and the general state of endemic

corruption date back to the very onset of the Bashir regime's assumption to power, yet none of the previous protests in Sudan enjoyed success in toppling autocracy in the country. In addition to the fiscal crisis of the state and deep divisions within the ruling NCP's leadership, the most important element this time was the remarkable cohesion of pro-democracy groups in civil society and a new vision and new strategies of resistance—what is best termed as an upgrading of new informal and largely horizontal modes and networks of popular mobilization.

If the demands of the protestors in 2018 were similar to those associated with previous protest cycles against the regime, the 2018–19 protests differed in three crucial ways that, taken together, explain their success. First, they were unprecedented in terms of their length and sustainability. Second, they spanned a large geographical terrain that included the entire country. Third, and most significantly, they united a remarkable coalition of horizontal networks of youth activists, informal associations, and organizations with long-standing opposition political parties. In this respect, it is not surprising that after six months of persistent mobilization, the Bashir regime fell, paving the way for a power-sharing agreement between a transitional military council and the main opposition coalition, the Forces of Freedom and Change (FFC). Equally important was that the coordination of these demonstrations followed a remarkably new, innovative, and sustained process. This point is crucial, because it shows that demonstrators learned from the unsuccessful anti-regime protests of the past. This is despite the fact that the Bashir regime had historically implemented policies designed to weaken the opposition by dismantling labor and trade unions, establishing a wide range of paramilitary militias linked to the state, and putting down armed opposition as well as anti-government activists in civil society. Led by the newly established SPA, a network of parallel (that is, informal) trade and professional unions—composed of doctors, engineers, and lawyers, among other unions—the demonstrations were coordinated, scheduled, and essentially designed to emphasize sustainability over time rather than sheer numbers, spread the protests throughout middle-, working-class, and poor neighborhoods, and coordinate with protestors in regions far afield from Khartoum, including the Eastern State on the Red Sea to the east, and Darfur to the far west of the country. In addition, the slogans promoted and utilized by the protestors were purposefully framed to incorporate the grievances of the wider spectrum of Sudanese, including workers in the informal sector, and not just those of the middle class and ethnic and

political elites centered in Khartoum and the northern regions of the country. These slogans were essentially framed in ways designed to resonate and mobilize support across socioeconomic, ethnic, racial, and ideological categories. In great part, this was achieved by emphasizing that the only way forward is to oust Omar al-Bashir and the ruling regime from power, and by highlighting the endemic and unprecedented level of corruption of the regime and its allies and decades of human rights violations against civilians in the country by a wide range of security forces, in Darfur, the Blue Nile State on the border of South Sudan, and the Nuba Mountains in South Kordofan.

Indeed, perhaps one of the most notable aspect of these protests, which distinguished them greatly from previous uprisings, was not only the sheer regional scale of the demonstrations but the hitherto unprecedented high level of solidarity across class, ethnic, and regional lines in the country. Youth activists and members of the professional associations not only challenged the political discourse of the state. They played a significant role in engineering cross-class alliances made possible by the implementation of a wider array of mobilization strategies. Over the course of six months protests, strikes, work stoppages, and sit-ins were held not only on university campuses and secondary schools, but also among private sector and public sector employees and workers. Among the most important examples were the strikes by workers of Port Sudan on the Red Sea, demanding the nullification of the sale of the Port to a foreign company, and several work stoppages and protests led by employees of some of the most important telecom providers and other private firms in the country.

Ultimately, the success of the 2018 uprising rested on the very structure of the protest movement in three important ways that reflected the forging of new networks of protest and mobilization. First, whereas previous protests were primarily organized horizontally and led by youth activists mainly in the urban areas of greater Khartoum, the most recent uprising was organized in a hierarchical structure which combined horizontal networks of mobilization with the informal, albeit vertically organized associations and unions, led by the SPA. The SPA took the lead in organizing daily protests, disseminating key information to protestors, and scheduling the protests in ways that would both encourage protestors but also safeguard their security as much as possible. Second, where as much focus is usually placed on the central role of the street protestors and the SPA, Sudanese opposition parties were also an important component of not only organizing the protests,



but also providing the ideational support for the protestors' demands. To be sure, as in other countries, Sudanese activists routinely questioned the credibility of the "old" politicians. Nevertheless, it is important to emphasize that the political parties took the lead in drafting the Declaration of the Forces of Freedom and Change (DFFC) in January 2019 at the most critical juncture of the intifada. Along with the SPA, Sudan's main political party coalitions, most notably the National Consensus Forces and Sudan Call (*Nida al-Sudan*), were the main groups behind the Declaration; they were the ones who led the drive toward the formation of the wide network of opposition under the banner of the Forces of Freedom and Change (FFC). It was the FFC that was primarily responsible for coordinating upper-, middle-, and lower-class Sudanese as well as those under-employed and the large segment of the population working in the informal sector of the country. Indeed, and most importantly, the FFC included not only middle-class youth associations and groups, but also resistance committees in the poorer urban quarters. These are the committees that served as the "foot soldiers" of the protests. They took the lead in redirecting protestors away from the security forces, thus playing a central role in sustaining the protests despite the great violence utilized by the security forces and militias designed to quell the intifada. Ultimately, the relative strength and legitimacy of the main opposition parties, in combination with their alliance and coordination with horizontal networks of street protestors and the informal unions organized under the umbrella of the SPA, played the most crucial role in sustaining the protests and articulating their demands in ways that resonated with most of the population in rural as well as urban areas.

Finally, and most crucially, protestors learned from the mistakes of previous protests which had been highly centralized, mostly limited to middle-class Sudanese, and did not consider new strategies of confronting and evading the ubiquitous security forces in the country. In this regard, there were four essential elements that played a crucial role in the success of the 2018–19 protests, lessons generated not only from the Arab protests of 2011–12, but also the persistent protests in Sudan throughout the 2010s. Taken together, these lessons from the Arab Uprisings as well as the Sudanese experience generated four important strategies utilized by the protests which ultimately laid the groundwork for success. First, protestors, led by youth, carefully devised new methods to combat the coercive apparatus of the state and the regime's security services. Second, they promulgated and commu-

nicated a carefully crafted counter-hegemonic anti-Islamist discourse that resonated with widely shared political, ideational, and economic grievances, and relayed pertinent information about the regime’s litany of failures and corruption to the public through the duration of the uprising. Third, led by the coordinating body of the SPA, civil society actors worked tirelessly to forge a hierarchical but legitimate organizational form that brought a wide range of horizontal networks under a vertical coordinating body made up of opposition across the political and ideological spectrum. And finally, having learned from the foreign interventions during the Tahrir revolution in Egypt and similar experiences in other Arab countries (as explained more fully in Toby Matthiesen’s chapter in this volume), the leaders of the uprising ensured that Gulf Arab support for the regime was delegitimized among the local population in the context of the uprising. The leaders of the protestors argued repeatedly that regional actors were more invested in the natural resources and strategic role of Sudan than in the prosperity of the Sudanese people.

### **Military-Civil Society Relations and the Challenge of a Hybrid Regime**

Yet for all the notable success of the 2018 intifada, and as the October 2021 coup has shown, there is little question that the prospect of a transition to civilian democracy, the key demand of the protestors, remains a daunting challenge. Following the fall of Omar al-Bashir’s regime, Sudan emerged as a quintessential hybrid-authoritarian regime. Military members of the now-dissolved sovereign council had the right to reject items in the sovereign council, had immunity from investigation of past crimes, and had veto over ministerial civilian appointments, including such important posts as the chief justice and attorney general, in addition to representatives of the proposed legislative council. Importantly, there was no clear separation of the main branches of power, which was obvious evidence of an imbalance between the authority of the military and civilian leadership. The military, and the leader of the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), Hamdan Dagalo “Hemedti,” assumed vague and undefined powers, allowing them great control over the transition interim period before promised elections originally scheduled for 2022. The concern in Sudanese civil society was that in the years that follow, the military would have authority over designing

the “rules of the democratic game.” Specifically, they would be able to wield influence over the drafting of the interim constitution, design and oversee the electoral laws in the run-up to elections, delimit the political space of the political parties by instituting new laws on political parties, and, of course, utilize coercive strategies to limit political participation among the citizenry in ways that would undermine the prospects for the convening of free and fair elections in the near future.

The fact that the military and security establishment eventually gained greater political leverage over civil society forces was a result of both the increasing divisions within the civilian block and the transitional government’s failure to satisfy the key demands of the protestors that led the uprising. Before the coup, the prospect for a democratic transition hinged on the overarching dynamics of Sudan’s transitional government, which involved three sets of diverse civilian and military actors. On one side, there was the transitional government’s civilian wing headed by Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok. Hamdok was partially supported by a tenuous coalition of parties that participated in the anti-Bashir uprising. These included the Unionist Association, the Community Party, the Ba’ath Party, and the SPA, and the most prominent youth groups (Girifna and Sudan Change Now), and until just prior to the coup, the Umma party.

Hamdok’s primary power base was derived from his relationship to this civilian coalition organized under the umbrella of the FFC. However, Hamdok lost support and legitimacy among the youth organizations that led the protests, as well as prominent women’s organizations, and the secular-Left oriented parties. Initially, grassroots organizations perceived Hamdok as a technocrat not affiliated with the corrupt political practices associated with the former regime and the traditional opposition parties. He was also supported by those groups well known to have the strongest and longest record of opposition to the Islamist movement. He enjoyed strong support from the SPA members, who perceived him as a like-minded technocrat and activist, and the Unionist Association, which is composed of the parties that stood unwavering in opposition to Bashir.

The strongest opposition in civil society, the FFC, continued to push for four important priorities that, even after the coup, continue to represent the opposition’s demands. These include the implementation of a peace agreement signed with the insurgent militias organized under the Sudan Revolutionary Front (SRF); constitutional reform to prepare for a constitutional conference that would oversee future elections; accountability for those involved in the June 3, 2019, massacre; and the establish-

ment of a legislative council so as to undercut the veto power of the military wing of the now dissolved sovereign council. The network of civil society organizations includes the SPA, the youth organizations Girifna and Sudan Change Now, and the grassroots resistance committees that played a key role in mobilizing the 2018–19 demonstrations. Ultimately, the failure of Hamdok to make progress on the aforementioned demands undermined his legitimacy (and that of political parties more generally) among the grassroots pro-democracy forces. This strengthened the power of the military leadership, which exploited divisions in civil society, thereby paving the way for the October 25 coup.

### **Outsourcing War: Coercive Power and the Role of Regional Actors**

As students of authoritarianism have long observed, if the strength of civil society forces relative to the military is a crucial variable in influencing the probability of authoritarian persistence as well as democratic reversal, then the role and nature of external patronage is of equal importance in these processes. Since the overthrow of Bashir in April 2019, along with the Sudanese Army’s General Abdul Fattah al-Burhan, it is Mohamed Hemedti Hamdan Dagolo, the leader of the powerful Rapid Support Forces (RSF) and vice president of the Military Council, who has wielded disproportionate influence over the country’s transition. Like Burhan and his allies, Hemedti and his militia, the RSF, are supported and financed by the Arab Gulf countries and, as Toby Matthiesen discusses in this volume, pose a direct threat to a democratic transition in Sudan.

At the root of this threat is Hemedti’s great influence over the country’s security apparatus and his links to the Arab Gulf countries. Specifically, Hemedti has built a paramilitary force, numbering an estimated 40,000, that is acting as a dangerous anti-democracy spoiler to the tenuous military-civilian coalition in power. This threat is directly related to Hemedti’s personal wealth, which he amassed in two important ways. The first was from revenue generated from his participation in the illicit trade in gold, and the second is wealth accrued from outsourcing his militias to Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) to fight the war in Yemen. In 2017 alone, Sudan produced 107 tons of gold, 70 percent of which was smuggled abroad, mainly to markets in the UAE (Michaelson 2020). It has been estimated that Sudan’s gold production at its current accounting is contributing to approxi-

mately 11–13 percent of the country’s Gross Domestic Product (GDP) although it is likely far higher. Moreover, until recently, Hemedti controlled the country’s most lucrative gold mine of Jebel Amer in northern Darfur.<sup>1</sup> Consequently, there is little question that Hemedti’s ascendance, from his humble beginnings as a camel trader in northern Darfur to a powerful national-level militia leader, was made possible by his access to riches, generated primarily from gold smuggling (Abdelaziz, Gregory, and El Dahan 2019). In 2015, another report released by the United Nations Security Council found that his forces were generating \$54 million a year from control of the Jebel Amer goldmine. Importantly, this revenue enabled the militia leader to recruit poor and unemployed youths to the RSF, from across the Sahel, including from Chad, Mali, and Niger (*ibid.*).

Nevertheless, there are several reasons that suggest that Hemedti’s strength has been vastly overestimated by analysts. First, Hemedti’s influence is largely built on patronage received from external patrons. This suggests that since his strength is rooted in the complex dynamics of regional politics, it is very likely that his power and influence would be greatly weakened once geopolitical and regional strategic calculations change on the part of his benefactors in the Gulf. Second, as is the case with Burhan and former NCP businessmen, Hemedti’s financial power is largely a result of weak central authority, and the less than robust regulatory environment that has enabled him to build his financial wealth from illicit and informal channels. Consequently, advances in improving regulatory, accountable, and more participatory institutions, currently pursued by the civilian leadership, would undercut the way he—and many rentier-oriented military officers and civilian businessmen—are able to generate rents from illicit economic activities, smuggling and trade. Finally, the rise of Hemedti and other paramilitary forces has been due to an important factor worth emphasizing: The fact that they have been able to deftly exploit a national army

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1. Hemedti’s rise to power dates to the latter years of the Bashir regime. In 2003, he was recruited by Bashir into the Janjaweed militia that was waging the anti-insurgency campaign against rebels in Darfur; in 2014, fearful of a military coup against his rule, Omar al-Bashir put Hemedti in charge of the Rapid Support Forces, essentially an offshoot of the Janjaweed. However, in contrast to the Janjaweed, Bashir essentially gave the RSF the status of a “regular force” as a bulwark against the military and to protect his own personal security. But if political largesse led to his political prominence, it was financial power, generated via illicit means, that ensured the consolidation of his power into the present.

gravely weakened by the concerted efforts of the previous regime and the related emergence of various paramilitary forces over the last three decades. This strongly suggests that, in addition to dismantling the remnants of the institutions of the “deep state,” prioritizing the building of a strong, legitimate, and autonomous national military would reduce the power of Hemedti and his militia.

### **The Challenge of Dismantling the “Deep State”**

As in other Arab countries where the entrenchment of the “deep state” has stood in the path of democratic transitions, perhaps the biggest threat in Sudan is the fact that the civilian wing of the hybrid government has been unable to dismantle the vestiges of the vast financial empire wielded by the security apparatus and the military. The financial power of the military poses a significant threat to the democratic transition. Taken together, the military and the security apparatuses control companies involved in oil, gum Arabic, sesame, weapons, fuel, wheat, telecommunications, banking, and real estate, as well as gold. The military’s defense companies produce a vast array of consumer goods, and they retain a large share of the country’s banking institutions. Moreover, since the military controls large sectors of the economy, the SRF also benefits from subsidies which allow for the RSF as well as the SAF to hoard commodities and profit from their sale in the black market at inflated prices to consumers. While specific data is difficult to come by, there is some evidence to suggest that the military-controlled companies such as al-Fakher and as-Sobat dominate the market in fuel and wheat. According to one report, the SAF reportedly controls 60 percent of the market in wheat, although Sudanese sources have noted that former NCP businessmen continue to wield the greatest influence in these markets. To be sure, these rents, generated from military-state predation, are used by Burhan to disburse patronage to the same loyal clients Bashir patronized and supported prior to his ouster in 2019. Nevertheless, while a focus on the power of the military and security apparatus over civil society is warranted, what is missing in this analysis of Sudan’s version of the “deep state” is an examination of the political and economic factors that have worked to sustain the patronage system in the first place—a system forged under Bashir and now exploited by the October 2021 coup leaders, including Burhan and senior members of the security establishment.

It is also important to emphasize that the military and security forces have also long been divided, with important consequences for the balance of power in state-civilian society relations and for the prospects for democracy. The three most important actors in this regard are the SAF, the National Intelligence and Security Services (NISS), and the RSF. Historically, the SAF was constituted of officers recruited from the elite classes and as such they continue to enjoy the support of most Sudanese; many mid- and lower-ranking military officers of the SAF participated in the uprising. In contrast, the NISS, the real stumbling block to the democratic transition, was forged in clandestine fashion by the Islamist radical coalition that overthrew the former democratic regime in 1989 and then went on to dominate the political and economic landscape of the country for three decades, primarily through coercion and the patronage of mercenary forces. This organization, which has been going through some significant, albeit insufficient, restructuring under the leadership of Burhan, enjoyed the patronage of the former regime more than any other sector of Sudanese society. Significant remnants of Islamist and NISS business networks continue to dominate large swaths of the economy, particularly in the private sector. The extent to which Hamdok and Burhan eventually find common cause and cooperate to dismantle these institutions that financed multiple paramilitary militias will crucially determine the success or failure of the current transition. However, given the fact that the NISS undermined the power of the SAF under NCP rule suggests that many in the senior military establishment have a strong interest in dismantling the power and financial base of the NISS.

### **Sudan's Protracted Conflicts and the Threat to Democracy**

Finally, in addition to the rivalries between (and among) the civil-military coalition making up the transitional government and the interventions of regional actors (see Toby Matthiesen's chapter in this volume), another key challenge for democracy in Sudan is an issue that is often neglected in the analysis of authoritarian persistence and democratic transitions in the Arab region: The protracted conflicts in the marginalized regions far afield from the capital. As April Longley Alley argues in her study of Yemen in this volume, countries undergoing civil conflicts have the additional challenge of nation-building, even as they pursue the difficult path toward political reform and more participa-

tory forms of governance. These challenges include resolving long-standing civil conflicts, addressing the grievances of insurgent militias within a national framework, securing funding for state-building and reconstruction, and minimizing the adverse effects of external intervention by regional powers. In Sudan, as in Yemen, the combination of civil conflicts, deep economic crises, and failures at state- and nation-building have stood in the way of both peace-making as well as successive efforts at democratization.

It is important to highlight that on the eve of the Sudan's 2018–19 popular uprising Sudan was experiencing significant protracted conflicts which continue to pose a great risk to the prospects for a peaceful democratic transition. Embedded within the conflict at the center between civilian and military leaders are the conflicts along the periphery, each with its own history and dynamic that continue to pose risks for the country. Darfur in particular has historically been unevenly integrated into the central Sudanese state and saw massive violence in the mid-2000s as Khartoum unleashed its allied militias known as the “Janjaweed” in response to growing insurgent movements led by the Sudan Liberation Army (SLA) and the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM). Even after the fall of Bashir, areas that are on what is now the international border between South Sudan and Sudan continue to see high levels of conflict and instability, and Darfurians have protested the inaction of Hamdok and the FFC in addressing their major political and economic grievances.

In the recent past, the SPLM-N (Sudan People's Liberation Movement-North) fought tenaciously in the Nuba Mountains of South Kordofan and in Blue Nile. The SPLM-N consequently created the SRF (Sudan Revolutionary Front), a coalition with the armed factions in Darfur which signed an historic peace agreement in October 2020. Despite this peace agreement, however, at the time of writing, in South Kordofan and Blue Nile, patterns of economic and social marginalization among residents in the Nuba Mountains continue and there is little evidence that the region has witnessed a cessation of violence. Moreover, while the SPLM-N controls significant territory in South Kordofan, notably a considerable portion of the border between Sudan and South Sudan, local communities are rarely consulted by its leadership. This is evidenced by the fact that local communities have worked to build autonomous political and civilian organizations to match the military capacity of the SPLM-N, and local resistance committees are often viewed as more legitimate representative institutions than the



SPLM-N. There is also a clear division among those in the Nuba Mountains, with some supporting the peace agreement with Khartoum, and a significant, more radical, group of Nuba that are demanding greater autonomy from the center if not self-determination. Finally, regions that have been historically marginalized, but were relatively quiet in recent years until the popular uprisings, continue to show signs of increasing tension, particularly in the East where some younger members of Beja ethnic group have organized a new armed group in opposition to the regime in Khartoum.

While the dynamics outlined above have the greatest potential to result in a risk of large-scale violence and political instability, everyday conflicts are also a grave threat to a democratic transition. The proliferation of weapons and the distortions of social networks due to displacement continue to create a new context for endemic conflicts over land, water, pasture, and, of course, political power. Local conflict resolution mechanisms, often linked to traditional forms of justice in the countryside, are weak and fragmented. In post-uprising Sudan, they have the potential to play a more meaningful role in mitigating conflict. However, central authorities often exploit local conflicts as part of their system of divide and rule and fermenting ethnic divisions and enmities. Consequently, absent a comprehensive peace agreement that addresses inter-communal conflicts in these regions, the prospect for a peaceful transition to a consolidated multi-party democracy in Sudan will remain a daunting challenge.

## Conclusion

The historic Sudanese intifada of 2018 was both similar and distinct from the Arab Uprisings of 2011 and the more recent uprisings in Lebanon and Algeria. On the one hand, the mobilization strategies of Sudan's youth-led uprising mirrored those other cases in at least two important respects: The development of new modes of organization adapted from the lessons of earlier uprisings, and a concerted strategy of relying on horizontal networks of opposition mobilization. However, what made a difference in the case of Sudan is that activists, however begrudgingly, did ally with formal political parties. To be sure, from the perspective of Sudanese youth activists, formal political parties have been discredited to some degree. Nevertheless, these parties retain no small measure of legitimacy primarily because of their long-

standing opposition to the Bashir regime. As early as November 2011, Sudan Call (*Nida al-Sudan*) emerged as an oppositional coalition to the Omar al-Bashir regime. *Nida al-Sudan* not only included the insurgent leaders in war-torn Darfur, Blue Nile, and Southern Kordofan organized under the umbrella of the SRF; it also included the newly formed youth organization Girifna which played a lead role in organizing the first wide-scale protests following the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt in 2011. Thus, while on the one hand Sudanese youth activists followed the pattern of mobilization in other countries in that they organized around horizontal networks and eschewed the promotion of any specific ideology, on the other hand, and owing to the relatively strength of the formal political party opposition in Sudan relative to other countries, they did form an effective coalition with long standing opposition parties at a critical juncture of the revolution—namely, in January 2019, which saw the emergence of the FFC. The FFC included youth activists and grassroots resistance committees, as well as the major *kutlas* (blocs) of the formal opposition.

Moreover, while protestors did indeed eschew any “grand ideology” during the revolution, they managed to effectively undermine the legitimating ideology of the state, namely, Islamism. Indeed, whereas the secular-Islamist divide has played a key role in dividing the opposition in other countries in the region, in Sudan, youth worked diligently to generate a counter-hegemonic discourse—disseminated through social media—which contained a coherent and popular critique against the Islamist edifice upon which the Bashir regime had built its ideological legitimacy. That discourse, in turn, gravely undermined the regime’s legitimacy as evidenced by the cross-ideological as well as cross-sectional character of the 2018 revolution.

Indeed, there is little question that Sudan’s 2018 intifada registered remarkable success in reinvigorating civil society in Sudan, despite decades of authoritarian rule and a policy of division across ethnic, racial, and class lines. In Sudan, as in much of the Arab world, the Bashir regime exerted great effort in either dissolving or coopting previously strong and independent unions and by the late 1990s, had effectively replaced all unions with those that were directly linked to the state. In response, informal trade and labor unions emerged in the wake of the 2011 protests in parallel to those established by the NCP leadership. Consequently, in the context of the uprising, the chief strength of Sudanese civil society emerged not in a vague sense but rather because of the reinvigoration of *parallel* trade, labor, and profes-

sional unions (*naqabat muaziyyah*), which came to be unified under the umbrella of the SPA at a time when most would have predicted the demise of any strong union life in society. Another strength of civil society that made a difference is rooted in the remarkable empowerment of youth activism and their utilization of social media to assist in the coordination of demonstrations across class, regional, and racial lines, rather than to simply express a particularly middle-class and elite and narrow political sensibility which characterized all the previous protests in Sudan and in many Arab countries. In Sudan, in addition to the close coordination among activists across middle- and working-class neighborhoods, repeated campaigns to support the *reef*, or rural areas, and remarkable cooperation across the gender divide underpinned the political and cultural shift that made the uprising a success. Indeed, the wide scope and sustainability of Sudan's December 2018 uprising rested primarily on the coordination and linkages forged between formal professional associations, informal trade and labor unions, and civil society organizations, as well as horizontal networks of youth activists. Ultimately, it was the success in organizing across the formal-informal social spectrum that sustained the protests.

The idea that informal (or parallel) networks of professional and trade unions should engage more closely with street activists and workers in the informal economy was not one that had been vigorously envisioned by leaders of previous protests and one that has rarely been accomplished in the region. This development played a key role in sustaining the protests and in undermining the Bashir regime. But it is also the precarious level of unity and cohesion among diverse groups in civil society following the historic uprising of 2018 that will determine the fortunes of what is still a tenuous path toward a democratic transition. Indeed, and in broader analytical terms, what the coup of October 25, 2021, has demonstrated is that the question of whether Sudan will witness the *consolidation* of yet another authoritarian regime or re-embark on a democratic transition, however fragile, will be determined by the evolving balance of power and conflicts between the security establishment and forces in civil society predicated on key factors highlighted throughout this chapter. These include the levels (and nature) of popular mobilization, civil society cohesion, political party autonomy and legitimacy, and the capacity of the coercive apparatus of the current military regime of General Abdul-Fattah Burhan itself crucially influenced by the support and interventions of regional and international actors.

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## 11 | Tunisia

### The Challenges of Party Consolidation and the Specter of Authoritarian Reversal

*Lindsay J. Benstead*

In the waning days of 2010, few observers would have predicted that life in Tunisia—and the Arab region—would be so fundamentally transformed by the desperate act of a fruit seller, Mohammed Bouazizi (Chomiak 2011). A decade on from the Arab Uprisings, Libya, Syria, and Yemen are embroiled in civil conflict. From Morocco, to Algeria, to Sudan, protests calling on the government to improve economic conditions and relax repression have embroiled the Middle East.

Yet as the region reached the tenth anniversary of the Arab Spring, Tunisia was considered a success story, having transitioned to a minimalist democracy (Stepan 2012) and made important strides in areas such as women's rights, that attract substantial international attention. At the same time, thorny economic and political challenges remained, as Tunisian elites struggled over the rules undergirding the emergent political order. Tunisia's party system was racked by instability, particularly on the non-Islamist flank, and all parties lack clear platforms and policy proposals on most economic and social issues. For instance, while most Tunisians could place the parties on a spectrum of positions concerning the role of religion in public life, most did not know how the parties viewed economic issues (Lust and Walder 2016).

This was the backdrop against which the COVID-19 pandemic and the accompanying economic and health crisis threaten to take the country's democratic experiment on a decidedly different, unexpected trajectory. On July 25, 2021, President Saied shocked the nation and the world by announcing in a televised speech that he had suspended Par-

liament, dismissed Prime Minister Hichem Mechichi, and cancelled parliamentary immunity—a constitutional guarantee.

Saied justified his decisions by invoking Article 80 of the constitution, which states that, in “a state of imminent danger threatening the integrity of the country and the country’s security and independence, [the president] is entitled to take the measures necessitated by this exceptional situation, after consulting the Prime Minister and the Speaker of Parliament.”

Yet while Saied claimed that his actions are constitutional, Article 80 also stipulates that Parliament *must* remain in continuous session during the state of emergency and cannot be dissolved. Moreover, “30 days after implementation of these measures, the Constitutional Court, at the request of the Speaker of the Parliament or 30 of its members, is entrusted with a decision on the continuation of the exceptional situation or not.”

According to Grewal (2021), the COVID-19 pandemic created a health and economic crisis that facilitated the executive takeover and helped to legitimate the president’s actions. Tunisia had one of the highest per capita rates of COVID-19, but the government has been seen as effective in recent weeks increasing the vaccination rates, reducing infection rates, and easing some restrictions.

The state of emergency has now been extended beyond this thirty-day limit. Moreover, there is no Constitutional Court, since efforts earlier in the year to create one were blocked by the president and could not obtain a two-thirds vote in Parliament.

Many in Tunisia’s civil society organizations are calling for a clear and time-bound schedule to end the state of emergency and reinstate Parliament. But the urgency with which the parties and civil society organizations call on the government to do so depends on whether they are supporters or opponents of the president. Those who oppose the president see his actions as a coup, while many of his allies are willing to grant him time to shepherd the political process away from the political paralysis of the pre-July 25 Parliament, as they see it.

In short, Tunisia now has a strong leader and its road to democratic consolidation faces grave challenges that threaten to take the country down the path of authoritarian reversal. Such a bleak outcome is not guaranteed. Yet earlier concerns about “too much consensus” between parties (Grewal and Hamid 2020) have now given way to signs of greater debate over the rules of the electoral game and the temptation to seize on the crisis to consolidate authoritarian rule.

This situation was a decade in the making. Elites' inability to reverse a decade of economic problems has buffeted Tunisians' public confidence in political parties and the Parliament. These developments speak to other cases where there is a growing divide between formal political institutions and popular aspirations for social change (see contributions on Jordan, Algeria, Iraq, and Lebanon in this volume). These insights from Tunisia also offer lessons for political development across the region and beyond. Consensus-building among the elite has helped craft a widely agreeable constitution and thus contributed to the transition to electoral democracy by reducing to some degree conflict between religious and secular groups in society. Yet that same quest for consensus has made decisive, stable governance impossible to attain and that has hurt the prospects for democratic consolidation. The dynamics of party competition that are good for democratic transition in one stage might not serve consolidation at later stages of transition because elites' failure to resolve critical economic issues faced by ordinary citizens reduced their trust in government and demand for democracy.

This chapter discusses Tunisia's successes and obstacles to democratic consolidation, focusing on the process of party consolidation that lays ahead for the nation, especially as the current constitutional crisis evolves. I argue that weak party consolidation and the government's inability to quickly resolve the country's severe economic and health problems poses a substantial challenge, because it hinders the development of competing programs for social and economic reform and diminishes popular confidence in Parliament and support for democracy. After discussing two major phases in Tunisia's transitional politics, I draw on Arab Barometer data to illustrate the interaction between citizens' low confidence in political parties and the growing demand for a strong leader that may well help sustain the state of emergency that imperils the country's democratic future.

### **Explaining Tunisia's Democratic Transition**

Tunisia enjoys several historical advantages that supported its transition to a minimalist democracy that has now seen alternation between parties across three parliamentary and two presidential elections (Schumpeter 1950). Benstead and colleagues (2013) argue that Tunisia's transition is due not to citizens' secularism—a conventional wisdom—

but to several institutional factors that shaped its institutional development. Unlike Egypt, which backslid into authoritarianism in 2013, Tunisia appeared to lack a strong, interested actor such as a powerful military that could intervene to stop the democratic process. Protests against social and economic conditions have continued in Tunisia since 2011 and support for a strong leader has grown in recent years, yet due to former Prime Minister Habib Bourguiba and President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali's distrust of the military, the security sector did not amass significant economic power. Thus, the Tunisian military has not intervened at key moments in Tunisia's transition when segments of society were unhappy with the electoral outcome, such as after the Islamist Ennahda (Renaissance Movement Party) won a plurality in Tunisia's elections in 2011. Second, Tunisia is spared some measure of foreign interference in its political affairs due to its physical distance from the Israeli–Palestinian conflict and lack of oil. Third, and critically, despite calls immediately after Ben Ali's departure by some elites for a presidential election, civil society organizations played a crucial role in demanding a constituent assembly be elected and write a constitution before installing a president who could reassert authoritarian rule, without a constitution. Finally, no single party won a majority of seats in the Constituent Assembly elections in 2011—Ennahda won 37 percent of seats, while the rest were divided across more than a dozen non-Islamist parties, none of which won more than 8 percent of seats—requiring the parties to compromise on key issues in the constitution (see table 11.2). Theoretically, a Parliament with robust powers (Fish 2006) and a balance in the party system (Angrist 2004) improve the prospects for democratic consolidation.

While Tunisia's transition to a minimalist democracy and the role of its civil society organizations (including the “Quartet”)<sup>1</sup> in shepherding it through that process is remarkable, the country faces substantial political, social, and economic challenges that have been exacerbated by the impact of the Tunis and Sousse terrorist attacks and the global COVID-19 pandemic. Deadly attacks on tourists in Sousse and Tunis decimated Tunisia's tourism sector, which lost 1.5 billion dollars—35

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1. The Tunisian National Dialogue Quartet is a group of four civil society organizations, including the Tunisian General Labor Union (UGTT), the Tunisian Confederation of Industry, Trade and Handicrafts (UTICA), the Tunisian Human Rights League (LTDH), and the Tunisian Order of Lawyers, that played a role in brokering Tunisia's transition to an electoral democracy in 2011 following the departure of Ben Ali.



percent of its revenue (Reuters 2016)—even as Gross Domestic Product (GDP) fell from 3.9 percent growth in 2012 to 0.8 percent in 2015. In 2020, Tunisia's economy was expected to contract 6.5 percent this year (IMF 2020) due to coronavirus, and freedom of speech and religion are still threatened after a woman was found guilty of joking about religion and COVID-19. The government continues to struggle with security. The border with Libya continues to be volatile and difficult to control.

Issues of human rights also loom as important obstacles to achieving justice and building strong social and institutional trust that will support democratic consolidation. The Truth and Dignity Commission's work began but was greatly hindered by the return of old-guard elites into positions of power, leading to a gradual reduction in the Commission's resources and the lack of publication to date of a report which details 62,000 victims of human rights violations committed between 1955 and 2013. This compromise effectively sacrifices justice for those who experienced human rights violations under the previous regime in favor of elites who directly or indirectly benefited from the crimes committed. Press freedom has also been challenged in recent years. As an example, a draft law was proposed by the Tahya Tounes (Long Live Tunis) party's Member of Parliament (MP) Mabrouk Korchid and then withdrawn, that would have criminalized defamation and the dissemination of false information, and would have been misused by others to quash dissent.

Politically, while major political groups have succeeded in compromising on key issues such as the religious identity of the state and women's rights, they have fallen short in responding to popular demands for improved governance and economic management. This was in large part the result of increasing fragmentation among and within non-Islamist parties, and infighting and political gridlock among the political elites more generally. In an environment where consensus has become a de facto prerequisite for decisive political action, this makes effective governance extremely difficult. Accordingly, public trust in government and national political institutions is low and this trend will continue to challenge the prospects for democratic consolidation in the country. Polls consistently found that many Tunisians regarded themselves as worse off than before the revolution, and support for democracy declined (Yahya 2016; Kilavuz and Sumaktoyo 2020).

Thus, the Tunisian "exceptionalism" narrative has been critiqued for two reasons. First, it creates the impression that Tunisia's transition

is an unalloyed success, missing the severe economic, political, and human rights concerns that continue to face the country. Even the rights that women achieved when Bourghiba liberalized the Personal Status Code and gave women many rights in 1956, while critically important for advancing the country's development, wash out the challenges such as wage inequality that women continually face. Moreover, the "exceptionalism" narrative wrongly indicates that other Arab countries lack the conditions which could lead them down a path toward democracy. While many of the conditions in Tunisia are indeed uncommon in the region, they do exist to varying degrees in other Arab countries. For instance, Morocco and Kuwait have notable levels of party pluralism. Were a transition to begin, either due to a revolution or a gradual development of constitutional monarchy, their political process might follow a similar path to that of Tunisia, with all the challenges it entails. These are examples that illustrate the possibilities for other Arab countries, which could include Palestine or others.

### **Between Polarization and Consensus**

The transition period can be divided into two phases. In the first phase—characterized by most consensus and compromise between the parties—Tunisian society was deeply divided over the role of religion in politics. Ennahda made several important compromises—especially regarding gender relations, religion and politics, and the semi-presidential form of government—to reduce social and political polarization and ensure its survival and the continuation of democracy. Many Tunisians were understandably optimistic about their country's future in the early years after the transition. There were those who regarded themselves as worse off as a result of the revolution. As a result, public trust in government and national political institutions is low, and thus the future of democratization in the country remains uncertain.

Throughout the decade that followed the uprising, citizens demonstrated for a host of political and economic issues. During this time, the old guard reemerged in the form of the Nidaa Tounes (Call for Tunis) party, founded by former Bourguiba and Ben Ali-era politician, Béji Caïd Essebsi, who served as prime minister and later president until his death in 2019 (see table 11.1). Nidaa Tounes and Ennahda were willing to forge a coalition government and power-sharing agreement that

TABLE 11.1. Presidents and Prime Ministers of Tunisia (2011–Present)

Name	Dates in office	Political affiliation
<i>Presidents</i>		
Fouad Mebazaa	January–December 2011	RCD and Independent
Moncef Marzouki	2011–14	Congress for the Republic (CPR)
Béji Caïd Essebsi	2014–19	Nidaa Tounes
Mohamed Ennaceur (Acting president)	July–October 2019	Nidaa Tounes
Kais Saïed	2019–present	Non-partisan
<i>Prime Ministers</i>		
Mohamed Ghannouchi	1999–2011	RCD and Independent
Béji Caïd Essebsi	February–December 2011	Independent
Hamadi Jebali	2011–13	Ennahda
Ali Laarayedh	2013–14	Ennahda
Mehdi Jomaa	2014–15	Independent
Habib Essid	2015–16	Independent
Youssef Chahed	2016–20	Nidaa Tounes and Tahya Tounes
Elyes Fakhfakh	February–September 2020	Ettakatol
Hichem Mechichi	September 2020–July 2021 (dismissed by President Kais Saïed)	Independent
Vacant	July 2021–present	

Note: Current as of August 26, 2021.

helped move the political process forward even as the U.S. Embassy in Tunis was attacked in 2012, two leftist MPs were assassinated in 2013, and terrorist attacks occurred in Tunis and Sousse in 2016. Ennahda acted to ensure its long-term political survival, having learned from its difficult history of repression and the renewed crackdown against the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt following the 2013 military coup (McCarthy 2018; Wolf 2013, 2018; Haugbølle and Cavatorta 2012). In 2015, a quartet of organizations—the Tunisian General Labor Union; the Tunisian Confederation of Industry, Trade and Handicrafts; the Tunisian Human Rights League; and the Tunisian Order of Lawyers—assembled in 2013 after the assassinations of the two leftist deputies, received the Nobel Peace Prize for helping steer the Tunisian political process out of the crisis.

Table 11.1 lists Tunisia’s presidents since 2011. They include Fouad Mebazaa, who had been politically active before Tunisian independence and, under the Bourguiba and Ben Ali eras, was designated by the Constitutional Council to serve as acting president until the Con-

stituent Assembly elections (January–December 2011). Mebazaa was an independent. The first opposition president, Moncef Marzouki, was elected by the Constituent Assembly in December 2011 and he remained in that position until he was defeated in the second round of the 2014 presidential elections by Essebsi, the former Bourguiba-era politician, founder of Nidaa Tounes, and the first to be elected in a free and fair election by universal suffrage. Upon Essebsi's death in July 2019, Mohamed Ennaceur (Nidaa Tounes) succeeded him. An independent candidate in the 2019 presidential election, Kais Saied was elected in September 2019 after defeating challenger Nabil Karoui in the second round.

### **Transition to Democracy, 2011**

With Ben Ali's departure, the ruling Democratic Constitutional Rally (or RCD) and its security apparatus, the main organ of surveillance and repression, collapsed. Tunisian parties and associations began the painstaking process of negotiating a new political order. Prime Minister Mohamed Ghannouchi, a technocrat who had been Tunisia's prime minister since 1999, served as interim president, but stepped down the following day due to a legal technicality and was replaced by parliamentary speaker Fouad Mebazaa, who remained in office until December 2011.

During Mebazaa's presidency, many important changes took place. From January through March 2011, the interim government granted amnesty to political prisoners, invited exiles to return, and froze the RCD's assets. In February, activists organized themselves into a Committee for the Safeguard of the Revolution as a watchdog organization that pressured the government to develop a democratic reform plan and to prevent the return of the old regime. By the end of the month, their continued protests forced Ghannouchi out of office. Essebsi, a Bourguiba-era official, became Tunisia's new prime minister, serving from February through December 2011. Essebsi moved quickly to resolve the issues hampering the transition. The interim government legalized Ennahda as a political party and accepted the opposition's plan for reforming the constitution before holding presidential elections. The government also established a new Commission for the Realization of the Objectives of the Revolution, Political Reform, and Democratic Transition, which combined the government's reform

commission with the Committee for the Safeguard of the Revolution. This fusion gave civil society organizations and opposition parties a direct role in crafting the country's reforms (Benstead 2020).

Tunisians held elections to the Constituent Assembly on October 23, 2011—the first free and fair elections ever held in the country. Fifty-four percent of eligible voters cast ballots. Just over 40 percent of those voters supported Ennahda, and the party obtained 37 percent of the 217 seats. The next two largest vote-getters were the Congress for the Republic (CPR), with 29 seats, and Ettakatol, with 20 seats—two secular parties that had participated in the October 18 coalition and said that they would join a coalition government with Ennahda (see table 11.2).

Ennahda, CPR, and Ettakatol formed the troika, or ruling coalition, as it was unofficially called. This outcome also turned out to be fortuitous. No single party won more than 37 percent of the seats (see table 11.2), which meant a constitution could not be passed without compromise among the Islamists and secularists. This helped keep highly polarizing issues like the role of religion in politics from tearing society apart and derailing the transition. The coalition partners began by deciding how to share power and by approving a provisional constitution through the Constituent Assembly. The troika agreed that Moncef Marzouki from the CPR would be interim president of the republic; Mustapha Ben Jaafar, from Ettakatol, would serve as president of the Constituent Assembly, and Hamadi Jebali, representing Ennahda, would be prime minister.

During this process of devising rules for the Constituent Assembly elections, suspicion and competition among Islamist and secular parties surfaced, and it became clear that a major social cleavage in Tunisia existed between religious and secular groups. But this cleavage surrounding religion in politics and the experience of the Muslim Brotherhood being repressed in Egypt prompted Ennahda to strategically embrace consensus measures with other parties and assure the public that it would not abrogate many of Tunisia's traditions, including the rights of women. Yet this did not stop a period of social polarization and fear among many women about a possible diminution of their rights. Secular activists argued that women had been the ones to make the revolution. Labor, women's movements, human rights activists, and secular parties had mobilized the masses and defined the dominant themes of the revolt: Dignity, individual freedom, and equality for all citizens. They also accused Ennahda of doublespeak, contending

that when the movement's leaders talked to foreigners or the general population, their message emphasized tolerance, separation of government and religion, and the protection of women's rights; but when they talked to their base, they criticized secular values and pledged to govern according to Islamic principles. Ennahda countered that the secularists' fears of the party were unfounded. In the months after Ben Ali's fall, Ennahda quickly rebuilt its organization across the country. This growth and Ennahda's reputation as the most organized party in the country created a strong expectation that it would do well in the first elections, even as Ennahda argued that most of the reform commission's members came from the secular left and were trying to rig the electoral rules in their favor.

This tension between Ennahda and secular organizations shaped debates over several issues related to the Constituent Assembly elections. In fact, Ennahda withdrew from the reform commission in June 2011. It never rejected the process, however, and the parties agreed on some key points. The commission voted to exclude from the elections those RCD officials who had held senior positions during Ben Ali's last decade and it retained the closed-list proportional representation electoral system. The commission and Ennahda also agreed that the new electoral code should require all party lists to offer an equal number of male and female candidates.

Protracted haggling between the parties delayed the elections from July to October 23, creating more time for the electoral field to grow. By late summer, the government had legalized nearly a hundred parties. However, most Tunisians and outside observers believed that the election turned on the contest between two parties, Ennahda and the Progressive Democratic Party (PDP).

The PDP was a center-left party, one of three opposition parties that Ben Ali had legalized in 2001. Despite its legal status under the old regime, the PDP enjoyed strong credibility for its role in the October 18 opposition. Believing that most Tunisians did not want to live under an Islamist government and convinced that a strong anti-Islamist message would allow it to dominate the elections, the PDP ran an uncompromising campaign against Ennahda and refused to join a coalition with other parties. By 2011, when the first transitional elections took place, the political sphere in Tunisia was fragmented, a cohesive and well-organized Islamist Ennahda party on one side of the spectrum and hundreds of small non-Islamist parties, without well-developed platforms, on the other. As a result of the large number of secular parties

splitting the vote, the PDP was unable to achieve its goal and won only 4 percent of the vote.

### **The Constituent Assembly, 2011–14**

The Constituent Assembly was tasked with writing a constitution. The assembly created six commissions, each charged with a specific set of issues. Commission chairs formed the drafting committee that would submit the completed constitution to the full assembly. The rules stated that the draft must receive a two-thirds majority vote in the assembly, after which it would become Tunisia's new constitution or be returned to the commissions for revisions. If it failed on a second assembly vote, it would go to the public for a referendum, requiring a simple majority to be ratified.

As soon as the constitutional drafting process began, it became bogged down on the role of religion. Article 1, which declared the country as a sovereign republic with Islam as its official religion, generated considerable tension. Islamists and secularists marshaled their forces in the streets and on university campuses to influence the language of the new constitution. In late March 2012, Ennahda leaders—wary of alienating secularists by creating an Islamic government—declared that they would not press for language making shari'a tenets a source of law, even though many in Ennahda's rank and file supported more religious language.

Another issue that engendered widespread public debate was women's rights. Many women were concerned about potential rollbacks of the rights they had achieved since the 1956 Personal Status Code (PSC) and later reforms, including in 1993, when women married to non-Tunisian men gained the right to pass Tunisian citizenship on to their children. Many protests took place, but they intensified after a debate in the constitutional committee focused on language referring to men and women as “complementary.” Some Tunisians saw the proposed language as a foot in the door that could later be used to repeal the PSC. In the face of public outcry, Ennahda removed the language and stated that they had no intention of changing the PSC (Charrad and Zarrugh 2014; Khalil 2014).

Fears that women's rights could deteriorate as a consequence of Tunisia's transition did not materialize. In the 2011 Constituent Assembly elections, a legislated quota was implemented requiring party lists

to alternate male and female candidates. Because the law did not include provisions requiring women to be at the head of half of the lists, women's representation remained 27 percent—about the same as the pre-revolution Parliament—rising to 28 percent in 2014. While this level is higher than in most MENA countries and reflects the level of equality Tunisian women have achieved, it also illustrates that gender-based biases and structural factors that inhibit women's full equality in politics still exist, such as their unequal access to campaign finances and positions in party leadership. Larger gender gaps are apparent in the cabinet, as well as within parties. Still, the constitution represents a major step forward for the advancement of women's rights, even by global standards. It guaranteed freedom from violence, the protection and further development of equal rights, and that the state would take necessary measures to achieve parity in elected assemblies.

The constitution passed on the first vote in early 2014—after committee work and debate had continued past the initial mandate of October 2013. Declaring Tunisia a democratic republican system, the constitution embodies ambiguities inherent in a document that reflects compromises by both secular and Islamist camps. The most important of these ambiguous areas concerns the issue of religion and politics. The constitution establishes that Tunisia's religion is Islam but does not, as many Islamists wanted, establish shari'a as a source of law. It also guarantees freedom of religion and condemns calls for *takfir* (inciting to violence by stating someone is not truly Muslim). Language criminalizing blasphemy was removed. At the same time, it states that the president must be Muslim.

### **The 2014 Parliamentary and Presidential Elections**

Amid increasing instability and public dissatisfaction with Ennahda's economic performance, Nidaa Tounes, the big-tent party led by Essebsi, obtained legal status in 2012. This status was granted even though the 2011 electoral law did not permit individuals involved with the RCD in the preceding seven years to run for office. A debate in the Constituent Assembly continued about the proposed political exclusion law for future elections, but the law was tabled in 2013 in the midst of instability created by the assassination of two leftist Constituent Assembly members. Although the terrorist group Ansar al-Shariah was held responsible, Ennahda was accused of failing to maintain security.



Some also charged that Ennahda was complicit with the killings. The turmoil increased public support for Nidaa Tounes, which was perceived as a bulwark of Ben Ali-era stability.

Amid continued public outcry against deteriorating economic and security conditions, Ali Laarayedh of Ennahda stepped down as prime minister in January 2014. Mehdi Jomaa replaced him until elections could be held on October 26. In the first polls following the ratification of the constitution in January, Nidaa Tounes won 38 percent of seats to Ennahda's 28 percent. Ennahda's loss, while not decisive, was the result of perceptions it had not governed effectively. No other party won more than 4 percent of the vote. Thus, while a broad swath of Tunisians voted for Ennahda in 2011, in 2014, its supporters came from more religious and conservative segments of the population.

Nahda's decision to not run a presidential candidate is believed to be the result of a meeting between Essebsi and Ghannouchi in Paris in August 2013. They decided to share power, the former by contesting the presidency and the latter becoming dominant in the Parliament (Grewal and Hamid 2020). This was to prove an important juncture in Tunisian elites' pattern of, and willingness to reach, elite bargains—and a key element of the first stage of the transition. That pattern allowed them to avoid a political crisis by sharing power. Some argued that the economic woes of ordinary citizens would be neglected by elites who were more interested in dividing the pie.

Nidaa Tounes waited to form a government until after presidential elections were held on November 23, and Essebsi won, attracting 56 percent of the vote to Marzouki's 44 percent. Even as the rise of Nidaa Tounes represented Tunisians' increasing worries about instability and nostalgia for a stable past, it created concerns about the return of the old regime and the future of transitional justice. To calm such fears, the transitional government created the Truth and Dignity Commission (TDC) to investigate, prosecute, and provide restitution for victims of state-perpetrated human rights violations under the Ben Ali regime. The commission's four-year mandate began in June 2014 and hearings began immediately, although Essebsi's election raised concerns about whether funding would be cut, or if access to records from Ben Ali-era security agencies would be "lost" or destroyed to protect perpetrators. Moreover, within a year of Essebsi's election, his party proposed a law offering amnesty to officials in exchange for truth-telling and some restitution, a move that many activists, who call for prosecution, see as inadequate. The commission had a mandate to investigate abuses from

1995 to 2013. Although the tribunal received over 62,700 complaints—many for economic corruption—and held 12 televised sessions, its work was hampered by numerous roadblocks by the Essebsi government and led to few trials. Neither Nidaa Tounes nor increasingly its ally, Ennahda, wished to press the process past the four-year mandate. The commission, while important, ended with many victims feeling that the process had not lived up to their hopes for justice.

### **Party Instability and the Struggle to Define the Rules of the Game**

In 2016, the Ennahda movement formally divided its religious and charitable activities into two separate organizations. While this was largely an outward-facing move intended to maintain its image internationally—and not one that created a hard firewall between the two dimensions of the organization—it solidified Ennahda's character as a Muslim democratic party and constituted an important step in the party's evolution.

Ennahda also remained committed to consensus, but new political developments spelled a gradual shift in the dynamics of the transition. Among these developments are party instability on the non-Islamist flank and renewed inter-party competition over corruption and the rules of the electoral game. Additionally, the goal of consensus-building was challenging the ability of the political elite to take decisive action on pressing policy matters. Parties, including Qalb Tounes (Heart of Tunisia), split from Nidaa Tounes after sparring for the succession of the party's leadership. Although the shift was gradual, a key indicator of this new dynamic came in 2019 when Nabil Karoui, a media mogul who had supported Essebsi's return to politics, rose in popularity in the presidential polls following President Essebsi's death in 2019. Karaoui's rise to prominence spoke to deepening public distrust of national political institutions, which gave outsiders like Karaoui an opportunity to make headway into politics.

It is worth considering Karoui's role in the political field. Karoui is a businessman who had been active in Tunisia's media landscape—first as owner of an entertainment network, then, after the revolution, of a news outlet. During a 2011 interview, he first broached the idea of Essebsi becoming prime minister. He organized the 2014 Paris meeting of Ghannouchi and Essebsi that reduced tensions between Nidaa Tounes, which represented old-guard non-religious interests, and

Ennahda, which represented religious interests within the opposition to the former regime. Karoui's media firm also crafted Nidaa Tounes's media strategy during the 2014 parliamentary elections.

Karoui's rise prompted Ennahda, which held a majority in Parliament, to propose new guidelines intended for the country's electoral commission. The law would have banned any candidate with a criminal record from running for office, as well as anyone who ran a charity, or received foreign funding for political advertising in the previous year. Karoui had a criminal record after he was charged and convicted for allowing Nessma, the television station he helped found, to broadcast *Persepolis*, a film that many see as blasphemous. Nidaa Tounes and Popular Front filed a legal action to call the law unconstitutional. Karoui stepped down from Nessma and founded the party Qalb Tounes. After being arrested on corruption allegations, Karoui was released, ran for president, and lost in the run-off to Kais Saïed.

Developments surrounding Karoui's presidential bid are part of an ongoing and highly charged process of defining the political rules and grappling with elite corruption. In 2014, Parliament considered but then tabled a law that would have banned anyone who was part of the previous regime in the past seven years to run for office. Once this law was dropped from the parliamentary agenda during the 2013 chaos created by the assassinations of two MPs, Essebsi was able to run for president despite his involvement in politics under Ben Ali.

In addition, there was strife within Nidaa Tounes as its prominent members sparred about party succession and several new parties emerged. Tensions grew between supporters of Essebsi's son, Mohamed Hafdth Caïd Essebsi, the party's then chairperson, and then Prime Minister Youssef Chahed, as well as others. This led to the emergence of several new parties. Nidaa Tounes members Mohsen Marzouk formed Machrouu Tounes (Tunisia's Project), while Chahed created Tahya Tounes. Dramatically, in 2019, Tunisia's ruling party Nidaa Tounes elected two leaders in parallel congresses—not unlike developments during Bourguiba's rise to the leadership of his party in the 1950s—deepening elite division. Nine MPs resigned from Qalb Tounes due to dissatisfaction with Karoui's leadership and formed Al-Watania (Homeland Party). As a result, in 2020, after tense debates on the floor, Parliament voted to send an electoral law amendment proposed by Ennahda to the Rules of Procedures Committee to create a 5 percent threshold for parties in the 2024 election.

Ennahda has also faced challenges, although it has remained much

more cohesive. The vice president of Ennahda, Abdelhamid Jelassi, resigned in 2020 as a result of party infighting, and Secretary Generals Hamadi Jebali and Zied Ladhari also left the party in 2014 and 2019, respectively. Its founder and leader Rachid Ghannouchi was accused of allowing foreign interference through his communication with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and support for Turkish-based forces in Libya. As a result, he narrowly survived a no-confidence vote in a closed-door session in 2020.

Political struggles between parties intensified following the 2019 elections when it took four months to form a government. After the parliamentary election, the party that won a plurality of seats, Ennahda, had two months to form a government. When it failed to do so, President Kais Saied nominated Elyès Fakhfakh, who had one month to form his government or face new elections (Ghamni 2020). Prime Minister Fakhfakh from Ettakatol (Democratic Current)—a party without seats in the 2019 Parliament—formed a coalition government of six parties including Ennahda. But Fakhfakh's government was brought down due to the Valis affair. This controversy centered on accusations that Fakhfakh was guilty of influence-peddling and conflicts of interest in waste management contracts. Other parties, including Ennahda, proposed candidates, but many also faced allegations of corruption.

In 2020, after protracted wrangling, Tunisia's President Kais Saied nominated Hichem Mechichi, an unaffiliated technocrat from the interior ministry as the next prime minister. According to Grewal and Hammami (2020), Saied, in doing so, created "a 'president's government,' rather than a parliamentary one." President Saied did not consult with the parties perhaps to the degree he might have. Yet the process followed the timeline outlined in the 2014 constitution and was consistent with Saied's desire to end the impasse and move forward with important government priorities.

The nation's elites also worked toward selecting the members of the constitutional court—a new body mandated by the 2014 constitution. But this process was difficult to conclude since it required a two-thirds vote in Parliament and the coalition government only had a simple majority.

For its part, Ennahda continued to encourage consensus. Despite its moves to prevent Karoui from running for office, it was done within a framework of anti-corruption, notwithstanding Ennahda's proposal of a prime ministerial candidate who was also accused of corruption. Moreover, in the struggle to form a government after the

2019 elections, Ennahda called for a government that included Qalb Tounes, arguing that national unity was needed to address the deep economic problems the country faces. This position is helpful, given the impact that perceptions of poor government performance play in shaping citizens' engagement in the political process and attitudes toward democracy. At the same time, Ennahda is aware that any attempt to reform the economy will threaten interests and its leaders know both that it will need allies as well as will not wish to be blamed for the austerity which will be needed. Brumberg (2019) argues that Tunisia has not progressed because political leaders have deliberately avoided imposing economic measures that would antagonize the Tunisian General Labor Union (the UGTT), which has considerable political influence in Tunisia. Such measures could arguably hamper Ennahda's future electoral success.

Thus, while major political groups had been relatively successful in finding common ground on thorny issues related to the religious identity of the state and women's rights, they had fallen short in responding to popular demands for improved governance and economic management. This was in large part the result of increasing fragmentation among and within non-Islamist parties, and infighting and political gridlock among the political elites more generally. As mentioned earlier, the imperative for consensus building among the political elite has resulted in gridlock, thereby undermining effective governance. This reality has contributed to low public trust in government and political institutions, a reality that continues to threaten democratic change in Tunisia.

### **The Presidential Power Grab: Democracy on the Brink**

On July 25, 2021, President Kais Saied suspended Parliament, dismissed Prime Minister Hichem Mechichi, and withdrew parliamentary immunity. Al Jazeera's office was stormed by police before the station could air a protest statement by the then former Prime Minister Mechichi, according to local reports. Ennahda President and Speaker of Parliament Rached Ghannouchi called the actions a coup.

President Saied's move reflected Tunisia's deeply polarized society. Supporters of the old guard, including the July 25 Movement, had been calling for the president to act and strongly opposed a return to the pre-25 July status quo. The movement opposes the largest party in Parlia-

ment, Ennahda, which it blames for the country's political, economic, and health crises.

President Saied shows no clear sign that he plans to reinstate Parliament. His administration also placed a travel ban on over 50 judges, business leaders, and at least one member of parliament, citing allegations of corruption and tax evasion. Yet on August 20, the Ministry of the Interior closed the offices of the National Anti-Corruption Authority (INLUCC) until the state of emergency ends.

### **Citizens' Perceptions of Parties**

Tunisia's crisis has in part been made possible by elite political paralysis, infighting, and corruption, which shape citizens' views of the political class and, therefore, their political engagement and confidence in the democratic order. Data from Waves 3–5 of the Arab Barometer conducted in Tunisia in 2013, 2016, and 2019 illustrate these trends.

#### *Confidence in the Parliament Has Fallen*

While the Arab Barometer did not ask citizens about their confidence in parties, it asked about the institution of parliament. The percentage of Tunisians who “absolutely do not trust” the Parliament increased over time from 52 percent in 2011 and 56 percent in 2016 to 71 percent in 2019. The percentage of citizens who lack any trust in the government and the cabinet increased over time from 45 percent in 2011 and 39 percent in 2016 to 62 percent in 2019 (Arab Barometer, Waves 3–5). These trends are illustrated in figure 11.1. The largest decline in confidence in the Parliament occurred between 2016 and 2019.

#### *Perceptions of Public Corruption Are Increasing*

Tunisians also see many of their party elites at the national and local levels as corrupt. In 2019, 54 percent of Tunisians believed the extent of corruption at the national level is to a large extent, 30 percent to some extent, 12 percent to a small extent, and 3 percent not at all. When asked how widespread they thought that corruption is in municipal government, 9 percent believed hardly anyone is involved, 41 percent believed not a lot of officials are involved, 29 percent believe most officials are corrupt, and 16 percent believed almost everyone is corrupt

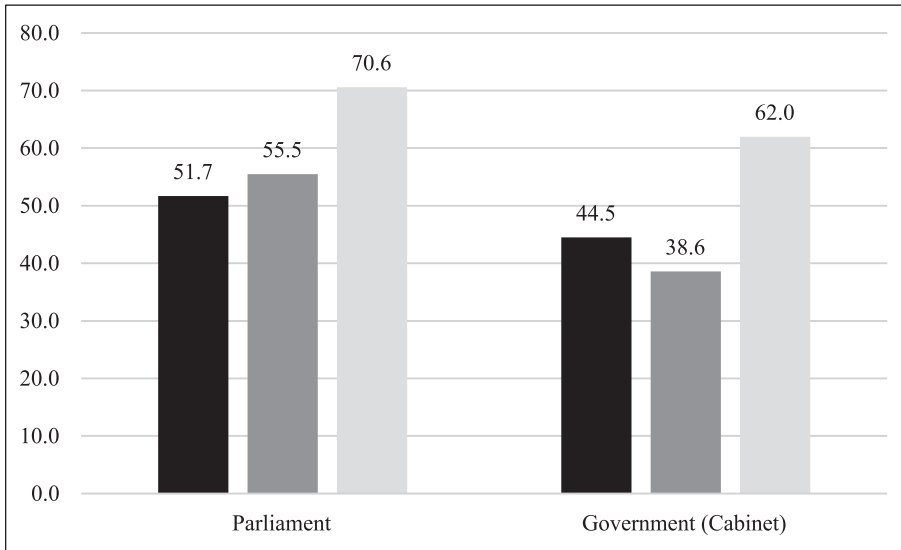


Fig. 11.1. Percentage of Tunisians Who Do Not Trust Political Institutions

Question wording: "I will name a number of institutions, and I would like you to tell me to what extent you trust each of them: The Parliament. The government (Cabinet). I trust it to a great extent. I trust it to a medium extent. I trust it to a limited extent. I absolutely do not trust it." Figure 11.1 shows the percentage who answered: "I absolutely do not trust it."

Source: Arab Barometer (Wave III, IV, and V).

(Arab Barometer 2019, Wave V). As of 2013, the only year in which the question was asked, 49 percent believed that corruption in state institutions was worse than in 2011; 31 percent believed it was the same, and 21 percent believed that it was less (Arab Barometer 2013, Wave III). Most citizens did not believe that the government was working to eliminate corruption. The percentage who believed that this was not at all happening grew from 6 percent in 2011 to 23 percent in 2013 and 36 percent in 2016.

### *Support for Democracy and Rejection of a Strong Leader Are Declining*

Given the declining satisfaction with the government and rising perceptions of corruption, it is not surprising that support for democracy in Tunisia has also waned in recent years. When asked to state on a ten-point scale the extent to which people believe democracy is appro-

appropriate for Tunisia, the mean support for democracy in 2011 was 6.0. In 2013, it fell to 4.9 and in 2016 to 4.8.<sup>2</sup>

Tunisians' willingness to accept a strong leader who does not have to bother with elections or Parliament has also increased in this period. The proportion of citizens indicating that a strong leader is very appropriate increased from 0.9 percent in 2011 to 4 percent in 2013 and 14 percent in 2016. The proportion who seeing it as absolutely inappropriate fell from 87 percent in 2011 to 81 percent in 2013 and 72 percent in 2016.<sup>3</sup>

### *Implications for Democratic Consolidation*

Tunisia had many of the conditions that help to facilitate democratic transition, including its relatively small, homogenous population and large middle class. Tunisians also appeared to have a strong desire for democracy, but in recent years, economic struggles and political corruption have tempered those views. Theoretically, a supply of effective, transparent governance is needed for citizens to develop confidence that they will not be negatively affected by free elections. System performance is the first link in a chain that fosters trust in the government and ultimately demand for democracy (Karl 1990; Mattes and Bratton 2007) which in turn supports democratic consolidation (Linz and Stepan 1996).

In a transitional regime like Tunisia, in which nostalgia for the previous authoritarian order is high, satisfaction with the government is needed to foster strong support for democracy. Across the Arab world (Benstead 2015; Benstead and Atkeson 2011), including in Tunisia (Benstead and Snyder 2016), better perceptions of government performance in the form of effective and transparent institutions and satisfaction

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2. Question wording: "Suppose there was a scale from 0–10 measuring the extent to which democracy is suitable for your country, with 0 meaning that democracy is absolutely inappropriate for your country and 10 meaning that democracy is completely appropriate for your country. To what extent do you think democracy is appropriate for your country?"

3. "I'm going to describe various types of political systems and ask what you think about each as a way of governing [respondent's country]. For each one, would you say it is a very good, fairly good, fairly bad or very bad way of governing [country]? A strong non-democratic leader that does not bother with parliament and elections."



with the government is related to higher support for democracy. Yet perceptions of poor government performance (Benstead 2015) and insufficient government control of corruption *undermines* support for democracy (Benstead, Atkeson, and Shahid 2019). That is because corruption undermines civil society and regime legitimacy and fosters ambivalence about whether free elections would improve transparency (Rothstein and Uslaner 2005; Manzetti and Wilson 2007; Seligson 2002).

Given these realities, it matters that Tunisia's leaders work to control corruption and develop transparent public institutions. Importantly, elite gridlock and elite corruption drive a sense that democracy is ineffective and for some apathy toward having a strong leader. This is particularly true as the country teeters dangerously close to a reconsolidation of an authoritarian order. Much depends now on the strength of civil society and its will to hold the government to account to respect the constitution.

## Conclusion

The dominant trend in party competition during Tunisia's transition has been polarization and consensus-building surrounding issues of religion and politics and key constitutional issues. All parties and party elites act strategically to advance their goals. Ennahda acted to ensure its long-term political survival, having learned from its difficult history of repression and that of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, which was banned after the transition in Egypt and the tragedy that unfolded in the 1990s in Algeria. Yet it now faces the specter of a longer-term closure of Parliament and uncertainty over its political future.

Efforts to ban figures from running for office if they had been part of the previous regime had fallen off the Parliament's agenda during the political chaos surrounding the tragic 2013 assassinations of two leftist MPs. Increasingly—and since the 2019 elections in particular—the political dynamic has centered on inter-party leadership struggles and intra-party competition over the rules of the game.

Even though a prolonged process of party consolidation is not unexpected, it has several political impacts that are worth noting. The first is the development of competing economic proposals aimed at addressing Tunisia's difficult socioeconomic problems (Lust and Waldner 2016), including low economic growth due to the impact of growing insecurity

on the tourism sector, high unemployment, inflation, and poverty. The lack of robust debate about economic policy has been made more severe by the tourism and economic crisis that followed the terrorist attacks in 2016 in Tunis and Sousse, and the lockdown due to the global COVID-19 pandemic. This is not to say that parties are not focused on these issues. In 2020, during the Prime Minister-designate Mechichi's meeting with Ennahda MPs, the discussion reportedly focused on the country's socio-economic challenges (Grewal and Hammami 2020).

Yet the inability of the political class to address the aspirations of the Tunisian people and the recurrent emergence of corruption allegations has severely damaged public confidence in the democratic political system. The seriousness of this situation should not be understated. Theoretically and empirically, low confidence in the Parliament and perceptions that the government is not addressing corruption are linked to lower support for democracy and rising apathy toward having a strong leader.

Even though these challenges paint a bleak picture, there is hope. Tunisia's civil society—its organizations and people—is robust. Tunisians, more than anyone, know the importance of fighting for a just society and they can achieve their goals.

The Tunisian case also offers lessons for political development across the region and beyond. Although Tunisia has moved beyond Ben Ali's closed authoritarianism and the political system has made a notable break from its past and dominant authoritarian trends in the rest of the region, it still exhibits some of the same patterns one finds in other authoritarian countries, including those that did not experience uprisings in 2011. Specifically, the strong disillusionment with national organized politics resonates with a region-wide trend whereby many political activists and protest movements have shown a great deal of distrust toward formal institutions. These dynamics are also echoed in the discussions of other cases in this volume. For example, in Lebanon, popular anger is aimed at the established political class, as Lina Khatib illustrates in her chapter. It is also apparent in Jordan where, as Sean Yom demonstrates, activists involved in contentious politics have eschewed formal politics as a mode of organizing and have shown little interest in working with formal parties. So too, the 2019 mobilization in Iraq also reflected this same lack of confidence in formal democratic political institutions, as described in David Patel's chapter. The fact that a similar trend is found in Tunisia shows that the evident lack of trust in formal politics is not unique to authoritarian

TABLE 11.2. Tunisian Elections Since 2011

Event	
<b>October 23, 2011:</b>	Constituent Assembly election (unicameral, closed-list proportional representation)
Seats (%):	Ennahda (37%), Congress for the Republic (CPR) (9%), Popular Petition (7%), Democratic Forum for Labor and Liberties (7%), Progressive Democratic Party (4%), The Initiative (3%), Democratic Modernist Pole (3%), Afek Tounes (2%), Tunisian Workers' Communist Party (2%), People's Movement (1%), Movement of Socialist Democrats (1%), Free Patriots' Movement (1%), Maghrebin Liberal Party (.5%), Democratic Social Nation Party (.5%), New Destour Party (.5%), Progressive Struggle Party (.2%), Equity and Equality Party (.2%), Cultural Unionist Nation Party (.1%), and Independents (2%)
Coalition:	71% of MPs formed the 2011 troika coalition: CPR, Ettakatol, and Ennahda
<b>January 26, 2014:</b>	Constitution adopted
<b>October 26, 2014:</b>	Parliamentary election (unicameral, closed-list proportional representation)
Seats (%):	Nidaa Tounes (38%), Ennahda (28%), UPL (4%), Popular Front (4%), Afek Tounes (3%), and CPR (2%)
Coalition:	77% of MPs formed the 2015 Nidaa Tounes-Ennahda grand coalition government
<b>November 23, 2014:</b>	Presidential election
Second-round results:	Béji Caïd Essebsi, Nidaa Tounes (56%), Moncef Marzouki, and CPR (44%)
<b>May 6, 2018:</b>	Municipal and regional election
Mayors:	Ennahda (37%), Independent (35%), Nidaa Tounes (22%), Others (6%)
Municipal seats:	Independent (33%), Ennahda (30%), Nidaa Tounes (22%), and others (15%)
<b>September 15, 2019:</b>	Presidential election
Second-round results:	Kais Saïed, Independent (72.7%) and Karoui, Heart of Tunisia (27.3%)
<b>October 6, 2019:</b>	Parliamentary election (unicameral, closed-list proportional representation)

TABLE 11.2—Continued

Event	
Seats (%):	Ennahda Movement (24.0%), Heart of Tunisia (17.5%), Democratic Current (10.1%), Dignity Coalition (9.7%), Free Destorian Party (7.8%), People's Movement (7.4%), Tayha Tounes ("Long Live Tunisia") (6.5%), Machrouu Tounes (1.8%), Nidaa Tounes (1.4%), Errahma (1.4%), Tunisian Alternative (1.4%), Republican People's Union (1.4%), Afek Tounes (0.5%), Green League (0.5%), Current of Love (0.5%), Farmers' Voice Party (0.5%), Aïch Tounsi (0.5%), Popular Front (0.5%), Democratic and Social Union (0.5%), Socialist Destourian Party (0.5%), and Independent (6.0%)
Coalition:	Fakhfakh formed a majoritarian (simple 50+1 majority) grand coalition or national unity government
July 25, 2021:	President Kais Saied suspected Parliament and seized emergency powers.

settings and does seem to persist even when competitive elections are prevalent.

The future of Tunisian democracy, however, is unfortunately uncertain. Consensus-building among the elite has helped craft a constitution that was widely acceptable to Tunisians and thus contributed to the transition to electoral democracy. But that same quest for consensus has made decisive, stable governance impossible to attain and that has hurt the prospects for democratic consolidation. Tunisia's political forces must now do the difficult work of crafting programs that will reverse the country's economic stagnation and create the conditions needed for consolidation to take place. Yet Tunisia's democracy can only succeed if all actors respect the constitution and remain committed to keeping the country on a path to consolidated democracy.

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## 12 | Examining Yemen's Post-2011 Trajectory

### From Reform to War to Many Yemens

*April Longley Alley*

Yemen's political trajectory has been one of dramatic turns since the days of popular protest in 2011. During the Arab Spring uprising, a diverse cross-section of Yemeni activists, political parties, and movements ended the 33-year rule of Ali Abdullah Saleh. The country entered a period of new opportunities and political transition: Saleh passed authority to his vice president through a single-candidate election and Yemenis participated in a national dialogue that was meant to form the basis of a new constitution. Like Tunisia, it was viewed as a success story in the region and policy-makers even spoke of a Yemen model that could apply to Libya and Syria. But soon the tables turned. Political contestation over power-sharing arrangements and new institutions gave way to escalating violence throughout the transition, a coup in 2014, and a civil war in 2015 that was accompanied by a direct military intervention by Saudi Arabia and its allies. At the time of writing, now in its seventh year, Yemen's regionalized civil war has fragmented the country and created what the United Nations (UN) describes as the world's worst humanitarian crisis.

Yemen is going through a process of social and political transformation that is no less dramatic than its period of modern state formation in the 1960s when republicans backed by Egypt defeated a religious theocracy supported by Saudi Arabia in the north and South Yemen won independence from the British, becoming the only radical Marxist state in the Arab world. As in the 1960s, an old political and economic order is breaking down and a new one is being forged through violence and shaped by external intervention. A battle over the nature of the



state and its boundaries is in full swing, and a return to a unified Yemen (north and south united in 1990) may no longer be possible.

This chapter will attempt to take stock of the events over the past decade: Yemen's authoritarian breakdown, moment of political transition, and then descent into civil war and territorial fragmentation.<sup>1</sup> First, it will look at the period of transition between 2012 and 2014, arguing that Yemen's collapse into war can be explained by problems with the elite pact that steered the transition, as well as deeper structural constraints. Problems with the elite pact included the absence of a mechanism for dispute resolution between the parties, as well as insufficient incentives for critical stakeholders, specifically Saleh's party and powerful new actors like the Huthi movement (a Zaydi<sup>2</sup> revivalist movement turned insurgency, that calls itself Ansar Allah) and southern separatists, to participate in the transition rather than to upend it. Structural and institutional factors proved to be significant barriers as well. Unresolved disputes over the boundaries of political community, particularly over the South, as well as chronically weak state institutions weighed heavily on the prospects for a successful transition. These factors contributed to popular frustration and mobilization against the Saleh regime, but also helped to overwhelm attempts at democratic reform.

The second section examines Yemen's regionalized civil war, now in its seventh year. It shows how unresolved issues from the transition period, particularly those related to the boundaries and nature of the state, are being violently contested and redefined on the ground. The country is currently divided into roughly five cantons of control, each with its own socio-political character, roots in Yemeni history, and ties to foreign patrons. In these five areas, and especially in the Huthi-dominated north-west, governance institutions are increasingly repressive and intolerant of dissent. The wartime trajectory has been profoundly shaped by external actors, particularly regional states seeking to secure national security interests by shaping their near abroad in the post-Arab Spring context. Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Iran are the heavyweights in Yemen, intervening politically and militarily to support local allies and undermine perceived foes.

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1. This chapter was last updated on March 16, 2022.

2. Zaydism is a branch of Shia Islam that is distant from the Twelver Shiism practiced in Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, and Bahrain. Zaydis form the majority in Yemen's far north and they comprise somewhere between 25 to 30 percent of Yemen's total population.

In doing so they have stoked sectarian narratives, shaped internal fragmentation, and ultimately prolonged the violence.

Contestation over Yemen's post-2011 future is in many ways unique, shaped by the country's recent history as two separate states, its importance to Saudi Arabia's security, and by the historical legacies of Saleh's brand of neo-patrimonial rule. But it also provides some comparative lessons that speak to other chapters and themes in this volume. Similar to some of the challenges explored in Khalid Mustafa Medani's chapter on Sudan, Yemen is a cautionary tale for experiments in democratic transition where there is a lack of consensus over nationhood and where state capacity is chronically weak, designed to ensure regime survival rather provide security and service. It is also a case where regional states, notably Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, have acted assertively to shape the post-2011 environment in ways that limit what they view as the destabilizing impact of democratizing trends (see Toby Matthiesen's chapter on the "Arab Counter Revolution"). This was particularly the case between 2011 and 2014. However, Yemen's war revealed divergent priorities within the Saudi-Emirati coalition, with the former prioritizing countering the perceived Iranian threat vis-à-vis the Huthis and the latter the perceived threat posed by political Islam and the Muslim Brotherhood in particular. Their support for divergent anti-Huthi networks has amplified the fragmentation of the country and in the case of the Emirati support for southern separatists, set the South more firmly on a path toward possible separation.

### **Political Transition: 2012–14<sup>3</sup>**

#### *Chronology of Yemen's Transition*

For a moment, Yemen was an unlikely regional success story. The country emerged from the 2011 protests against the regime of Ali Abdullah Saleh with a pacted political transition in which Saleh and his ruling party, the General People's Congress (GPC), agreed to the Gulf

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3. This section draws heavily from fieldwork conducted in Yemen from 2012 to 2014 as part of the author's work with the International Crisis Group. See Crisis Group (2012, 2013, 2014). For another useful reference for this period, see Lackner (2017).

Cooperation Council (GCC) initiative and a set of UN-backed implementation mechanisms. The agreement set out a two-year political transition, inclusive of Saleh transferring power to his deputy, Abdu Rabbo Mansour Hadi, in return for domestic immunity. It mandated the formation of a national unity government (split evenly between the GPC and the main opposition bloc, the Joint Meeting Parties, or JMP) and a national dialogue process to make recommendations for a new constitution. The transition was to end with a constitutional referendum and elections. It also set out a process of military-security sector reform aimed at reunifying, professionalizing, and bringing the security services under the control of the new government.

Initially, there was some success. Saleh transferred authorities to Hadi, a southerner from Abyan province who is still the country's internationally recognized president, albeit based in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. Hadi became president in what was billed by the political elite and international community as an election—but which was in effect a non-competitive referendum. Many youth and civil society activists and Huthi supporters were skeptical of that deal. In their view, it did not go far enough in changing the old order. Indeed, GCC support and particularly Saudi Arabia's backing for the deal was a counterrevolutionary move, aimed at dampening more radical change and potential chaos on Saudi's southern border, as Toby Matthiesen explains in his chapter in this volume.

Still, Saleh had resigned and Yemen's political elite were able to avoid descent into civil war, along the lines of Syria and Libya. In early 2012, both Saleh's GPC and the rival JMP were optimistic and even proud of their accomplishment. The UN and the international community embraced and actively supported the transition, and even discussed exporting a Yemen model to other Arab Spring countries.

The moment of optimism and indeed opportunity for reform was short-lived. Saleh and his closest supporters backed the agreement insofar as it did not fundamentally change the old political order. The GCC initiative gave the former president domestic immunity from prosecution, and it allowed him to continue in his position as head of the GPC. He and his backers interpreted the accord as a revised power-sharing arrangement that would still allow them to maintain privileged control of state positions and resources. Their main political adversaries, on the other hand, viewed the agreement as a chance to shift power away from Saleh in their favor, as opposed to a chance to alter the existing neo-patrimonial autocracy. These include the predominantly Sunni

Islamist party, Islah, the strongest group in the JMP bloc. Islah was allied to the powerful al-Ahmar family of the Hashid confederation.<sup>4</sup> Also among these adversaries was Saleh's former regime partner who defected during the 2011 uprising, General Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar (no familial ties to the al-Ahmar clan).

It soon became clear that Hadi too viewed the transition less as a moment of genuine change and more as an opportunity to reshuffle the political deck for personal gain. Part of the old regime himself, the new president in many ways repeated the patterns of Saleh's rule, appointing family members and loyalists from his home governorate to the most sensitive security posts and using divide-and-rule tactics to manage political forces, albeit in a far less skilled manner than his predecessor.

As the gaggle of elites competed for power, they marginalized three constituencies that were part of the original anti-regime protests: The revolutionary youth, the Huthi movement, and parts of the southern Hiraak, a movement started in 2007 seeking greater rights and access to resources for southerners that later shifted to pro-independence demands (Day 2008 and 2010). These groups largely rejected the GCC initiative, viewing it as an elite bargain concocted by Gulf monarchies to halt genuine reform in its tracks. For the Hiraak, the accord was a northern affair that did not adequately address southern aspirations for autonomy. The GCC initiative and its implementation mechanisms largely excluded each of these groups from the transition government and military decision-making during the transition period. As the transition began to go off the rails, the Huthis and parts of the Hiraak gained strength in the north and south respectively, filling the void as old regime elites struggled for influence in the capital.

By 2013, the transition was in trouble. Saleh loyalists saw their share of the political and economic pie, particularly military-security positions, decline in the face of Islah, Ali Mohsen, and Hadi gains. As the political parties jostled for positions, corruption increased and economic conditions for average Yemenis declined significantly. Security conditions deteriorated too. Several major terrorist attacks hit Sanaa, including a May 2012 suicide bombing on a group of soldiers practicing for a Unity Day parade. The bombing, which was claimed by al-Qaeda on the Arabian Peninsula, left over 90 dead (Mujahed and Raghavan 2012). In the south, Ansar Sharia, a local al-Qaeda affiliate, took over

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4. There are two main confederations in the north: Hashid and Bakil.

large parts of the hinterland outside of Aden and made inroads into the city as well. In the north, as state security structures were weakened, the Huthis filled the void. They consolidated control over most of their home governorate of Saada as early as 2012 and slowly began to militarily challenge their main rivals, a combination of Islah-affiliated tribal leaders, Salafi fighters, and members of the al-Ahmar clan in the northern highlands.

As new political and military realities were taking shape outside the capital, most international attention was focused on the National Dialogue Conference (NDC), which took place between March 18, 2013 and January 24, 2014 at one of the country's only luxury hotels. The NDC was the cornerstone of the transition and was designed to air grievances, debate a future social contract, and ultimately inform a new constitution-writing process. On paper, it was relatively inclusive, bringing together representatives from the country's main political parties, youth and civil society activists, parts (although not all) of the Hiraak, and the Huthi rebels. Women comprised nearly 30 percent of the delegates.

The dialogue produced an expansive list of outcomes mostly focused on civil and political liberties. But it failed to produce consensus on the country's most divisive political issue, namely state structure and particularly the status of south Yemen. By the end of the conference, there was a developing agreement on the need for a federal state, in light of strong regional identities and resentment of the periphery to being controlled by Sanaa. But no agreement emerged on the number of federal regions or on the details of power sharing in a federal model. Instead of allowing debate to continue, the presidency of the NDC, supported by the UN, decided to give the sensitive issue to a special committee chosen by President Hadi. The committee recommended a six-region federalism, an outcome that was never put to a vote for all NDC delegates and was publicly rejected by both the Huthis and large parts of the Hiraak.

While popular sentiment had been supportive of the NDC initially, deteriorating economic conditions, deepening corruption, and the growing security vacuum rendered the conference increasingly distant from the concerns of citizens. By the time it concluded, the country's main power brokers were preparing for war. In July 2014, Huthi fighters pushed south out of Saada and captured a strategic military base in Amran, a governorate to the north of Sanaa. The capture of Amran was both a tipping point and a harbinger of what was to come.

After Amran, Sanaa was next. The Huthis entered the capital under the cover of popular protests, which were triggered by the government's abrupt decision to lift diesel subsidies. When protests failed to reverse the government decision, the Huthis entered militarily in September 2014. The fighting was limited and swift. The rebels routed forces aligned with the Islah/Ali Mohsen/Salafi alliance. Saleh loyalists in the military-security services stayed home or facilitated the Huthi advance.

The Huthi takeover of Sanaa marked a dizzying shift in political alliances and is still a source of political intrigue. What was clear is that Saleh, who had fought six rounds of conflict with the Huthis during his rule, aligned with his former enemies against new proximate adversaries, in this case, Islah, Ali Mohsen, and the al-Ahmars. Hadi's role and intentions were less transparent. He failed to mobilize troops to protect the military base in Amran and even traveled to the base shortly after the Huthi takeover to declare the government was in control, which was clearly not the case. Indeed, Hadi, while close to Ali Mohsen, had never been a supporter of Islah and may have tried to use Huthis to weaken Islah, assuming the Huthis would never threaten his rule (Lackner 2017). If this was the case, he was gravely mistaken.

In the midst of the takeover, the Hadi government signed a National Peace and Partnership Agreement (PNPA) with the Huthis, an accord that halted fighting while calling for greater inclusion in the government and for non-state actors to return captured territory to state control. On paper, the agreement righted some of the wrongs of the transition, particularly by mandating greater inclusion, but the government was essentially forced to sign it at gun point. The die was cast for war.

Both the Hadi government and the Huthis accused the other side of violating the agreement. By January, the Huthis had put Hadi and his government under house arrest after the president attempted to move forward with a constitutional referendum that included six-part federalism, which the Huthis had long warned they rejected. On February 6, the rebels formally overthrew the government through a "constitutional announcement" that established a "revolutionary council" along with other authorities to run the government. Hadi escaped house arrest and fled to Aden on February 25, where he tried to mount a resistance. In response, Huthi/Saleh forces bombed the presidential palace in the port city and Hadi fled to Oman a month after arriving in Aden, calling on the Saudis to intervene. In March, the Saudis announced an Arab coalition to push back Huthi advances and reinstall Hadi's government.

*Explaining the Descent into War:  
Faulty Pacts and Structural Constraints*

Two sets of factors seem to have played an outsized role in thwarting the possibility of reform and leading to a collapse into civil war. The first pertains to problems with the elite pact, which incentivized Saleh to renege and ultimately join the Huthis to overturn the transition. The second comprise historical legacies surrounding state- and nation-building, that made democratic transition particularly challenging.

Yemen's transition was made possible by an elite pact between Saleh's GPC on one hand and the JMP opposition bloc, plus regime defectors like Ali Mohsen, on the other. Without a power-sharing agreement between these two sides, specifically one that gave Saleh a face-saving exit, the alternative was civil war. The elite pact had many faults that eventually led to violent conflict. Among them is the exclusion of increasingly powerful regional constituencies, like the Huthis and Hiraak. The pact also failed to serve its primary function. That is, to contain elite competition long enough for a broader political/economic agreement to form through the NDC. Such an agreement could have allowed for a process of electoral democracy to emerge and democratic consolidation to begin.

The pact failed primarily because its signatories had widely divergent interpretations of the agreement and there was no mechanism capable of adjudicating disputes or holding both sides to account. When the agreement was negotiated, pragmatists in the GPC, the leadership of the JMP, and the international community—namely Saudi Arabia, the U.S., the UK, and the EU—sold the initiative to Saleh as a “no victor, no vanquished” agreement. After it was signed, Saleh and his close supporters interpreted the pact as a marginal change to the power structure, while their opponents viewed the spirit of the agreement as mandating a rapid curtailment of Saleh's and the GPC's power. Saleh also assumed that Hadi, who was a GPC member, would take his side in the power struggle. The former president however was mistaken. It soon became clear that Hadi had his own ambitions and was aligned more with Islah and Mohsen than he was with Saleh's faction of the GPC. By year two of implementation, Saleh and his supporters—who at that time were the group most capable of upending the transition—decided that their core interests would no longer be protected by the agreement.

Whether or not the agreement could have been amended to allow

more time for an inclusive agreement over power sharing through the NDC is debatable. One step that could have improved chances would have been if Hadi and the government had formed the interpretation committee, a body that was part of the original accord and tasked with settling disputes over the agreement's meaning and its implementation mechanisms. The interpretation committee would have been the only Yemeni body able to adjudicate disputes. Hadi never appointed the committee and was never pressed to do so by an international community, particularly the UN, the U.S., the UK, and the EU, who were all focused almost blindly on strengthening the new president against Saleh. The U.S. in particular was focused on counter-terrorism priorities, to the detriment of the transition's viability. Hadi gave the U.S. permission to dramatically expand its drone strikes against al-Qaeda, something the U.S. routinely praised. The focus on counter-terrorism likely played a role in Washington's reticence to criticize Hadi's actions, even when it directly violated the accord (for more on the tension between these conflicting priorities in U.S. policy, see Sarah Yerkes's chapter in this volume).

Other options for improving the elite bargain would have come with significant risks. If the agreement, in either substance or practice, had moved more slowly to remove Saleh loyalists from power, it could have led to a relapse of popular protest or to subversion by Islah/Ali Mohsen/al-Ahmars, who were all capable of using force to push for additional changes. A potentially better option promoted by a wide range of Yemeni politicians at the time, but repeatedly ignored by Western diplomats and UN officials, was the suggestion that the agreement remove from politics and indeed from Yemen for a set period of time a group of core elites, including Saleh, Ali Mohsen, and Hameed al-Ahmar, one of ten al-Ahmar brothers and a member of Islah who is reviled by Saleh's GPC. Such a move, the argument went, had precedence in Yemen's history and would have reduced the personal nature of the political struggle and therefore allow the transition a better chance of success. According to many Yemenis, this would have been a solution tailored to the needs of their political system. Yet, internationals repeatedly said that supporting the resignation of individuals from politics was beyond their mandate. Instead, they were quick to intervene on other issues, including sanctioning Saleh and Huthi leader Abdulmalik al-Huthi in 2015, insisting that the NDC adhere to international norms of inclusion, and, in the case of the U.S., encouraging the government to accept dramatically increased drone attacks against suspected terrorists.



In their seminal work on transitions in Latin America, Guillermo O'Donnell and Philippe Schmitter argued that pacts must protect the interests of key elite players or these groups will sabotage the transition (O'Donnell and Schmitter 1986). There is much to critique their ahistorical approach to democratic transitions, but in the case of the viability of Yemen's elite bargain, their observation held true. The core interests of a key elite group—Saleh and his supporters—were unmet and that faction chose to upend the transition.

Even if the elite pact had held together, the road to competitive elections and democratic consolidation would have been fraught. The weight of historical legacies related to the country's patterns of state-building and festering disputes over national identity weighed heavily on the chances of success. Looking at the trajectory of Arab states following the 2011 uprisings, Stephen J. King (2020, 15), argues that in addition to managing the challenges of forging new military, political and socioeconomic agreements associated with democratization, many Arab countries also had to grapple with issue of national identity and building a modern state: "The nation-building and state-building challenges complicated and sometimes overwhelmed the other elements of democratic pact-making." This was very much the case in Yemen.

Many of the demands of Yemen's protestors as well as the participants in the NDC revolved around building a modern state capable of controlling all of Yemen's territory and providing reliable security, services, and economic opportunities to citizens. That is, a state that could replace citizens' dependence on tribal alliances and a highly fragmented and corrupt security sector. The legacy of state-building under the Saleh regime made this shift particularly difficult. Saleh presided over a neo-patrimonial autocracy in which he extended and withheld access to wealth, employment, and services to secure political loyalties. Networks of tribally and regionally based patronage produced and transferred power, not formal state institutions. In practice, the state's ability to control all of its territory or provide services and employment opportunities in a standardized way was intentionally curtailed as part of the logic of regime survival. The security services were intentionally fragmented to prevent coups and were constructed around personal and tribal loyalties that privileged the Hashid confederation in general, and the president's Sanhan tribe in particular (Alley 2010; Phillips 2008).

The failure to address state-building challenges after 2011 was in part a product of political parties focusing their energies on fighting over access to jobs and control in the capital, essentially reshuffling

patronage rather than responding to demands of the protestors for reform. For the Islah/Mohsin/Hadi alliance, it was a chance to push Saleh out of the central patron role and to reshuffle access around their alliance. It was also a function of the complexity of state-building challenges that even well-intentioned elites would have had difficulty in overcoming. When the transition government failed to overcome these legacies, it was immediately vulnerable to waning popular support and to groups like the Huthis and parts of the Hiraak, who eventually violently challenged a process they viewed as fundamentally flawed from the beginning, albeit for their own specific reasons.

Issues of national identity were arguably even more detrimental to the success of the transition period. Dankwart Rostow (1970) proposed that democracy is not possible in the absence of national unity. The vast majority of citizens, he held, should have no doubt about the political community to which they belong. Other scholars have argued that democracy is possible in countries that lack national unity, but that preventing a descent into violence is a challenge that requires specific institutional compromises, notably around federal models (Laitin 1995).

The proximate cause of Yemen's civil war was lack of agreement on how to define and structure political community. Both the Huthis and the majority of the Hiraak rejected a six-part federal model proposed by the NDC's special committee. When Hadi attempted to move forward with a constitutional referendum that included the six-part proposal, the Huthis toppled the government, accelerating a move to war.

The reason for Huthi and Hiraak opposition were different. The Huthis support Yemeni unity, although they claimed during the transition period to be open to federal models. They objected to a six-part division that would have confined their strongholds to territories without resources or access to the sea. For the Hiraak, this issue was fundamentally different because many in this group view Yemeni unity as a failed project. During the NDC, Hiraaki moderates proposed a period of two-part, north-south federalism for a number of years, followed by vote on southern independence. Others who did not join the NDC demanded immediate separation. Although Saleh's GPC and Islah both accepted the six-part federalism, they were initially skeptical and the leadership of both parties maintain a preference for a strong central government.

Yemenis are deeply divided on the issue of what people should be part of the Yemeni state and what structure that state should take. The future of the south is the most politically divisive issue with a large per-

centage of southerners viewing themselves as part of a separate nation. But issues of national disunity do not stop there. Within both the north and the south, subregional identities are strong and often overlap with religious, socioeconomic, and political divides that strengthen narratives of uniqueness (Dresch 2000; Chaudhry 1997). This is the case for example with Hadhramaut, an area with a distinct political, social, and economic history where many citizens often see themselves as part of a separate community struggling to maintain autonomy from both Sanaa and Aden. In the north, locals in predominantly Sunni/Shafai areas like Marib, Taiz, and Tihama resent historic domination by the northern Zaydi highlanders (al-Iryani 2020).

Finally, there is a struggle over the type of political community and in particular the place of religion in politics. Many Yemenis suspect that the Huthis want to revert to a religious autocracy similar to the imamate that ruled Yemen for a millennium prior to the 1962 revolution. The imamate gave privileged status to Hashemites, or descendants of the prophet. The Huthis vehemently deny this claim and put forward a vision in the NDC that supports democracy. But in practice they have acted in ways that give ample reason for skeptics to question their intentions. For example, much of their leadership is Hashemite, their religious speeches preference Hashemite rule, and they have repressed religious freedom (most notably with the Baha'i community) and political dissent in areas they control.

On the other side of the equation, various Sunni Islamists want their version of Islam to play an important role in guiding social norms and shaping the future polity. These include Islah, a predominantly Sunni Islamist group, which participates in democratic elections and seeks to encourage conservative social norms. Many Islah supporters vilified the Huthis as Iranian puppets, a label that intentionally removes the rebels from the Yemeni political milieu of groups that can and should be bargained with. Then there are violent jihadi groups like al-Qaeda and Islamic State, who completely eschew democracy altogether and seek to impose a religious order. Caught in between these are a variety of non-Islamist groups and parties, including some members of the GPC, the socialists, and Nasserists, as well as independent youth and civil society activists, who worry that both the Huthis and Sunni Islamists pose a grave threat to any rights-based, democratic society.

Yemen's transition period ultimately collapsed under the weight of continued elite infighting and the tripartite challenges of democratization, state-building, and nation-building. The elite actors who origi-

nally signed the GCC initiative laid the groundwork for their own demise, fighting with each other over the spoils of the state in the capital, while new, excluded political actors, particularly in the far north (the Huthis) and the south (groups affiliated with the Hiraak), gained strength. When issues of national identity could not be resolved by the NDC, the battle moved from political competition to violent conflict.

## Regionalized Civil War: 2015 to the Present<sup>5</sup>

### *Chronology of the War*

The Saudi military intervention marked a new phase of conflict. From that point on, what had started as a civil war was reshaped and amplified by regional dynamics, as indicated in the chapters by Toby Matthiesen and Abbass Milani in this volume. Saudi Arabia views the Huthis as a proxy of their rival, Iran, and they framed the intervention as part of a larger effort to roll back Tehran's influence in the region. Iranian support or not, the Huthis—who espouse Iranian-inspired, anti-American/Saudi/Israeli rhetoric—were unlikely to allow Riyadh to continue its kingmaker role in Yemen as it had in the past. As such, the intervention was likely driven in part by an interest in protecting the Kingdom's privileged influence over its restive southern neighbor.

The timing of the intervention overlapped with dramatic changes inside the Kingdom as well, as outlined in Michael Herb's contribution to this volume. In January 2015, King Abdullah passed away, giving authority to his brother, King Salman, whose reign saw the meteoric rise of his son, Mohammed bin Salman (MBS). At its inception, the conflict was very much MBS's war, an opportunity for the young defense minister to rally his country against the Iranian threat, possibly distract from changes at home that marginalized MBS's domestic rivals, and prove himself on the battlefield. Saudis expected a quick victory. Now in its seventh year, the war has been anything but that.

Initially, the Huthis/Saleh alliance was seemingly poised to control most if not all of the country, notwithstanding a brutal Saudi-led air

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5. This section draws heavily from fieldwork conducted in Yemen and the Arab Gulf states, including Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Oman, from 2015 to 2020 as part of the author's work with the International Crisis Group. See Crisis Group (2016, 2020).

campaign, made possible by weapons sales and logistical support from the United States, and strong pockets of local resistance in areas like Marib and the south. This changed in July and August 2015, when the UAE supported local southern fighters to push the Huthi/Saleh alliance out of Aden and the territories of former South Yemen.

The eviction of the Huthi/Saleh alliance from Aden allowed the Hadi government to claim the port city as its temporary capital. It also set the south on a different trajectory. UAE-supported paramilitary forces—known as the Security Belt in Aden, Lahj, and Abyan, and as the Elite Forces in Hadramout and Shewba—were useful in both pushing back the Huthis and in fighting al-Qaeda, but they have also set the south on a path more friendly to separation. These forces are closely associated with the Southern Transition Council (STC), formed in 2017 as a kind of government in waiting. While the leadership of the STC is technically drawn from all seven southern governorates, leaders from al-Dalia and Lahj—areas with historic animosity toward Abyan and Shebwa—are widely perceived by Yemenis to have the most influence inside the organization. Like their UAE sponsors, the STC is vehemently opposed to Islah, which they view as a northern party bent on occupying the south.

There were other notable turning points as well. In December 2017, the Huthis killed their erstwhile ally, Saleh, when he attempted to defect from their coalition. Saleh's death dashed GPC hopes of wresting control of Sanaa from the Huthis and propelled greater Huthi consolidation of networks once dominated by Saleh in the north. Saleh's death also reinforced a fight for the Red Sea coast and the Tihama, as his nephew, Tareq Saleh, escaped from Sanaa and aligned with the UAE-backed fighters to attempt to capture the vital port of Hodeida in 2018. In the spring and summer of 2018, UAE-aligned forces on the Red Sea coast made significant gains, coming within striking distance of the port. The UAE, along with its Saudi and Yemeni allies, had hoped that a Huthi defeat in Hodeida would turn the tide in the north, forcing the Huthis to negotiate from a weaker position or even opening the way for an assault on Sanaa.

But the UN-brokered Stockholm Agreement of 2018 thwarted these ambitions, halting the attack and along with it the potentially devastating humanitarian consequences of a fight over the port of Hodeida. With the option of capturing Hodeida closed, international public opinion sharply critical of the war, and tensions with Iran heating up in the Gulf of Oman in the spring of 2019, the UAE shifted course. It announced a redeployment of its forces from Yemen in the summer.

The UAE redeployment was a significant change of events that limited the military options for the Saudi coalition. It faced increasing financial pressures at home, the redeployment of its main coalition ally from Yemen, and growing uncertainty surrounding the U.S. security umbrella, following a series of attacks on shipping and then on Saudi oil facilities that were widely attributed to Iran in 2019. Thus, Saudi Arabia began actively seeking an exit from the war. It revived direct channels with the Huthis in the fall of 2019, which led to a significant reduction in cross-border attacks and ground fighting for several months. Riyadh also negotiated an agreement in November 2019 between the Hadi government and the STC, the Riyadh Agreement, which halted—or at least delayed—a war within a war over control of the south.

Initiating the intervention has predictably proven easier than ending it. The tide shifted once again toward escalation in January 2020 when the Huthis, citing lack of tangible progress in the Saudi backchannel in ending the war and lifting access restriction on their areas, made gains in the north in areas that had been stalemated for over four years. Between January and March, they took territory in eastern Sanaa and al-Jawf and western Marib, putting them on the cusp of an assault on Marib city, an oil-rich area and the government's main stronghold in the north. In September and October 2021, they made further gains, capturing strategic areas in the central governorate of Baydah and three districts in northern Shebwa, which opened the opportunity for an assault on Marib from the south. Yet a surprise redeployment of UAE-aligned Yemeni forces from positions around Hodeida city in November 2021, freed up Amalika fighters who retook northern Shebwa in January 2022. In doing so, they staved off a potential Huthi takeover of Marib. As of the writing of this chapter, the battle for Marib is ongoing and, like Aden and Hodeida were before, it could be another significant turning point.

### *New Actors, Territorial Fragmentation, and Autocratic Retrenchment*

The war is still unfolding, yet certain trends in Yemen's emerging political order are clear. Fighting has empowered a new set of political actors. The main losers have been traditional political parties and power centers, most notably Saleh's GPC and his wider network, but also Ali Mohsen, the al-Ahmar family, and even the leadership of Islah, which is located outside the country. The former ruling party, the GPC,

is a shadow of itself, now divided into at least four groups: One under the thumb of the Huthis in Sanaa; one supportive of Hadi in Riyadh; another aligned with the Saleh family; and others not aligned with any of these, based mostly in Cairo. The main winners have been armed movements like the Huthis and parts of the separatist movement, both of which were marginalized in the previous transition period.

While the war started between two main blocs—the Huthi/Saleh coalition, loosely backed by Iran, and the Hadi government and its allies backed by Saudi Arabia—these coalitions have fractured over time, resulting in roughly five main power centers on the ground. As of the writing of this chapter, the Huthis control the northern highlands and are the most cohesive political grouping and powerful military bloc. The Huthis inherited the largest and most capable parts of the military-security apparatus under Saleh. They are also the heirs to what remains of state institutions based in Sanaa, including the bulk of civil servants. They preside over an increasingly fierce and capable police state that, using the war as a cover, provides few services and is increasingly intolerant of dissent.

The Huthis rely heavily on parallel organizations to control state institutions and run the war effort. After capturing Sanaa in 2014, a revolutionary committee headed by Mohammed Ali al-Huthi acted as a *de facto* head of state and they used networks of *mushrefin* (supervisors) within ministries to oversee the day-to-day bureaucracy, ostensibly to fight against corruption. This changed somewhat in 2017, when the Huthis formed a National Salvation Government (NSG) in partnership with the GPC. As part of that power-sharing agreement, they disbanded the revolutionary committee, although it functioned for some months after. The *mushrefin* system has to some extent been absorbed into state institutions, with many supervisors taking on official posts, if they did not already have them. However, at the governorate level, the *mushrefin* system remains highly influential.<sup>6</sup>

After killing Saleh in 2017, the Huthis have increasingly consolidated power in the north. They have placed their supporters in senior positions in the military-security apparatus and bureaucracy, while maintaining parallel institutions. Those closest to their spiritual and political leader, Abdulmalik al-Huthi, wield the most influence and they populate important government posts, including the presidency,

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6. Author interview with Sana'a Centre for Strategic Studies scholar Abdulghani al-Iryani, July 2021.

the director of the president's office, the minister of interior, the chief of staff, regional military commands, and the leadership of the security services. The GPC and other political parties still hold ministerial posts, such as that of prime minister and foreign minister, but decision-making lies squarely with the Huthis.

In addition to placing their partisans in state institutions and retiring many GPC affiliates, the Huthis have also established entirely new agencies and institutions staffed by their partisans that allow them to control critical financial resources. For example, in 2019, they established the Supreme Council for the Management and Coordination of Humanitarian Aid (SCMCHA), effectively removing this portfolio from the Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation. They have also formed an agency for Zakat (an Islamic tax) and Waqf (religious endowments) that in effect curtail the authorities of the Ministry of Awqaf (religious endowments) and allow the Huthis to control significant financial resources.<sup>7</sup>

The anti-Huthi side of the equation by contrast is deeply fragmented and consists of at least four distinct areas of control. The internationally recognized government is mostly a government in exile. President Hadi and Vice President Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar are based in Riyadh, rarely visiting Yemen. Other ministers spend their time between Cairo and Riyadh. After the Huthi/Saleh alliance forces were pushed out of Aden in 2015, the Hadi government claimed the port city as its temporary capital and tried, largely unsuccessfully, to establish government institutions there. In many ways, this effort was starting from scratch as the headquarters for all ministries (and most of their staff and technical know-how) were located in Sanaa during Saleh's rule. The government has yet to establish full control over Aden or to carry out effective service delivery there or in other areas they nominally control, a fact that has benefited the Huthis politically.

Despite the government's largely absentee status, a significant area of the country falls under its influence as a product of its relationship with local allies. In the north, the Hadi government and its local allies—particular local tribal leaders as well as Islah party affiliates—control a crescent-shaped arch around the Huthi-dominated highlands that is comprised of predominantly Shafai/Sunni areas, including portions of al-Jawf, Marib, and al-Bayda governorates and part of Taiz city. These

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7. Author interview with Sana'a Centre for Strategic Studies scholar Abdulghani al-Iryani, July 2021.



areas harbor a historical resentment to being dominated by Sanaa, both during the time of the imamate and during Saleh's rule, which was often seen by opponents as disproportionately dominated by northern Zaydi highlanders from the Hashid confederation (of which Saleh was a part) (Dawsari 2017). Marib—politically and developmentally marginalized under Saleh—has been the relative success story within the area of Government of Yemen influence. Its charismatic governor, Sheikh Sultan al-Aradah, has been able to bring together local tribesmen and to work in coordination with Islah, the national army and the Saudi coalition to defend the city against the Huthis. He has also focused on strengthening local government. As part of a deal with the Hadi government, Marib keeps 20 percent of its oil and gas resources, which it uses to pay state employees and to support a functioning judiciary (Baron 2018).

In the south, the government also has pockets of influence. Its allies are dominant in northern Hadhramaut and parts of al-Mahra, Shebwa, and Abyan. Hadhramaut and al-Mahra, in Yemen's far east, have close ties with Saudi Arabia and Oman respectively. They are far removed geographically and socio-culturally from the capital, Sanaa, and even from Aden, the political center of gravity in the south. Hadhramaut, Yemen's largest governorate by land mass and an area with a strong sense of a separate national identity, is divided between the northern wadi and the coastal plains. It has an influential expatriate community which sends remittances home, historically allowing the governorate some financial autonomy. The Hadi government's influence in Hadhramaut is located in the wadi, where military units associated with the army are positioned. The government also has local allies in Shebwa and Abyan, two areas known by southerners as Bedouin regions, in contrast to the tribal hinterland of Lahj and al-Dalia around Aden. Hadi and many in his inner circle hail from Abyan.

Apart from the Hadi government's areas of influence, there are three other centers of control associated with Saudi Arabia's main coalition partner, the UAE. Abu Dhabi views political Islam and particularly the Muslim Brotherhood as an existential threat and over time it has supported a number of anti-Islah (Islah contains Yemen's version of the Brotherhood) political groups in Yemen who now control large swaths of territory. Local authorities and UAE-backed paramilitary forces are dominant in coastal Hadramaut, whose regional capital is Mukallah. They are concerned with protecting Hadrami autonomy from any group that may threaten it, including the Yemeni government and arguably even the STC.

The UAE-aligned separatist Southern Transition Council (STC) is the dominant entity in Aden and its immediate hinterland, including Lahj, al-Dalia, and parts of western Abyan. While the STC's security services enjoy a preponderance of force in these areas, they have not assumed primary responsibility for service delivery or running non-security related governance institutions. Infighting between the STC and the Hadi government have hindered any efforts to provide predictable governance in these territories. On three occasions, STC aligned forces have clashed with the government: January 2018, when they fought inconclusive battles; in August 2019 when the STC pushed Hadi aligned forces out of the city; and again, in the spring of 2020 when the STC declared self-administration in Aden and surrounding territories (which it later retracted), triggering clashes. In December 2020, as part of the Riyadh Agreement, the STC joined the Hadi government in a new cabinet, but tensions remain high and neither side has been willing to implement the security components of the deal that would see an integration of forces.

On the Red Sea coast—a distinct geographic and political area known as the Tihama—the UAE supports former President Saleh's nephew, Tareq Saleh, who controls territory along the coast from the strategic Bab al-Mandeb to al-Khawkhah, south of Hodeida. Tareq leads the Joint Forces, which includes the Guards of the Republic, the heirs of elite units associated with the Saleh regime; the Giants Brigades, a predominantly southern force commanded by Salafist fighters; and the Tihama resistance, who are local forces from the Tihama region. Saleh has refused to declare allegiance to Hadi, although he and his forces coordinate on security and governance issues with the Hadi-appointed authorities in Taiz and Hodeidah. The Tihama was a stronghold of the GPC prior to the war and many Yemenis speculate that Saleh is trying to carve out a territorial base there for a new version of the party in postwar Yemen.

The division of the country into roughly five areas of control is tied to domestic political trends and patterns of state- and nation-building. The divide between north and south is rooted in Yemen's recent history of two states. As the above section shows, within both the former north and south, there are strong subregional identities that often overlap with social-economic and/or confessional divides. When the NDC failed to resolve disputes over the boundaries of political community peacefully, the struggle turned violent. In effect, war has implemented the general consensus of the NDC—that Yemen should be a decentral-

ized polity based on some number of federal divisions. Each of the five main areas that exist today can find raw material to support a narrative of unique political community. The division into five is not the only outcome possible and further fragmentation could occur. Alternatively, temporary consolidation could happen. But what looks increasingly unlikely is a victory for one stakeholder over all of Yemen's territory and with it a rapid recentralization of military and economic power under Sanaa or Aden.

Finally, across Yemen's areas of control there appears to be a trend toward authoritarian entrenchment. The war provides a justification for various authorities and leaders to use heavy-handed security measures against suspected enemies and political opponents. A comparative examination of governance institutions across the five areas is beyond the scope of this chapter. But in general, the conflict has strengthened the hand of armed groups who have violently suppressed political dissent and undermined rule of law in areas they control, while weakening constituencies who have advocated for these principles. The Huthis, the STC, and government-affiliated forces all stand accused of egregious human rights abuses, including illegal detention, unlawful killing, and torture. There is a widespread pattern of repression of journalists in particular (UNSC Panel of Experts Report, January 2021). Meanwhile, the youth and civil society activists who led the 2011 protest movement have lost political ground and influence to the various armed groups. Some have joined the fight. Others back the Hadi government from afar, viewing it as a deeply imperfect symbol of the state and what was Yemen's transition process.

### *The Role of External Actors*

Regional states have played a significant role in determining the shape of fragmentation and the new political winners and losers, especially since 2015. External interference in Yemen is nothing new and Saudi Arabia in particular has a long history of influence in the country's internal affairs. But the scale and nature of its intervention has been unprecedented (Lackner 2017). External military intervention has also gone beyond the Kingdom, drawing in Iran and the UAE, both of which had limited engagement in Yemeni affairs prior to the war. To a much lesser extent, Qatar and Turkey have provided financial and political support to Islah and allegedly to Islamist fighters, particularly in Taiz.

By far Saudi Arabia has been the most influential external actor. It

has spent more than others on the conflict, has significant leverage over the Yemeni allies, and has effectively framed the war internationally, backing UN Security Council Resolution 2216 in 2015. The resolution has justified the military intervention, affirmed the Hadi government as the internationally recognized authority, and effectively demanded Huthi surrender.

Saudi policy-makers argue that the net effect of their intervention has been to limit Huthi expansion and to preserve the Yemeni government. To some extent they are correct. It is difficult to see how the Yemeni government would have survived without Riyadh's military, financial, and political support. It has also helped support one side of the old regime, Ali Mohsen and the al-Ahmars, as well as the senior leadership of the Islah party by giving them sanctuary in Riyadh, as well as diplomatic and financial support. A brutal air campaign led by the Saudis and facilitated by U.S., UK, and French arms sales and other military assistance has also played an important role. The campaign thwarted Huthi territorial advances and helped preserve pockets of control outside of the highlands in areas like Marib, Taiz city, al-Baydah, and in the former south.

But the net effect of the Saudi military intervention is more complex and in some cases it has had the opposite effect of intended policy. More than undermining the Huthis, the air war has arguably strengthened them in the far north. At the beginning of the conflict, it ensured that Saleh and his allies remained on the Huthi side against what was perceived in the north as a war against foreign intervention and wanton destruction of civilian infrastructure. Even after Saleh's death, the devastation caused by Saudi airstrikes has helped ensure that tribal and political groups in the north, who may otherwise have turned against the Huthis, have remained with them or at least stayed neutral.<sup>8</sup>

Saudi Arabia's efforts to marginalize, even punish, Saleh for joining the Huthis in 2015 backfired spectacularly, undermining the main political coalition (the GPC) in the north that could have challenged the rebels in the northern highlands. At the beginning of the war, Saleh and his supporters were as much or more of a target of airstrikes as the

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8. Another reason many tribal leaders have remained neutral in the war is their fear of Huthi retaliation against them if they support the coalition. There is a perception among some sheikhs that the coalition does not have the ability or the will to back up potential partners on the ground if they challenge the Huthis.

Huthis. From 2015 until Saleh's death in 2017, the Saudis attempted to pull Saleh's tribal and political supporters to the Hadi camp, with only limited success, and they resisted attempts by the former president to abandon the Huthis and switch sides. After Saleh's assassination, there seems to have been a thawing of relations between Saudi Arabia and at least part of the Saleh family, including Tareq Saleh. But the damage to Saleh's military and political networks—now mostly absorbed by the Huthis in the north—and to the GPC, was done.

Riyadh's main coalition partner, the UAE, has also shaped the course of the war and current political realities, but in profoundly different ways. More than the Saudis, the UAE was successful in supporting Yemeni fighters, rolling back Huthi territorial control in the south and along the Red Sea coast. While Abu Dhabi and Riyadh agreed on the strategic priority of pushing back Huthi gains and limiting Iranian influence, over the course of the war their strategies for doing so and indeed their priorities have diverged and even collided in practice. For the UAE, the Muslim Brotherhood poses as much if not a greater existential threat than Iran. They view Islah as part of an Islamist agenda in the region, associated with Qatar and Turkey, and as such a group to be contained. The UAE views the Hadi/Ali Mohsen side of the government as both incompetent and dangerously associated with political Islam.

As such, the UAE has worked to ensure that non-Islah/Hadi-oriented groups have a foothold on the ground. In the south, they have supported the STC and its affiliated military-security forces, setting the south more firmly on a potential path to separation. UAE officials say they are not pro-separation and indeed their choice to align with fighters associated with the Hiraak from al-Dalia and Yafea appear to have been motivated by expediency rather than any commitment to separation. But in effect, UAE actions have supported aspirations for southern statehood by building units on the ground with the capacity to fight for this cause. On the Red Sea coast, they have helped carve out a place for a part of the fragmented GPC and the military networks once aligned with Saleh to regroup around Tareq. They have focused their attention on the south and the Red Sea, areas of the county particularly important to maritime security and have built local allies there that have clear anti-Muslim Brotherhood leanings.

While Saudi Arabia and the UAE diverge in their engagement with Islah, both have facilitated the rise of a variety of Salafi-oriented militias to fight the Huthis. The root causes of the conflict between Salafis and the Huthis, especially in Saada governorate, dates back decades.

But the UAE and the KSA (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia) have poured fuel on the fire of this fight. Both have found Salafis to be dedicated fighters against Huthi opponents. The KSA has funded and mobilized Salafi militias to fight along its border with Yemen. The UAE supports Salafi groups, some aligned with the STC paramilitary forces and others who populate the Amalika (Giants) brigades along the Red Sea coast. Those on the Red Sea coast are mostly southerners from Yafa (a tribal areas that spans parts of Lahj and Ayban). It is unclear what will become of newly mobilized Salafi fighters (most of whom were quietist Salafis prior to conflict) in a postwar context. Many Yemenis worry that the thousands of religiously motivated fighters on both the Huthi and anti-Huthi side will perpetuate rounds of sectarian-tinged conflict long after the war formally ends.

Iran too has intervened to shape the course of the conflict. Its support to the Huthis is multifaceted and has seen a rapid expansion over the course of the conflict. Iran provides the Huthis with political, diplomatic, and moral support, including through official statements and visits to Tehran by Huthi representatives, support for the Huthi media outlet, al-Masira, and in 2020 by appointing Hassan Irlu, a Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps commander as ambassador to Sanaa. (Irlu passed away in 2021 and has not been replaced.) It also provides military support, including high-tech military equipment, training, and advice (UNSC Panel of Experts Report on Yemen, January 2021).

Tehran has invested little in comparison with Saudi Arabia, but it has conscientiously stoked Saudi fears to keep their enemy bogged down in Yemen. Iranian politicians cheer the Huthis on publicly and at times the Huthis have closely cooperated in Iran's efforts to pressurize the Kingdom militarily. This was most clear in the September 2019 Aramco attack, which the Huthis immediately claimed, but which is widely attributed to Iran. While the Huthis say they retain decision-making authority and some in the movement are deeply skeptical of Iranian intentions in Yemen, their members acknowledge a growing relationship with Tehran.

Iranian support has no doubt improved Huthi military capacities, especially in developing their drone and missile programs, which they use to target Saudi Arabia. More importantly, it has served to extend and deepen the conflict. Ending the war is now closely tied to the issue of the Huthis providing assurances to Riyadh that they can and will curtail their relationship Iran, adding yet another complicated negotiation layer to an already tangled mix.

The toxic regional battle between Iran and Saudi Arabia has also stoked sectarian narratives inside of Yemen. While Yemen has never had a Shia versus Sunni divide, there are confessional tensions between Zaydis and Shafais that often overlap with political and economic divisions of the country. Many in the anti-Huthi camp worry that the Huthis want to reimpose a religious autocracy that discriminates against non-Hashemites. With the layering of the Iranian–Saudi struggle onto that fear, these same critics view the Huthis as Iranian puppets, claiming not only that they want to revive the discriminatory policies of the imamate but also that they are drawing closer to Twelver Shiism doctrinally. The Huthis deny this, but similarly stoke sectarian divisions by conflating local opposition with al-Qaeda or even Islamic State.

## Conclusion

Yemen's political landscape has changed dramatically over the last ten years, and not in a way that bodes well for the chances of more accountable, participatory national government or even stable autocracy in the near term. The war has empowered armed groups who in practice actively suppress dissent and pluralism, while marginalizing constituencies advocating for good governance and accountability. Saudi Arabia, Iran, and the UAE are the most important regional actors; none has an interest in democracy promotion. Meanwhile the U.S. has demonstrated a lack of any specific Yemen policy. Notwithstanding President Joseph Biden's decision to end support for the war in February 2021, the U.S. has shown a persistent tendency to defer to Saudi preferences while continuing to pursue counter-terrorism objectives when possible.

Most importantly, Yemen's dual challenges of state- and nation-building have become more acute. Any potential new government will face an economy decimated by conflict. Institutions are fragmented, to include two central banks and numerous military forces. The thorny issue of the status of the south remains deeply divisive, including among southerners. The main difference now is that there is no center of gravity in Sanaa capable of holding the country together. Saleh and his non-ideological, patronage-based GPC imperfectly performed this function in the past. But the new power brokers in Sanaa, the Huthis, have a narrower social base, and are perceived widely by Yemenis outside the highlands as a Zaydi, sectarian-based movement that is unwell-

come in other parts of the country. Moreover, the secessionist STC now has effective control of territory in the south, as well as the military capability to make a serious bid for independence. On top of this, semi-autonomous areas in Marib and Hadhramaut, and Tareq Saleh's forces in Mocha are unlikely to willingly relinquish autonomy to a new central government if they do not see they have a stake in it.

The story of contestation over Yemen's political future is unique, but it also echoes some of the broader themes of this volume and provides comparative lessons. First, it is a cautionary tale for states that face simultaneous challenges of democratization, and state- and nation-building. Similar challenges arise in other countries, notably Sudan, as Khalid Medani explains in his chapter in this volume. Yemen is an extreme manifestation of how structural challenges—weak formal state institutions and unresolved issues over nationhood—played a role in overwhelming a moment of transition. The country's Arab Spring protestors and a wide array of stakeholders participating in the national dialogue demanded improved governance and state capacity. Core to their demands was a modern state capable of controlling its territory and providing services, economic opportunities, and equal citizenship. Yet the country's recent history of state-building proved to be a formidable obstacle. Under Saleh, formal institutions were weak, while highly personalized networks of regionally and tribally based patronage were the main locus of power. When Yemen's political elite used the transition to reshuffle patronage networks, as opposed to pursuing reform and improving economic conditions for average Yemenis, they were immediately vulnerable to popular backlash, which Saleh and the Huthis capitalized on. Even well-intended attempts at reform would have faced an uphill battle given the challenge of balancing the expectation of patronage from powerful elites against popular demands that run counter to those interests.

The issue of unresolved nationhood was equally important. Yemenis are deeply divided over what people should constitute the nation and what structure the state should take, federal or otherwise. Many southerners view themselves as a separate nation. Within both the north and south, there are strong subregional identities that overlap with socioeconomic and confessional divides. While the national dialogue began to forge agreement around a federal model, important details including agreement on the number of federal units and the specifics of resource-sharing remained unresolved. When the transitional government attempted to push forward a six-part federal proposal without



consensus, it triggered the war. In this volume, David Patel's chapter on Iraq shows how political institutions have proven remarkably durable despite weak consensus over political community. Yet in Yemen, disputes over political community overwhelmed a moment of democratic transition before new institutional arrangements could be tested.

Finally, and as explored in more detail in the last section of the volume, Arab Spring outcomes have been profoundly shaped by a diverse set of regional players seeking to protect their national interests by shaping their near abroad. Toby Matthiesen's argument that the "Arab Counter Revolution" alliance led by Saudi Arabia and the UAE have been primarily concerned with implementing anti-democratic policies had particular resonance in Yemen's transition from 2012 to 2014. The GCC initiative was an attempt to tame more sweeping demands for democratic change and accountability. But Yemen's case also uncovers differences within the alliance, particularly when it comes to threat perceptions related to Iran and the Muslim Brotherhood. Both Saudi Arabia and the UAE view the Huthis as dangerously close to Iran and as such a potential threat to their national security interests, especially given their position on Saudi Arabia's southern border and along international waterways. But in practice, the UAE has prioritized containing the Muslim Brotherhood, while Saudi Arabia has been almost exclusively focused on the Huthis (and by extension the Iranian) threat along its border. Saudi Arabia has worked closely with Islahi leaders and affiliates on the ground in areas like Marib and Taiz to push back the Huthis. By contrast, Abu Dhabi has its own networks of anti-Huthi fighters in the south and along the Red Sea coast that are distinctly anti-Muslim Brotherhood. In practice, these differing approaches have contributed to Yemen's territorial and political fragmentation.

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## 13 | U.S. Influence on Arab Regimes

### From Reluctant Democracy Supporter to Authoritarian Enabler

*Sarah Yerkes*

Democracy promotion has been a long-standing objective of U.S. foreign policy. Indeed, America's role as the shining "city upon a hill" has shaped its foreign policy through decades of war and peace. President George W. Bush championed democracy promotion as a way to counter the ideological extremism that led to the 9/11 terror attacks against the United States. President Barack Obama sought to repair relations with the Muslim world while also reducing American commitments in the Middle East. Obama was forced to take a more hands-on approach with the emergence of the Arab Uprisings, but struggled with how to balance American interests and values (that is, rhetorical support for democratic reform alongside maintaining strong partnerships with the region's dictators). President Donald Trump, who displayed an almost allergic aversion to Obama's policies, openly embraced the region's autocrats with little regard for their abuse of human rights or absence of attention to political or economic freedom. President Joseph Biden came into office with a desire to both return the United States to its former hegemonic stature as well as to bring more consistency to the U.S. approach toward democracy at home and abroad.

How the United States approaches the Arab region matters—both for aspiring democrats and for those who wish to silence them. While there are multiple, at times competing, levers of U.S. influence, the person who occupies the White House has a significant impact on the overall U.S. commitment to democracy promotion. The struggle for political change in the Arab world has been hampered by the lack of a consistent

champion for democracy in the Oval Office. As demonstrated by various contributions to this volume, a wide set of actors have sought to capitalize on the uncertainty following the Arab Uprisings, often with interests that run counter to the United States and, at times, directly competing with the United States. In particular, regional powers like Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and other Gulf states, have spent the last decade trying to expand their influence across the Arab region. In addition, China has expanded its footprint in the region, as Lisa Blaydes argues in this volume, in a way that has a direct influence on the ability of the United States to promote greater freedom and accountability. Nevertheless, the U.S. remains the sole superpower, with the loudest voice on the world stage. Thus, the shift from democracy promoter—albeit reluctantly at times—to authoritarian enabler has made the task of democratic political reform more challenging for people across the Middle East. Furthermore, structural factors, including the multi-agency nature of U.S. policy in the region and the relatively short lifespan of individual U.S. administrations, have encouraged forms of authoritarian retrenchment and lowered the cost for regimes to ignore U.S. policy. This chapter examines the democracy-promoting efforts of the United States, with a focus on the Obama and Trump administrations.

### **Institutional Levers of U.S. Influence**

Democracy promotion is carried out primarily by the State Department and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and covers six main areas: Rule of law, good governance, political competition and consensus building, civil society, independent media and free flow of information, and human rights. Within the State Department, the primary democracy-promotion units are the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor (DRL) and the Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement (INL), in addition to regional bureaus. DRL's mission is to “champion American ideals as a means of combating the spread of authoritarianism, terrorism, and subversion of sovereign democracy” and funds programs that support this mission, as well as providing diplomatic support for democracy promotion writ large. DRL manages all of its projects out of Washington, DC, and focuses on “building civil society and supporting diplomatic initiatives to improve governance, particularly in repressive and closed societies.” Projects typically cost at least \$500,000; last one to five years; and are imple-

mented by U.S.-based organizations. INL operates programs that combat corruption and promote the rule of law and good governance. These are mostly bilateral agreements with host governments to build their capacity to address these issues and can be conducted from either Washington, DC, or embassies on the ground (U.S. GAO 2020, 14).

Within USAID, the two main democracy promotion bodies are the Center of Excellence on Democracy, Human Rights, and Governance, and the Office of Transition Initiatives. USAID generally funds multi-year, multimillion-dollar projects implemented by US-based or international organizations, while missions overseas take the lead on designing and managing democracy-focused programs. The Center of Excellence provides technical and other assistance to missions.

Another body with a crucial role in democracy promotion is the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), a private, nonprofit, NGO, funded through a grant from the State Department that comes through an annual congressional appropriation plus additional funding from the State Department for congressionally directed or discretionary programs. NED is a grant-making organization that provides grants to its four core institutes: The Center for International Private Enterprise, the International Republican Institute, the National Democratic Institute, and the Solidarity Center. The NED “focuses on providing grants to grassroots activists in response to local needs and ‘seeks out newly-emerging groups in both democratizing and authoritarian countries around the world, helping to empower the most effective grassroots activists’” (U.S. GAO 2020, 35).

### *U.S. Foreign Assistance to the MENA Region*

U.S. foreign assistance to the region has remained relatively stable before and after the Arab Uprisings (see tables 13.1 and 13.2). While priorities shifted and Tunisia’s funding, for example, increased dramatically following the 2010–11 revolution there, overall support for democracy and governance funding fell significantly in 2013 and has remained modest since, with a spike in 2017 (see tables 13.1 and 13.2).

At the end of the Bush administration, programs under the heading “governing justly and democratically” received more each year than during the entire 1991–2001 period combined, showing the significant investment the Bush administration made in these programs. This was due, in part, to the creation of MEPI (the U.S.-Middle East Partnership Initiative). At its peak, in FY06, MEPI received \$114.2 million in fund-

TABLE 13.1. U.S. Democracy and Governance Funding by Country (2009–21)

	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020 <sup>a</sup>	2021 <sup>a</sup>
<b>Region Total</b>	483.5	495.1	422	473.6	254.9	250	180.4	350.8	522.5	287.7	334.1	196.2	189.2
Tunisia	0.3	0.5	2	1.6	3	1.3	0.5	20.9	41	44.2	46.1	18.1	17.7
Egypt	20	25	46.5	14.3	19.9	21.7	6.4	12.5	7.8	14.2	22.6	14.8	20.6
Morocco	5	7.2	9	8.6	7.5	5.9	7.2	6	9	6.5	12.6	3.8	4.4
Iraq	318.7	286.9	177.5	176	46.2	37.3	28.7	49.5	66	41.5	66	41.6	41.6
Jordan	24.3	26	22	28	25	28.4	35	60	62.7	76.4	76	45.8	40.8
Lebanon	18.3	25.4	21.1	21	9.8	9	9.4	16.5	16	27	17.4	9	8
Libya	1	0	0	0	9	0.5	0.4	10	38.6	14.5	8.5	10.7	6.7
Syria	0	0	0	52.5	15.9	5.5	0	40.6	160.5	0	15	0	0
West Bank and Gaza	36.9	31.6	38	56.9	21.2	35.9	31.1	31.5	45	17.5	0.6	5.5	0
Yemen	4	11	3.8	23	14	1	0	20.5	21.5	2.1	5.3	0.2	2.5

Source: Project on Middle East Democracy.

Note: Data in millions of USD.

<sup>a</sup> Requested

TABLE 13.2. Total U.S. Bilateral Assistance by Country (2009–21)

	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020 <sup>a</sup>	2021 <sup>a</sup>
<b>Region Total</b>	7079.3	6666.4	7013.3	8158	7243.3	7044	6731.6	7454	7338.4	7422.4	7862	6579.8	6547.3
Algeria	8.7	8.6	9.8	10.9	9.1	7.2	2.7	2.6	1.8	2.1	1.5	2	3.3
Tunisia	14.6	21.9	25.7	89.3	47.2	57.8	61.4	141.9	205.2	165.3	191.3	86.4	83.9
Egypt	1554.7	1555.7	1553.8	1556.5	1484.2	1505.9	1455.8	1449	1353.5	1413.7	1419.3	1382.3	1381.9
Morocco	25.2	35.3	34.1	41.2	31.1	34.2	38.5	31.7	38.6	38.6	38.5	16	13.5
Iraq	599	414.8	471.8	1270.3	589.4	367.6	229.8	405.4	861.3	403.3	451.5	165.9	124.5
Jordan	871.8	843	678.2	775.9	861.4	1010.3	1011	1274.9	1319.8	1525	1525	1275	1275
Lebanon	240	238.3	186.4	191.1	176	166	166.3	213.5	208.4	245.9	242.3	133.2	133.2
Libya	3.3	0.8	5.7	5.4	22.5	5.9	4.5	18.5	139.2	33	33	21.8	21.4
Syria	0	0	0	55.5	77.7	8.3	46.9	177.1	422.7	0	40	0	0
West Bank and Gaza	1027.5	495.9	550.1	510.3	437.2	449.7	367	261.3	291.1	61	0.6	35	0
Yemen	42.4	80.3	82.9	135.2	114.8	102.8	89.6	203.4	370.6	315.5	474.4	41	36.5

Source: Project on Middle East Democracy.

Note: data in millions of USD

<sup>a</sup> Requested

ing. The administration gradually scaled back MEPI funding, with Congress only appropriating \$49.5 million of the president's requested \$80 million in FY08 (Yerkes and Cofman-Wittes 2004).

During the Bush era, Congress would often approve lower amounts of democracy funding than the president requested, whereas under Trump, the White House's requests for dramatic funding cuts were ignored by Congress (McInerney 2008). Obama's pre-Arab Spring budgets doubled funding for democracy and governance programs over those of the Bush period, to \$1.54 billion for the broader Middle East and North Africa region. Much of that assistance, however, was for Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iraq (McInerney 2009). When the Arab Spring occurred in 2011, the Obama administration responded by prioritizing resources for Egypt and Tunisia as well as MEPI, despite an overall decrease in foreign affairs spending of over 13 percent (McInerney 2011). The erratic nature of U.S. funding, with often little consistency from one year to the next, has complicated the efforts of civil society organizations that rely on U.S. funding in their efforts to push back on the state. Additionally, fragile state institutions and political parties that benefit from funding for training, or other capacity-building funds, suffer as a result of massive budget swings and shifting priorities from year to year.

### **The Bush Administration: Democracy Promotion as a National Security Imperative**

There was perhaps no greater democracy promoter in the White House in recent years than President George W. Bush. Bush's Freedom Agenda sought to remake the Middle East into America's image. Coming on the heels of the attack against the United States of September 11, 2001, Bush was convinced that a key tool in fighting terrorism overseas was through the export of American values. The beginning of the Freedom Agenda also coincided with the publication of the first Arab Human Development Report (AHDR), a call for action coming from the Arab world to address deficits in knowledge, freedom, and women's empowerment, which helped justify the U.S. push for political and economic reform in the region (UNDP and Arab Human Development Report 2002). MEPI, launched in December 2002 with \$29 million in reallocated State Department funds, sought to address the freedom deficits identified in the AHDR.



Bush laid out the Freedom Agenda in National Security Presidential Directive 58, “Institutionalizing the Freedom Agenda.” In it, he states:

championing freedom is a national security imperative. Governments that respect the human rights of their own people are more likely to uphold responsible conduct toward other nations, and the advancement of freedom is the most effective long-term measure for strengthening international stability, reducing regional conflicts, countering terrorism and terror-supporting extremism, and extending peace and prosperity. (Bush 2008)

But Bush’s efforts failed due, largely, to his administration’s policy choices. First, many in the Middle East found it impossible to trust Bush’s motives when his administration turned a blind eye to Islamophobia at home. Bush also was quick to applaud even the most authoritarian states in the region for taking small steps toward political reform, even when those reforms did little to shift the fundamental balance of power. In a 2003 NED speech, Bush applauded numerous Middle Eastern nations, from Egypt to Saudi Arabia to Iran, for their democratic gains. Of Saudi, he said, “The Saudi government is taking first steps toward reform, including a plan for gradual introduction of elections. By giving the Saudi people a greater role in their own society, the Saudi government can demonstrate true leadership in the region.” Most importantly, the forcible regime change that accompanied the Iraq War undercut the Bush administration’s democracy promotion efforts (Bush 2003).

### **The Obama Administration: A Struggle between Interests and Values**

Obama came to office with the intention of restoring American credibility across the globe. This was particularly true in the Muslim world, where he sought to undo the damage caused by his predecessor. In his first inaugural address Obama stated, “To the Muslim world, we seek a new way forward, based on mutual interest and mutual respect” (White House 2009a). A large part of that new way forward related to decreasing the size of America’s footprint in the region. As Lynch (2015) has argued, “Obama came to office with a conviction that reducing the United States’ massive military and political investment in the Middle East was a vital national security interest in its own right.” Thus, Obama

sought a more hands-off approach to the region by scaling back Bush's Freedom Agenda and adopting a more bottom-up approach toward the region in addition to limiting U.S. involvement in overseas conflicts. While he and many other officials in his administration were committed to the ideal of democracy promotion, in practice, Obama struggled to balance his interests in the region with his values and to marry bottom-up support with top-down pressure. All the while, he maintained strong ties to some of the region's most notorious autocrats, to the anger and frustration of many of the region's citizens.

Obama laid out his vision for U.S. engagement with the Muslim world clearly in a major address at Cairo University on June 4, 2009. The speech was meant to reset relations with the region following a major deterioration post-9/11 that saw a rise of Islamophobia in the West and was fueled by President Bush's poor handling of the Iraq War. Specifically on the issue of democracy promotion, Obama stated that while he did not support the imposition of democracy on others, he laid out the case for a values-based foreign policy, stating:

I do have an unyielding belief that all people yearn for certain things: the ability to speak your mind and have a say in how you are governed; confidence in the rule of law and the equal administration of justice; government that is transparent and doesn't steal from the people; the freedom to live as you choose. These are not just American ideas; they are human rights. And that is why we will support them everywhere . . . governments that protect these rights are ultimately more stable, successful and secure. (White House 2009b)

Obama's speech largely satisfied both Americans and Middle Easterners who were looking for a recognition that the United States had been the source of great harm in the region, but was seeking a new path forward in collaborating with the *people* of the region as well as their leaders. As Stephen Grand noted, a successful Cairo speech would be one that both recognized America's "enduring strategic interests in the Middle East" but also stated, "we as Americans share the same aspirations as you do: to be able to live in a safe and secure environment, find meaningful employment, feed our families, send our children to good schools, and to be free to pursue our own human fulfillment. Our own security as Americans will be advanced immeasurably if we can help citizens of the region realize these basic needs" (POMED 2009). Obama's

speech succeeded in this regard. Thus, while both Bush and Obama championed the promotion of U.S. values abroad, they did so in different ways.

Other major policy pronouncements during the early years of the Obama administration made a strong argument for why a continued, albeit light-handed, democracy promotion policy was in the national security interest of the United States. During Hillary Clinton's confirmation hearings for her nomination as Secretary of State she said, "The president-elect and I believe in this so strongly: Investing in our common humanity through social development is not marginal to our foreign policy but essential to the realization of our goals" (*Washington Post* 2009). In addition, the administration's first National Security Strategy, published in 2010, stated:

The United States supports the expansion of democracy and human rights abroad because governments that respect these values are more just, peaceful, and legitimate. We also do so because their success abroad fosters an environment that supports America's national interests . . . as our history shows, the United States can more effectively forge consensus to tackle shared challenges when working with governments that reflect the will and respect the rights of their people, rather than just the narrow interests of those in power. (White House 2010)

One major shift in rhetoric from Bush to Obama related to the need to work with Arab publics—including civil society and youth groups as well as other local actors—to encourage greater freedom. This contrasted with the primarily top-down approach adopted by the Bush administration. But in the early years of the Obama administration, this remained largely a rhetorical, rather than practical approach. While Obama's team reached out to civil society, they also retooled their bilateral foreign policy to engage with countries that the Bush administration had shunned—such as Iran and Russia. This led to a clash of values-based and interest-based foreign policy, wherein the desire to "reset" relations with Russia or court Iran's acceptance of a nuclear deal meant less harsh criticism of anti-democratic behaviors (Carothers 2012). This did not go unnoticed by Arab activists whose expectations of Obama as their champion did not always match reality. As Carothers (2012) noted, "The real weight of the administration's broadly stated commitment to democracy

and human rights is also undercut by its pursuit of friendly ties with many nondemocratic governments for the sake of countervailing economic and security interests.”

*The Arab Spring: Forcing the Obama Administration  
Back Into the Arab World*

The Arab Spring took the administration, and the world, by surprise. While Obama had made clear his commitment to democratic ideals, he was executing those ideals in a far more hands-off fashion than under George W. Bush. However, according to former Deputy Secretary of State William Burns (2019), the Arab Spring was “inexorably tugging [Obama] back to the crisis-driven Middle East focus that he had hoped so much to escape.”

In Obama’s first major public response to the Arab Spring—a May 19, 2011 speech—his language echoed much of the administration’s earlier public remarks on the importance of human dignity and freedom. But he also recognized that if the United States did not act to fully support the people in the street, it would blow back on the United States. He said, “. . . failure to speak to the broader aspirations of ordinary people will only feed the suspicion that has festered for years that the United States pursues our interests at their expense. Given that this mistrust runs both ways . . . a failure to change our approach threatens a deepening spiral of division between the United States and the Arab world.” He went on to emphasize the importance of showing, “that America values the dignity of the street vendor in Tunisia more than the raw power of the dictator.” He also added an important caveat, arguing, “It’s not America that put people into the streets of Tunis or Cairo—it was the people themselves who launched these movements, and it’s the people themselves that must ultimately determine their outcome.” Yet he also stated, “Our message is simple: If you take the risks that reform entails, you will have the full support of the United States” (White House 2011).

The path that Obama set his administration on was a very precarious one—to simultaneously upend traditional and long-standing relationships with authoritarian leaders across the region, while also letting Arab publics guide their countries’ futures. This approach entailed both “fully supporting” Arab publics while letting them steer the political ship. While this fit Obama’s desired worldview for a less prominent role for the United States, it would prove to be a nearly impossible task.

One of the main criticisms of the Obama approach was that many activists felt like the level of financial and diplomatic support given to them was far from the “full support” Obama had promised (author interviews 2011).

Second, the “value the street vendor over the dictator” approach worked in Tunisia, a country low on the list of U.S. priorities where the dictator quietly left the country with little bloodshed. It was more complicated in a place like Egypt, however, given U.S. interests, or Syria, where the dictator had no intention of leaving and no qualms about shedding blood. All U.S. presidents struggle with how to balance interests and values in their foreign policy. For Obama, this struggle was most clearly on display in the aftermath of the Arab Spring. As a former U.S. official who spent time in both the State and Defense Departments during that time, it was clear that there were high-ranking officials within the administration on both sides of the interests versus values debate and Obama often listened to the interests’ side over the values’ side. While Obama genuinely wanted to support the protestors across the region, he was reluctant to be drawn into further conflicts and entanglements in a region from which he was trying to extricate the United States.

The Obama administration’s approach toward the Arab Spring thus became “reactive and inconsistent, with a mismatch between rhetoric and action” (Boduszynski 2019, 4). This was complicated by the relatively small pot of money made available for assistance. The budget austerity that came on the heels of the 2008 global recession certainly contributed to the limits in funds, but the signaling sent by providing 1/150th of the amount dedicated to the Marshall Plan, spoke volumes to the struggling activists on the ground in the Arab world (Boduszynski 2019).<sup>1</sup> The assistance also paled in comparison to U.S. assistance to the former Soviet states following the color revolutions there. One reason for this slow and ambivalent response was that Obama was not interested in trying to “fix” the Middle East. As Goldberg (2016) argues, Obama believed that “the Middle East could not be fixed—not on his watch, and not for a generation to come.”

Another criticism comes from Lynch (2015), who argued that Obama “was right to embrace the uprisings and to seek to channel them into democratic institutions. Although he failed to support the uprisings

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1. Boduszynski (2019) calculates the Marshall Plan at \$150 billion in 2019 dollars, compared to \$1 billion in US assistance to the Arab Spring.

consistently across the region or to manage the political wars they unleashed, it was always unclear what more the United States could have done.” Finding funding to support the Arab Spring states was a massive challenge. The United States’ bureaucracy is simply ill-equipped to handle rapid change. As Carothers said of USAID, it suffers from “punishing bureaucratization that chokes off innovation and flexibility; a high degree of externality in the design and implementation of aid programs and a consequent low degree of local ownership of assistance; and inadequate integration of democracy and governance priorities and capacities within the agency’s own institutional structures” (Carothers 2009). Since the Arab Spring was not a planned event, there was no source of funding readily available for those within the State Department tasked with responding to the massive need that arose following the 2011 Uprisings. Thus, money had to be reprogrammed from other accounts in the short term to help address the overwhelming need for assistance. Furthermore, democracy promoters were up against powerful lobbies, including those representing the Arab Gulf states, when it came to requesting funding from Congress. In this volume, Toby Matthiesen elaborates on the powerful counterrevolutionary forces emanating from the Arab Gulf regimes against democratic movements following the 2011 Uprisings.

The administration did attempt to identify adaptable funding mechanisms for democracy promotion. In the case of MEPI, Obama’s team greatly increased the reach of MEPI’s local grants—those administered by the U.S. embassies on the ground—by upping the size of the average grant and the share of these grants within the broader MEPI portfolio. The United States also supported several vehicles for bringing assistance to burgeoning democrats, including through the G8’s Broader Middle East and North Africa Initiative. On November 3, 2009, the Forum for the Future in Morocco, “a joint civil society initiative of the countries of the Broader Middle East and North Africa region (BMENA) and the Group of Eight (G8) brought together leaders from government, civil society, and the private sector to exchange ideas and form partnerships to support progress, reform, and expanded opportunities for the people of the region” (U.S. Department of State 2009). Secretary Clinton announced the Civil Society 2.0 initiative that sought to build the technological capacity of grassroots civil society organizations (Department of State 2009).

Obama also pushed for rising democracies to speak out in support of freedom elsewhere. In September 2011, the United States, along

with several other governments as well as civil society actors, launched the Open Government Partnership, whose goal is that “more governments become sustainably more transparent, more accountable, and more responsive to their own citizens, with the ultimate goal of improving the quality of governance, as well as the quality of services that citizens receive” (Open Government Partnership, n.d.). The administration also submitted the United States for peer review at the UN, established the Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review (QDDR) process at the State Department that explicitly made engagement with civil society a crucial part of U.S. diplomacy. Further, the administration made the democracy provisions within the qualification process for the Millennium Challenge Account more robust (Carothers 2012).

*Egypt: A Revolution without Revolutionary Changes to U.S. Policy*

The administration’s inconsistent response to the Arab Spring was on display most prominently in Egypt. Prior to the Arab Spring, the U.S. commitment to democratic reform in Egypt had been tested on numerous occasions. Despite lofty rhetoric about support for the Egyptian people, the United States nearly always stood up for the status quo—which meant supporting Mubarak. As Carothers (2012) noted, “When Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak stayed true to his authoritarian form by manipulating and undermining Egypt’s 2010 parliamentary elections, the Obama administration made little fuss.” The unending U.S. support for Egypt was surprising to some analysts given the leverage the United States had over Mubarak. As Traub (2008, 165) points out about the Bush administration (but which applied to the Obama administration as well), “The Mubarak regime could not afford to ignore the country that provided it with \$2 billion a year and ensured it a central place in Middle Eastern diplomacy. No country mattered to Mubarak remotely as much as the United States.”

In the early days of the Egyptian revolution, the United States stood by their longtime ally—President Hosni Mubarak. One of the first responses came from Secretary Clinton who described the U.S. assessment of the situation on the ground as “stable.” On January 27, 2011 Vice President Joseph Biden told PBS Newshour “I would not refer to [Mubarak] as a dictator.” The view was echoed by the administration’s Special Envoy Frank Wisner who made clear his commitment to Mubarak, stating, “I believe that President Mubarak’s continued lead-

ership is critical” and that “[t]he president must stay in office to steer those changes” (Poppe 2019). These comments were consistent with the authoritarian narrative Amr Hamzawy describes in this volume, where support for protests diminished and the removal of Mubarak was equated with instability, rather than responding to the demands of the people. This is particularly important because, as Aftandilian (2009) notes, “Internal developments in Egypt and U.S. relations with the Egyptian government and people are watched closely by others across the region. American policy toward Egypt sends a strong signal of the U.S. administration’s broader priorities in the Middle East.” Thus, by failing to send unequivocal support for the revolutionaries, the United States was signaling to the myriad other would-be revolutionaries around the region, as well as Egyptians in Tahrir Square, that they could not necessarily count on the U.S. for support.

Once it became clear that Mubarak was on his way out, however, the United States quickly reversed course, publicly siding with the protestors and abandoning a long-time ally. This was not an easy decision for Obama, given that several other important U.S. partners in the region—particularly Israel and Saudi Arabia—saw Mubarak’s continued tenure as the best bulwark against a rise of Islamism and instability in Egypt. Furthermore, the decision to first back Mubarak and then turn on him caused the United States to lose the trust of many Egyptian activists who saw the United States as calculating and not fully committed to its stated goals of democracy and freedom.

However, it would be wrong to ignore the support the United States provided to the protestors. Most importantly, the Obama administration explicitly informed the Egyptian military that it would lose its \$1.3 billion in US military assistance if it fired on the protestors. This massive “stick” employed by the US administration helped turn the tide of the revolution in favor of the protests (Brookings Institution 2012). Additionally, the United States quickly stepped in to provide \$65 million of reprogrammed aid to support Egypt’s transition, providing NDI and IRI with funds to strengthen political party development, improve democratic civic education, and support Egyptian NGOs.

Following Mubarak’s removal, the U.S. response to Egypt faced two major obstacles. The first occurred on December 29, 2011 when Egyptian officials (that is, the police, army, and judiciary) raided the offices of at least eight NGOs working in Egypt. They proceeded to confiscate documents, computers, and cash and “sealed the office doors with wax as they left” (Newby 2012). Among those NGOs were several interna-



tional organizations including NDI and IRI, as well as Freedom House and the International Center for Journalists, thus making clear that this was a gesture intended to anger the United States. The raid followed a U.S. decision that angered the Egyptian government—to allow USAID to fund Egyptian NGOs that were unregistered. This has previously been U.S. policy, as the Egyptian NGO registration process under Mubarak was highly politicized and prohibitively complicated. However, President Obama reversed the decision in 2009, deciding to only fund officially registered NGOs. This shift back to funding both registered and nonregistered NGOs greatly angered Egyptian officials and was one of the many factors that led to the NGO raid in 2011. In February 2012, 43 NGO employees, including 16 Americans, were indicted by the public prosecutor, prohibited from leaving the country, and ordered to stand trial in Egypt. As Newby (2012) notes, the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces' (SCAF) “excoriation of U.S. support for NGOs” in Egypt caused a major rift in the relationship.

The second major rift came following the coup against democratically elected President Mohamed Morsi in July 2013. Some have noted that the U.S. response was largely colored by Secretary of State John Kerry’s “anti-Islamist prejudices” which made it nearly impossible for him to support the Muslim Brotherhood, despite President Morsi being democratically elected (Boduszynski 2019, 93). Additionally, Kerry was far less committed to democracy promotion than his predecessor was. Further complicating the U.S. response to the coup was the tug-of-war between the State and Defense Departments, with the Pentagon fearing that should the United States decide to play hardball, it would result in significant damage to U.S. interests in Egypt (including loss of access to the Suez Canal, overflight access, or Egypt renegeing on its peace deal with Israel). This argument failed to acknowledge what Egypt would lose by further degrading its relationship with the United States, particularly massive financial and diplomatic support that no other world power was prepared to replace. In the end, the United States took a soft swing at Egypt—failing to officially call the SCAF’s abuse of power a coup and withholding delivery of some military assistance and equipment, only to release them several months later.

### *Morocco: U.S. Policy Enables Façade Reforms*

The ambivalent approach toward democracy assistance is also clear in the case of Morocco. While Morocco did not experience a full-fledged

revolution akin to Egypt and Tunisia, the February 20 protest movement, was powerful enough to force the monarchy to make several power concessions via revisions to the constitution, although most of these “reforms” were never implemented and failed to devolve power from the king to the people. As Samia Errazzouki argues in this volume, “the palace has implemented a series of measures that have supplanted elected institutions in an attempt to both maintain its authority and to manage dissent and popular mobilization.”

On paper, democracy promotion is a major pillar of U.S. policy toward Morocco. Even prior to the Arab Spring, the United States was the largest bilateral donor of democracy assistance in Morocco (Khakee 2010). As Khakee (2010, 18) argues, U.S. democracy assistance has been “largely positive for the development of civil society in Morocco” and “there is relatively wide agreement that international support for reforms of women’s status, electoral procedures, and the development of civil society, for example, has helped reinforce nationally led processes for change.” But while U.S. assistance may be somewhat effective, it also has helped continue to prop up the monarchy and stood idly by while the Moroccan government has slowly consolidated power under the guise of democratic reforms. U.S. officials often praise Morocco as an example they wish other states to follow. This is despite serious human rights violations and a crackdown on civil society and opposition figures, often for minor infractions.

Thus, U.S. policy toward Morocco failed to achieve real democratic change, instead enabling the regime to make good on some reforms, such as reforming the personal status code, or reducing reliance on the military courts, but these reforms have been carefully crafted to avoid encroaching on the power of the monarchy. Morocco is an example of what Heydemann describes in the following quotation: “The point is not that these US strategies have failed. They have forced authoritarian regimes to adjust, adapt, and reconfigure themselves in response to U.S. and domestic pressures for democratic reform. Yet adjusted they have. As a result, current U.S. democracy promotion policies in the Arab world have largely exhausted their value” (Khakee 2017). For reform to be effective in a place like Morocco—a regime interested in the guise, but not substance of reforms, U.S. assistance needs to adjust to tackle not just the low-hanging fruit but also the challenging issues that the government might not be as willing to engage on.

While the Arab Spring fundamentally altered the relationship between citizens and their government across the region, the United

States did not respond with a concomitant shift in U.S. policy. One criticism of the Obama administration's response to the Arab Spring is that the United States lacked leverage over the leaders facing domestic challenges. As Juan Cole puts it, "the Arab Spring put the United States and President Barack Obama in a very difficult position. On the one hand, [a]s a world power, you don't want to lose your allies. But [a]s a democratic world power, you don't want to be opposed to democratizing. So Obama is between a rock and a hard place" (Atlas 2012, 354). Others, however, have argued that the United States, as the sole superpower and major financial supporter of many of these regimes, had tremendous leverage over the Arab autocrats, but they did not use it adequately or effectively to ensure that the protests calling for change across the region resulted in freedom, rather than a continuation of the status quo (Boduszynski 2019). And by attempting to be "neutral"—sitting on the sidelines and failing to intervene in another country's internal affairs—the United States came off as siding with the status quo, which, in the case of the Arab Spring, meant the continued support of autocrats. As Forsyth and McMahon (2017, 35) argue, "Given the reach of its military power, the size of its economy, and its diplomatic-legal position in the UN Security Council" the United States is "indispensable" when it comes to democracy promotion and "well positioned to have an impact if it wishes to try."

### **The Trump Administration: Abandoning Values and Enabling Autocrats**

President Donald Trump came to power with an explicit "America First" policy. His transactional-based diplomacy was purely interest-driven, with little regard for the export of democratic values. A very generous interpretation of his foreign policy would acknowledge that by asserting American supremacy he is, in an indirect way, promoting American values. A more realistic assessment of his policies, however, makes clear that he has repeatedly "openly glorified autocracy" (Boduszynski 2019, 186). This has been a marked shift from both Obama and Bush, who may have fumbled their democracy promotion efforts, but at least were rhetorically supportive of democratic values at home and abroad. The picture under the Trump administration was quite bleak for the future of democracy in the Arab region.

In a 2017 speech to the State Department, Secretary of State Rex Til-

lerson laid out the administration's justification for separating values from foreign policy, stating:

Guiding all of our foreign policy actions are our fundamental values: our values around freedom, human dignity, the way people are treated. Those are our values. Those are not our policies; they're values . . . And so, I think the real challenge many of us have as we think about constructing our policies and carrying out our policies is: How do we represent our values? And in some circumstances, if you condition our national security efforts on someone adopting our values, we probably can't achieve our national security goals or our national security interests. If we condition too heavily that others must adopt this value that we've come to over a long history of our own, it really creates obstacles to our ability to advance our national security interests, our economic interests. It doesn't mean that we leave those values on the sidelines. It doesn't mean that we don't advocate for and aspire to freedom, human dignity, and the treatment of people the world over. We do. And we will always have that on our shoulder everywhere we go. (Tillerson 2017)

Tillerson's underlying message was that the United States would no longer even pretend that values and interests were of equal importance. Rather, interests would always come first, even at the expense of values. As Carothers (2020) argues, "The longstanding bipartisan commitment to advancing democracy globally as a critical pillar of U.S. foreign policy has little place in [Trump's] framework." Trump's December 2017 National Security Strategy further made clear that democracy promotion was not one of the priorities of the United States. It does have one reference to democratic values, stating, "we will advance American influence because a world that supports American interests and reflects our values makes America more secure and prosperous. We will compete and lead in multilateral organizations so that American interests and principles are protected. America's commitment to liberal democracy, and the rule of law serves as an inspiration for those living under tyranny." And in reference to the Middle East, it emphasized the need to strengthen partnerships and "advance security through stability" but does not acknowledge that through increased freedom, comes greater stability. Furthermore, the administration's emphasis on terrorism and countering violent extremism ignored the

fact that extremist recruitment preys on anger and frustration that many, particularly youth, feel due to lack of socioeconomic stability and political voice and accountability, all of which can be partially addressed by an effective democracy promotion strategy. Virtually all U.S. interests, from stability of global energy supplies to promotion of economic growth to regional security would be assisted with an explicit support for greater freedom in the region. Yet, the official position of the Trump administration offered only the most benign reference to democracy, stating, “whenever possible, we will encourage gradual reforms” (White House 2017).

The U.S.-Saudi relationship, which strengthened under Trump, made democracy promotion a mirage. Traditionally, Trump had a close relationship with Saudi leaders, including King Salman and his influential son Mohammed bin Salman (MBS), although the relationship started to sour somewhat in mid-2020. While there has been little attempt at political reform within the Kingdom, the U.S.-Saudi relationship is crucial because the very essence of the U.S.-Saudi relationship has allowed Saudi Arabia to continuously undermine U.S. democracy promotion efforts in the region. Saudi Arabia has been part of what Matthiesen in this volume calls the “Arab Counter Revolution,” which sought to undermine the democratic gains of the Arab Spring. This was explicit in Egypt and Bahrain during the Arab Spring, where Saudi Arabia forcefully backed the status quo. Furthermore, Saudi Arabia is one of the few states capable of undercutting U.S. economic leverage in the region, by providing bailout packages of sorts to states who are uninterested in the conditionality that comes with U.S. assistance. Finally, as Hassan (2015, 481) argues, the United States, “has long provided Saudi Arabia’s ruling House of Saud with a security guarantee against both external and internal threats.”

Under Trump, however, the U.S. Congress was far more confrontational toward Saudi Arabia than under Obama or Bush, spurred on in part by the murder of *Washington Post* journalist and Saudi dissident Jamal Khashoggi by Saudi government operatives. The Trump administration repeatedly ignored Congressional mandates to sanction Saudi Arabia over the Khashoggi killing and even some of Trump’s closest Republican allies such as Senator Lindsay Graham directly challenged Trump’s support of MBS. On a June 30, 2019 appearance on *Face the Nation*, Graham said, “There’s no doubt in my mind that [MBS] ordered the killing of Mr. Khashoggi . . . and that he’s been a disruptive force throughout the region.”

Under Trump, the absence of an executive branch pushing for democracy opened the door for Congress to become a larger player in the democracy promotion sphere. Congress asserted its authority most clearly in the budget, repeatedly rejecting Trump's massive proposed budget cuts and allowing democracy promotion assistance to continue at the Obama levels. Furthermore, Canada and Western European nations such as Sweden and Germany took the lead on democracy promotion, as the United States' withdrawal left something of a vacuum (Carothers 2020).

Another challenge for the Trump administration was that Trump significantly eroded democracy at home, undermining any credibility the United States may have had in promoting democracy abroad. In discussions with both activists and autocrats in the region, the United States was thought to have ceded the moral high ground. Activists lost the remaining trust they had in the U.S. government as an instrument of democracy promotion and autocrats saw clearly that they could ignore any calls for change. This was complicated by the fact that authoritarian powers China and Russia continued to be on the rise and looking to "limit or reverse democratic progress in many countries" (Carothers 2020). These circumstances also limited U.S. leverage, as China has sought to provide regional states with no-strings-attached aid and investment that could undermine U.S. assistance, as Lisa Blaydes argues in this volume.

The COVID-19 pandemic further complicated U.S. democracy promotion efforts by forcing the United States to focus its development assistance abroad on humanitarian support, including emergency health and international disaster assistance. While the COVID-19 crisis led to erosions of freedom in some Arab states, the United States was distracted by the pandemic and largely ignored this uptick in attacks on activists and opposition figures in the region (Yerkes 2020). Additionally, the budget strain due to the U.S. domestic response to the pandemic made the Trump administration and Congress less likely to pursue additional support for non-essential programs, such as political and economic reform efforts.

### **Toward a More Flexible and Effective Democracy Promotion Approach**

While the Arab Spring may have turned into an Arab Winter across much of the region, citizens continue to demand change at home. The

protests that brought about the Arab Spring and toppled two long-standing dictators made clear to Arab citizens everywhere that the people have a voice and are able to bring about change. As we are seeing in Algeria, Iraq, Lebanon, and Sudan, protests live on and demands for change have not gone silent. As Lynch (2016) has noted, “The reassertion of authoritarianism has beaten back popular challengers for the time being, but failed to respond to any of the underlying governance, economic and social problems” in the region. While it is difficult to draw a clear causal link between U.S. democracy promotion efforts and democratic progress in the Middle East, whether and how the United States engages with pro-democracy forces, particularly civil society groups and networks, matters. Under the Trump administration, as the White House eagerly and overtly supported the region’s dictators, the United States gave cover to autocratic behavior and thereby handicapped democracy activists. This did not go unnoticed by the people of the region, whose opinion of the United States and the Trump administration, in particular, plummeted. Furthermore, the lack of any sort of pressure applied to Arab autocrats under the Trump administration left greater space for Arab leaders to undertake the behaviors identified repeatedly in this volume, including “increasing the role of repression and overt forms of legal engineering as tools of managing and preempting political dissent.” And the decline of U.S. influence more broadly both opened the door for China as well as Turkey, Saudi Arabia and other Gulf States to expand their influence in the region, as this volume shows. But, as Diamond (2020) argues, “Whatever its failings, democracy is still the best form of government for protecting human rights and improving human well-being. It is in the U.S. national interest to return to a foreign policy in which this fact is clearly stated and clearly informs our diplomacy, investment, and aid.”

The Biden administration has an opportunity to reassert U.S. support for political and economic reform. Within weeks of assuming office, President Biden made clear that the United States would once again prioritize democracy promotion as a key aspect of U.S. foreign policy. He argued that in order to address the many challenges facing the United States, “We must start with diplomacy rooted in America’s most cherished democratic values: defending freedom, championing opportunity, upholding universal rights, respecting the rule of law, and treating every person with dignity” (White House 2021). When confronted with situations that tested that commitment however, Biden—like his predecessors—failed to act. For example, Biden opted not to

punish Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman following the release of the US intelligence report that made clear Bin Salman's role in the murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi. The Biden administration also remained relatively silent when Egypt arrested the relatives of Mohamed Soltan, an Egyptian American activist who has been a vocal critic of the Sisi government. And in May 2021, the Biden administration drew global ire over its repeated veto of UN Security Council resolutions calling for a ceasefire in the conflict between Israel and Gaza.

Experience has shown that the most effective way for the United States to support grassroots movements for change may be to seek out new, local partners outside of the Capitol who would benefit tremendously from international support. In interviews with U.S. government funders and implementers shortly after the Arab Spring, there was a clear bias for working with traditional partners, particularly those fluent in English, and those with whom the U.S. embassy already had a relationship. This mindset prevented many of the very actors who brought about the revolution in Egypt and Tunisia and were the loudest voices pushing for change elsewhere from making it on to the radar of the U.S. government. Additionally, Heydemann (2010) points out that Western democracy promotion assistance can backfire by “giving preference to secular, Western-style opposition movements with very limited popular appeal.” Many of these groups are themselves a part of the elite, and are thus ineffective at representing the voices of marginalized communities in the region. Some scholars go so far as to say that by supporting Western-style, elite groups, the United States is “polishing some of the ‘rough edges’ of authoritarianism, they might have even contributed to its persistence” (Brynen et al. 2012). Bush (2013) has argued that traditional democracy assistance programs, which she calls “tame” and are “linked to measurable outputs that do not challenge authoritarian regimes” may “help organizations win future grants and work in many countries in the world, but there is no clear evidence that they bring about genuine democratic development in host countries.”

Furthermore, there is a clear connection between reasserting democratic values and practice at home and promoting those values abroad. For democracy promotion to be successful, the Biden administration will need to reassure the region that the United States is not the same Islamophobic, racist, misogynistic government as under Trump—much like Obama sought to roll back the Islamophobia of the Bush administration. Biden's desire to roll back some of the more egregious



Trump-era anti-democratic measures at home is a strong start, but the growth of anti-democratic forces within the U.S. government and the increasingly vicious polarization within the U.S. Congress will not be easy to eliminate and are likely to harm U.S. efforts at promoting democracy in the Arab world. As Traub (2008, 6) has argued “How can you seek to universalize your values in places where ordinary citizens think you stand for something deplorable?”

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## 14 | Chinese Soft Power Projection in the Arab World

From the Belt and Road Initiative to  
Global Pandemic Response

*Lisa Blaydes*

Recent years have seen the growth of economic and political ties between China and countries in the Arab world. These relations have been facilitated by Xi Jinping's signature foreign policy venture, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)—a multi-trillion dollar Chinese infrastructure and economic investment program aimed at countries in the Middle East as well as Central, South, and Southeast Asia (and beyond). Arab countries have emerged as an important target for BRI investments. This chapter discusses the growth of Chinese economic investments in Arab countries in the decade following the 2011 Uprisings. In the relatively wealthy Arabian Peninsula region, Chinese investment comes at a time when these states are seeking to reduce their hydrocarbon dependency and diversify their economies as part of national development programs. China's ventures in less wealthy Arab countries provide funding for risky and expensive infrastructure projects, including in post-conflict regions.

The Belt and Road Initiative represents China's most important form of soft power projection in Arab societies. According to Schweller and Pu (2011, 57), Beijing views anything outside of the traditional security domain—including development assistance, economic coordination, and cultural cooperation—as part of its efforts to exert soft power around the world.<sup>1</sup> Kastner and Pearson (2021) argue that the

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BRI seeks to advance China's foreign policy and geostrategic objectives. This includes enhancing China's access to oil and gas (Lind and Press 2018, 171), but also providing an outlet for China's excess capacity in terms of steel, cement, and metal production. Channeling its large, skilled workforce abroad is seen as preferable to increased investment in construction of Chinese infrastructure, which may be overbuilt (Frankopan 2018, 100–103). On an operational level, the BRI promotes market integration, capital exchange, and the cultivation of mutual understanding. Chinese soft power projection comes at a time when China is already a leading trade partner for Arab countries.

What is at stake with potential growing Chinese clout in Arab politics and economies? The growth of Chinese leverage in the Arab world points to the influence that the United States stands to lose (Simpfendorfer 2009, 5). And as Sarah Yerkes points out in this volume, the U.S. has exhibited forms of policy inconsistency in the Arab region in recent decades that have already lessened forms of American influence. China's size and economic power have created the conditions for a restructuring of a regional political and economic order that has long afforded the U.S. a privileged role. China's vision may be particularly appealing to Arab authoritarian regimes, as it does not rely on the sorts of liberal values that the U.S. has long sought to promulgate, if only rhetorically. Ultimately, China's growth and investment model may lead Arab governments and societies to be skeptical about the benefits of democratizing reforms and the associated role of the U.S. as the leader of a Western-dominated, liberal economic order.

American policy-makers and analysts have tended to dismiss the political significance of the BRI, assuming that China's power play will be viewed as "debt trap diplomacy," or poorly conceived infrastructure projects of dubious financial import (Khanna 2019). Yet Chinese willingness to bring development dollars to countries of the Arab world could give Beijing an upper hand in terms of regional influence, particularly at a time when the influence of the U.S. is waning. The roll-out of BRI investment efforts has been complicated, however, by the global COVID-19 pandemic, a development that has introduced both opportunities and tensions for Chinese ambitions in Arab countries. While China has traded aid and pronouncements of cooperation with Arab

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1. Soft power "rests on the ability to shape the preference of others" (Nye 2004, 5).

governments, a weakened economic position may be leading Beijing to scale back its BRI commitments.

This chapter describes the ways that Chinese economic investments have the potential to influence the direction of political change in Arab societies. Loans for infrastructure upgrades and security-sector cooperation both have the potential to stabilize Arab authoritarian regimes. In addition, China and various Arab regimes have sought to mutually reinforce forms of state repression undertaken against their citizenries. These trends take place in the context of a declining importance of the U.S. as a hegemonic actor in Arab societies. The increasing regional clout enjoyed by China also points to how a wider set of actors are now seeking to influence the direction of political change in Arab societies. Finally, the case of China provides a window into how transnational actors are deploying new forms of soft power projection in Arab societies, including recent developments like “vaccine diplomacy.”

## The Belt and Road Initiative

The Belt and Road Initiative represents the latest in a series of international initiatives to project political and economic influence in the Middle East—especially Arab countries. For example, the European-Mediterranean dialogue—which began in Barcelona in 1995—sought to increase economic development and cooperation between Europe and countries of North Africa and the Levant.<sup>2</sup> The U.S. launched the Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI) in December 2002 to foster cooperation with Middle Eastern countries with the broader goals of encouraging good governance and economic reform, likely as a strategy for combatting Islamist extremism in the wake of the 9/11 attacks.

China is a relatively new player in the Middle East with increased economic and political cooperation beginning in the 1990s (Shahbazov 2021). China’s oil consumption has increased in recent decades and, as a result, it is highly vulnerable to energy disruptions (Lind and Press 2018, 171). Several factors contribute to this vulnerability, including China’s historically weak influence in the Middle East and its inability to militarily defend its oil supply chain (Lind and Press 2018, 187). Beijing views the Persian Gulf as a hub of U.S. influence but that new BRI-

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2. Most observers expressed the belief that the initiative sought to preempt economic migration through job growth.

sponsored ports in Gulf Cooperation Council countries would represent a breakthrough for China's energy security (Lind and Press 2018). While the "Silk Road Economic Belt" will link China to Central Asia, the Middle East, and Eastern Europe, the "21st Century Maritime Silk Road" will connect China with South and Southeast Asia as well as the Persian Gulf. According to one report, the Chinese government has already spent more than \$200 billion on these projects (Chatzky and McBride 2019).

China's experience investing in Africa provides a useful template for considering potential Chinese influence in the Arab countries of the Middle East. Over recent decades, countries across sub-Saharan Africa witnessed considerable investment from Chinese state-owned enterprises and private companies. Frankopan (2018, 114) finds that China made over \$20 billion in investments across sub-Saharan Africa between 2000 and 2014 to finance pipelines, power plants, roads, and railways.

China's impact on economic growth in Africa is well documented in a series of influential studies (for example, Brautigam 2011; French 2015) and provides a point of comparison for thinking about the potential opportunities and pitfalls associated with the BRI. Rotberg (2008) points to China's principles of mutual respect and reliance on diplomatic equal footing with countries in the Global South as appealing; on the other hand, African elites have expressed concerns about China as opportunistic, extractive, and exploitative. While public pronouncements about Chinese-African economic cooperation are largely positive, there have been confrontations including economically and politically motivated violence directed at Chinese citizens and investments in Africa (Rotberg 2008). In addition to the relatively small numbers of Africans employed in Chinese factories, China has come under criticism for failing to engage in technology transfer as part of its investments. Bianchi (2019) has suggested that, even more so than in the African context, Middle Eastern societies are highly organized with politically astute interest groups and elites, perhaps posing a greater challenge to Chinese soft power projection.<sup>3</sup>

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3. BRI investment initiatives have been welcomed by a number of countries. Iran's chief strategist at the Ministry of Roads and Urban Development has said that the BRI is of utmost importance for Iran, pointing to the impact of China's investment in road building in neighboring countries. For example, Ali Khamenei, in a speech in March 2018, stated that the BRI might assist Iran to achieve forms of economic self-sufficiency while simultaneously connecting it to parts of the world

Critics of the BRI have suggested that China's global investment and lending program is a "debt trap for vulnerable countries" (Abi-Habib 2018). Sri Lanka signed a 99-year lease on a Chinese-financed port at Hambantota after going \$8 billion in debt to state-controlled Chinese firms (Schultz 2017). Despite signing over the Hambantota port, Sri Lanka remains highly indebted to China with loans that have rates higher than those offered by other international lenders (Abi-Habib 2018).<sup>4</sup> Others have suggested that the BRI is nothing more than a set of loosely linked "white elephant" projects, expensive and useless, without the potential to make a real impact on development.<sup>5</sup> Bianchi (2019, 2) writes that while critics see the BRI as a form of Chinese "colonialism," he considers it is more accurate to "view the emerging webs of relations as a co-evolution of multiple mega-regions in the making."<sup>6</sup>

### *Economic Engagement in Practice*

What do Chinese economic engagements in Arab countries look like, in practice? In the Arab Gulf States, port facilities have been important targets of investment. For example, China has partnered with Oman on

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economy. Promotion of Chinese economic connection with the predominantly Muslim societies of Western Asia also provides opportunities for the promulgation of a new narrative about historical interconnectedness. For example, Bianchi (2019) has argued that over the last decade, Chinese writers have been able to promote a hopeful vision of integration and prosperity between China and Muslim societies that takes advantage of a nostalgic vision of the Silk Roads.

4. The situation in Sri Lanka raises critical issues about both China's ability to gauge the financial profitability of its investments, as well as the challenging issues associated with sovereignty such a situation raises. The best-case interpretation of events surrounding the Sri Lankan investment is that China has been overly forthcoming in its investment outlays, investing in projects that are unlikely to yield profits in the future with negative externalities for the loan-taking countries. A less charitable interpretation suggests that China ensnares target countries with the goal of exercising forms of economic and political influence.

5. While it is too soon to know for sure what the impact of the BRI will be, it does raise the question of why leading actors invest in costly projects that are unlikely to yield appreciable military or economic benefits (Musgrave and Nexon 2018). Musgrave and Nexon (2018) argue that leaders seek to invest in areas that they believe are symbolically important to their leadership and security.

6. China's considerable investment in Pakistan and other countries in the region may be encouraging regional rivalries, however. For example, agreements to build roads through neighboring countries like Azerbaijan and Turkey may reduce dependence on Iran as a transportation route. See Young Journalists Club (2017).



a major facility in Duqm, a port city on the Arabian Sea. Duqm's strategic location on the Arabian Peninsula—but separate from the narrow, Iran-adjacent Strait of Hormuz—offers proximity to shipping lanes for world oil markets. The United Arab Emirates has also emerged as a leading partner for China in the Gulf. Projects like the Khalifa Port CSP Abu Dhabi Terminal are operational, while the Khalifa Industrial Zone Logistics Park is nearing completion and has already attracted Chinese companies (Calabrese 2020). The Abu Dhabi port project has also involved the provision of housing for Chinese employees as part of a 50-year agreement with a Chinese investment company (The National 2019). Indeed, the Chinese expatriate community in the UAE has grown from 30,000 in 2006 to 200,000 in 2018, with more than 4,000 associated Chinese businesses operating in the UAE (Fulton 2018).

Chinese officials have also been negotiating increased economic engagement with officials in Kuwait. Kuwait Vision 2035 (“New Kuwait”) includes a number of capital-intensive investment projects including the Madinat al-Hareer (“Silk City”) project, which is estimated to cost \$160 billion, of which \$40 billion has been committed as part of Chinese outward foreign direct investment (Fulton 2020a, 497). In addition to Madinat al-Hareer, Kuwaiti officials are also seeking funding for the mega-development Five Islands project and the Mubarak al-Kabeer Port (Khedr 2021).

Egypt has seen growing trade and investment ties with China over the last decade. China also emerged as Egypt's largest trading partner in 2012 (Wood 2018). The Shaq al-Thuban industrial area near Maadi has emerged as a granite mining and fabrication location. Many of the companies operating in this area are Egyptian-Chinese partnerships that make use of Egyptian workers and Chinese machinery and technicians. The al-Reda granite factory is among the largest in the industrial area with 28 granite cutting machines from China in addition to a granite polishing machine (Xinhua News Agency 2018). Scholars have raised questions, however, about the negative environmental impact of the increased mining and the processing waste associated with stone cutting.<sup>7</sup>

With projects from Ain Sokhna to Port Said, the Suez Canal Economic Zone has also been an investment target for the Chinese. Suez Canal redevelopment was initially launched by President Abdel-Fattah

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7. See Eid (2011) for more on this issue. Stone waste is polluting because of its highly alkaline nature (Eid 2011).

al-Sisi in 2014 shortly after he came to power and has more formally integrated with the BRI in recent years. Egyptian officials have said that China is the largest investor in the Suez Canal area (Wood 2018). For example, Chinese developers associated with the Tianjin Economic-Technological Development Area (TEDA) have invested in a fiberglass fabrication facility that has made Egypt a major fiberglass production location. According to one commentator, “the Suez Canal is what makes Egypt exceptional [to China]” (Wood 2018). The six-day blockage of the Suez Canal in March 2021 demonstrated the vulnerability of the international shipping routes upon which China relies heavily, as well as the need for possible infrastructural upgrades to the canal itself.

### *Economic Investments and Social Stabilization*

Political stability is a function of a complex set of factors, not all of which are in the hands of a domestic government or its opposition. Demographic changes and broader economic trends evolve in ways that have the potential to increase unrest, challenging even entrenched autocrats. Economists have argued that a combination of an increasingly educated youth population combined with a lack of high-quality job opportunities together created the conditions for the 2011 Uprisings (for example, Campante and Chor 2012). These demographic burdens and economic challenges continue to be salient for Arab countries, influencing recent and growing protest movements in countries like Algeria, Lebanon, and Sudan as described in other chapters of this book.

Scholars have long posited a relationship between economic growth and forms of social stability. Indeed, existing research suggests that robust growth makes regime change less likely and increases the probability a ruling party retains political power (Feng 1997). If BRI-associated investments have a positive effect on economic growth in Arab countries, this could have a stabilizing effect for sitting autocrats. For example, Chinese-Egyptian economic cooperation has supported growth in Egypt’s lagging tourism sector. Xinhua news agency reports that as economic ties between Egypt and China have grown, there has been an increase in the number of Chinese tourists to Egypt, a figure that reached nearly half a million in 2018 compared to 300,000 in 2017 (Xinhua News Agency 2019). Given the decline in tourism to Egypt from the U.S. and Europe, Chinese tourists have helped Egypt weather the challenge of supporting the hospitality industry.

China has also shown an interest in investing in Syria, despite the risks associated with doing so and the extent to which this may shore up the status quo regime. In April 2017, China and Syria re-engaged discussions regarding Chinese investments in Syrian oil and energy sector. China's National Petroleum Corporation has stakes in both the Syrian Petroleum Company and Al-Furat Petroleum Company (Saigal 2017). In the telecommunications field, Huawei signed an agreement with Syria to increase broadband connectivity (Saigal 2017). According to one analyst, "war in Syria will end, the country will stabilize, and when this happens China will be in the right side of Syria's economic growth story . . . Chinese investment may even be an incentive to end conflict in Syria as citizens slowly realize that more money and development will follow once conflict in the country comes to an end" (quoted in Saigal 2017).

This investment comes at a time when the Syrian state does not have sufficient resources to finance vital reconstruction, and Iranian and Russian commitments have proven inadequate given the enormity of the infrastructure funding gap (Calabrese 2019). At the same time, China has opposed censures, sanctions, and a referral to the International Criminal Court for the Bashar al-Assad regime, but instead has taken a flexible, non-coercive policy stance (Calabrese 2019). China has already established a track record with regard to post-conflict reconstruction, particularly when there are strong geostrategic incentives to do so. For example, China's most active oil-related projects in the region are in Iraq, with significant stakes in the Al-Ahdab, Rumaila, and Hal-faya oil fields (Shahbazov 2021). China's postwar investment in Iraq after 2003 serves as a potentially useful example for involvement in postwar Syria; Chinese companies moved slowly but steadily into safe regions of Iraq with high-value projects in sectors like energy, logistics, and transportation (Burton, Lyall, and Pauley 2021).

Countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council have sought to reform their domestic economies with the goals of improving state capacity and encouraging labor force participation on the part of nationals. These aspirations are summarized in a series of national vision programs including Saudi Vision 2030, Kuwait Vision 2035 ("New Kuwait"), Abu Dhabi 2030, Qatar National Vision 2030, Oman Vision 2040, and Bahrain Economic Vision 2030. In each case, these programs have a focus on diversifying local economies in preparation for a world in which petroleum resources are less valued in the global economy. If Chinese investments support national economic visions on the part of

Gulf regimes by funding investment in diverse industries, this has the potential to support status quo governments. China has established comprehensive strategic partnerships with Saudi Arabia in 2016 and the United Arab Emirates in 2018; Chinese investments in the two countries between 2008 and 2019 topped \$62 billion (Gurol and Scita 2020). Fulton (2020a) argues that China has gone from being a promising economic actor in the Arab Gulf to being the predominant economic actor, developing ties to every state in the region and an increased diplomatic presence.

### *Growing Repressive Capacity and Coordination*

To what extent have growing Chinese economic relations with Arab countries translated into a strengthening of the repressive hand of existing autocrats? The example of Egypt is illustrative. In recent years, Egypt has witnessed increasingly autocratic tendencies under the leadership of President al-Sisi. In this volume, Hamzawy argues that the military and security-led regime in Egypt has exercised control over society through a serious curtailing of freedoms and an engineering of the legal space. The Egyptian Ministry of Interior has been implicated in widespread abuses, including arbitrary arrests and torture against perceived dissidents. Alleged members and sympathizers of the Muslim Brotherhood have been particularly targeted, leading Brotherhood activists to be jailed and the group's social service activity significantly reduced.

Journalists have drawn attention to Chinese coordination regarding repression within Egypt. In May 2017, the Egyptian government arrested Uyghur students from China who were studying at Al-Azhar University, ordering those individuals to return to China. Some of these individuals were sent to Chinese detention camps for re-education; in return, the Egyptian government was offered a Chinese infusion of foreign currency (Wood 2018). Other Chinese students were sent to Egypt's Tora Prison, with some being held in prison for months (Ullah 2019). Most of the arrested students were young males, studying Arabic and Islamic studies, who had the appropriate permissions to study in Egypt before they were arrested (Barrington 2017). These arrests took place shortly after Egypt and China signed a 2017 security memorandum aimed at "combatting terrorism" (Ullah 2019). The timing and context for the arrests suggests a "tit-for-tat" security relationship between China and Egypt, encouraging repressive state capacity for both countries.

Chinese investments in Egyptian infrastructure also have the potential to support the Sisi regime in a way that insulates the leadership from popular pressure. With more than 20 million Egyptians living in Greater Cairo, population growth has put a strain on the city's infrastructure. In addition, the 2011 Arab Uprisings pointed to the regime's vulnerability to popular protests in the capital city. A relatively remote, newly constructed capital city obviates the need to upgrade Cairo's crumbling infrastructure, while simultaneously insulating the government from existing urban populations that have shown a willingness to engage in protest mobilization. President al-Sisi has taken the lead in overseeing the construction of Egypt's new administrative capital which is to be located miles from downtown Cairo and will serve as the country's new seat of bureaucracy. Chinese firms have also been associated with work on Egypt's new proposed capital city project. Indeed, since being announced in 2015, few foreign investors other than the Chinese have shown an interest in the project. Chinese banks have committed to lending a sizable percentage of required funds, including for an associated light rail system (Ullah 2019).

Chinese investment in Saudi Arabia also provides an informative case. Saudi Arabia has become China's most important trading partner in the Middle East (Shahbazov 2021). The intensity of Chinese relations with Saudi Arabia increased since the signing of oil cooperation agreements between Saudi King Abdullah and Chinese President Jintao Hu in 2006.<sup>8</sup> Recent years have seen the growth of a more robust relationship between China and Saudi Arabia, including in terms of security cooperation—a priority area in comprehensive strategic partnership documents between China and Saudi Arabia. Saudi Special Forces, for example, have participated in joint exercises with their Chinese counterparts focused on anti-terrorism drills (Fulton 2020a, 501). Historically, Riyadh has only conducted exercises of this type with the United States (Gurol and Scita 2020). Chinese Navy vessels also visited Jeddah in the context of anti-piracy exercises at the King Faisal Naval Base. In addition, both Saudi Arabia and China are keen to preserve forms of “cultural security.” Xiaojun and Alsudairi (2021) argue that the two countries share a national security discourse, potentially opening the door for future cooperation in the realm of cultural security as well.

Shahbazov (2021) argues that a primary reason for Beijing's success in the Gulf states relates to the lack of political obligations imposed by

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8. See Simpfordorfer (2009) for a more detailed discussion of these issues.

China on partner countries, including China's policy of non-interference in their domestic affairs. For example, in the wake of the 2018 killing of journalist and dissident Jamal Khashoggi at the Saudi Arabian consulate in Istanbul, several international investors withdrew or scaled back their interest in new Saudi development projects. Indeed, the so-called "Davos in the Desert" event that was scheduled to take place just weeks after the Khashoggi killing saw a number of CEOs withdraw their participation. Saudi almost immediately redirected its focus to Chinese companies that continued to be interested in investment opportunities despite a backlash from Western countries (Hubbard and Hernandez 2019). Over this same time period, criticism of China in Saudi newspapers diminished with key commentators expressing respect and admiration for China's economic development model (Leber 2020). In addition, Saudi-owned Aramco and Saudi Basic Industries Corp. (SABIC) entered into negotiations to invest about \$35 billion in major chemical production projects in China (Shahbazov 2021).

BRI-affiliated states have also provided support for repression within China. China has engaged in widespread human rights abuses against Chinese Muslims, with some reports even suggesting that the Chinese government has even required Muslims to renounce Islam, an accusation that Beijing rejects (Hoffman 2021). In 2019, dozens of countries, including Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Oman, Bahrain, Egypt and Algeria, signed a letter supporting China's Xinjiang policies (Cumming-Bruce 2019). This took place shortly after a number of European countries urged China to stop the arbitrary detention of Uyghurs, millions of whom had been forced into state-mandated "re-education" programs. Support for Chinese policies in Xinjiang are increasingly difficult to separate from Chinese investment support for these countries as they seek to reform their economies.

China's hands-off approach to the domestic politics of other states makes the "China model" attractive to Arab leaders long accustomed to outside calls for political reform (Fulton 2018). China's economic success—including its political authoritarianism and gradualist reform approach—provides "an attractive developmental model for many poor, non-democratic countries" (Schweller and Pu 2011, 57). China's flexible economic diplomacy may also resonate favorably with Arab regimes as the aid is "typically offered without political preconditions," in contrast to U.S. offers of assistance (53). Indeed, the Chinese speak of the BRI as a politically neutral initiative.

## The COVID-19 Pandemic and Chinese-Arab Relations

Over the last ten years, Beijing has invested heavily in cultivating a positive image for China within Arab societies. The COVID-19 pandemic—which originated in Wuhan, China—provides both vulnerabilities and opportunities for Chinese ambitions at soft power influence in Arab countries. China has largely succeeded in maintaining support in Arab societies during the COVID-19 crisis, particularly as related to official state rhetoric. At the level of popular opinion, however, there have been incidents of hostility, notably in Egypt and the Gulf states. The COVID-19 pandemic has also generated massive economic disruption that has the potential to damage China's ability to pursue its BRI plans. This will especially be the case if the pandemic triggers a prolonged global economic contraction. This section discusses the fallout associated with the pandemic for the future development of China's relations with Arab countries.

### *Trading Aid*

As the extent of the COVID-19 outbreak in Wuhan became increasingly clear, Arab regimes were quick to extend support as China struggled to control the spread of the virus. One observer described Arab governments as “racing to China's side” in order to curry favor in a “frenzied competition over displays of friendship and generosity” (El Aasser 2020). Gulf states—like Qatar, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE—were all eager to send aid to China. Visible public assistance was accompanied by “symbolic diplomatic gestures” which helped to diminish, or at least neutralize, Arab criticism of China's handling of the early crisis period (Fulton 2020b). Arab officials from countries like Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar expressed concern for the Chinese people and confidence in Beijing's capacity to control the spread of the virus (Calabrese 2020).

Chinese officials expressed appreciation for the symbolic aid offered by Arab states (Fulton 2020b). As COVID-19 began to spread in the Middle East, China reciprocated by sending both medical equipment and personnel to virus hotspots (Calabrese 2020). China dispatched disease control experts to Iraq, for example (Xie 2020). Beijing also dispatched doctors to Algeria, where Chinese nationals are the country's largest group of expatriate workers. Many of these individu-

als are employed on large construction sites from which they are deployed to infrastructure projects across Africa (*Middle East Eye* 2020).

In addition, Chinese doctors have provided consulting to public health officials in the Gulf; in one case, officials from China's National Health Commission, the Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention, and Peking University First Hospital's infectious diseases department briefed Saudi health officials (Fulton 2020b). China is also reported to have sent 500 medical experts to Saudi Arabia (Abu Omar and Elbahrawy 2020).

Chinese technological and manufacturing capacity has also created the opportunity to increase shipments of medical testing technology to Arab countries. For example, Saudi Arabia purchased 9 million coronavirus test kits from China for over \$200 million (Abu Omar and Elbahrawy 2020). In the UAE, Group 42—an artificial intelligence and cloud computing company—and the Beijing Genomics Institute collaborated on a large COVID-19 testing center in Abu Dhabi (Levingston and Westall 2020). Partnerships of this sort demonstrate how China has been able to leverage its testing and organizational capacity as a form of diplomacy in Arab states (Levingston and Westall 2020). Collaborations in medical testing suggest that the U.S. may be less valuable as a strategic partner under emergency circumstances like the COVID-19 pandemic. While the U.S. was slow to develop testing capacity for U.S. citizens, China was able to test the entire city of Wuhan in just 19 days, for example. The foreign minister of the UAE described collaboration with China as a key strategy for getting through the challenge of the pandemic outbreak (Fulton 2020b). Indeed, China's Sinopharm and China National Biotec Group have partnered with Group 42 to jointly produce 200 million doses of the Sinopharm vaccine in the UAE (Westall, Nair, and Elbahrawyestall 2021).

### *Attributions of Blame*

The analysis presented in the previous section suggests that at the level of interstate relations, reciprocal aid flows strengthened ties between China and Arab regimes (Fulton 2020b). Indeed, the COVID-19 pandemic may have even provided an opportunity for China to demonstrate the resiliency of Beijing's political relations with Arab states (Calabrese 2020). China has sought to influence Arab public opinion through state propaganda with the goal of reducing concerns about its



handling of the pandemic, though these attempts appear to be received more favorably in some locations than others (Al-Sudairi 2020). These efforts have been led by the Chinese Communist Party, which has highlighted sacrifices made by the Chinese people and effective management by the Chinese government in handling the pandemic (Al-Sudairi 2020).

Although official rhetoric has been positive and mutually supportive, there are some indications that Arab societies may view the COVID-19 pandemic in a different way. Several narratives have emerged within the Arab public sphere. A number of characterizations have attributed the viral outbreak to Chinese eating habits. Arabic Twitter users have raised concerns about “wet markets” (*al-aswaq al-rutba*) including the idea that “moral globalization” (*‘awlama ikhlaqiyya*) requires that China reduce its wild animal trade, since the consumption of exotic game has been shown to have implications for the rest of the world. Concerns about consumption of wild animals has led to suspicion between Arab communities and Chinese expatriates. In Egypt, five Chinese nationals were detained for allegedly barbecuing snakes at a social event in violation of social distancing restrictions (Arab News 2020).

Further questions have been raised about how the virus emerged and was handled by the Chinese government in the early days of the pandemic.<sup>9</sup> Although there was initial praise for China as a result of its handling of the COVID-19 response in countries like Saudi Arabia (Leber 2020), over time there were concerns about the perceived trustworthiness of China and a growing public hostility toward China as a result of COVID-19 (Hoffman and Yellinek 2020). Arab Twitter users have raised questions about Chinese transparency regarding the origins of the virus as well as the quality of information provided to the global community regarding the severity of the outbreak in Wuhan. Some individuals suggested that the virus was divine punishment aimed at China linked to the oppression of Muslim minorities in Xinjiang (Al-Sudairi 2020). Ugly incidents of anti-Chinese sentiment have also been observed in Egypt, as evidenced by a viral video of an Asian man ejected from a taxi on a busy highway after the driver suspected him of having COVID-19. An Egyptian lawyer even threatened to sue the Chinese government for \$10 trillion (El Shamaa 2020). While incidents may have negatively impacted relations between China and Arab

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9. Leber (2020) finds little evidence of a shift in popular sentiment toward or away from China in Saudi Arabia as a result of the pandemic.

societies, mutual strategic interests are likely to prevent serious damage at the governmental level (Amin 2020).

### *Implications of the COVID-19 Pandemic for the Belt and Road Initiative*

The COVID-19 pandemic may lead to delays in BRI projects in the UAE and Oman while simultaneously decreasing the possibility that other countries, like Lebanon, will be successfully incorporated into the initiative. Beyond the logistical concerns associated with COVID-19 lockdowns around the world, the pandemic has damaged the Chinese economy, forcing China to rethink its ability to extend investment ambitions in the Middle East. The result will likely lead to more selective outbound investments, particularly in the absence of a major economic rebound (Calabrese 2020). There are also questions about whether China has benefitted from a weak international oil market or used shocks to the oil markets in order to gain leverage over Gulf states (Di Paola, Lee, and Wingfield 2020).

A cash-strapped China will have negative implications for BRI cooperation beyond constraints on infrastructure investments (Calabrese 2020). For example, a weakened Chinese economy means that Chinese tourists will be less likely to travel to Arab countries—like Egypt and the UAE—that are relying on visitors from China to boost their local economies (Al-Sudairi 2020). Anti-Chinese sentiment as a result of COVID-19 blowback may decrease Chinese interest in travel to the Middle East more generally. Despite the many challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic and associated global economic crisis, China has much to lose by pulling back on the BRI (Greer 2020). This is particularly the case for the countries that might be considered core regional partners.

### **Implications for U.S.–China Rivalry in the Arab World**

China's growing economic influence in Arab countries has the potential to translate into political leadership as trade and investment become instruments of Chinese state power. Scholars have raised important questions, however, about whether China seeks to challenge the U.S. role in the Arab region, or if it is even capable of doing so. Indeed, there is a robust debate regarding whether or not China actually seeks to challenge the status quo American-dominated unipolar

system (Johnston 2003). For example, Schweller and Pu (2011, 53) argue that “in the short term, China seeks a gradual modification of Pax Americana, not a direct challenge to it,” as Chinese elites have a realistic estimate of their country’s strengths and abilities.<sup>10</sup> At the very least, China hopes to see its political and economic models respected and to be seen as a contributor to global public goods (Haas 2021).

How might China’s economic ties lead to increased political influence? Existing scholarship suggests that aid and investment (Andrabi and Das 2017), and trade and remittance flows (Baker and Cupery 2013) have the potential to serve as effective strategies for soft power projection. Kastner and Pearson (2021) identify four channels by which Chinese economic investments are thought to increase political advantage. These channels include giving Beijing tools to reward compliance and punish non-compliance; generating new interest groups in countries that come to depend on China economically; shaping public and elite opinion about China as a country; and empowering Beijing to set standards and shape markets to which other countries need to adapt.<sup>11</sup>

There are a number of complicating factors, however, that raise questions about China’s ability to project power in the ways that I have discussed. For example, China’s economic problems may be more intractable than those facing the U.S. in the future, calling into question the idea that Beijing will be able to outperform Washington in terms of aid and investment. In addition, Allan, Vucetic, and Hopf (2018) argue that China’s alternative order may not be ideologically appealing, potentially blocking the ability of China to challenge the current international order. Thus far, there has been relatively little analysis of attitudes toward China, raising questions about whether Beijing will be able to achieve its objectives.

An important advantage of China’s approach is that Beijing can exert influence without directly challenging American hegemony (Schweller and Pu 2011, 53).<sup>12</sup> That said, Arab elites are keenly aware of

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10. For example, Beckley (2012) has argued that China’s economic problems may be more intractable than those facing the U.S. in the future, calling into question the idea that the U.S. is in decline at all.

11. Scholars have increasingly argued that domestic developments in China increasingly have international implications (Fravel, Manion, and Wang 2021).

12. Why not engage in a more direct challenge of the U.S.? “In the short term, China seeks a gradual modification of Pax Americana, not a direct challenge to it” in part because Chinese elites have a realistic estimate of their country’s strengths and abilities (Schweller and Pu 2011, 53).

what is at stake with the success or failure of the BRI. According to one Kuwaiti economist, the BRI is part of “a global struggle for power and existence” that creates increased economic competition between the U.S., European Union, and a rising China (Khedr 2021). This perspective maps on to discourse offered by Chinese scholars of the Middle East. For example, Wu (2021, 446) has suggested that neither the U.S. nor Europe, or even Russia, are capable of helping the Middle East to establish a “functioning regional cooperation mechanism,” thus opening the door for China to promote cooperation in West Asia in a way that contributes to peace and security.

## Conclusions

Periods of time with even rates of growth across world powers tend to be associated with a stable international order. On the other hand, uneven economic growth can create dissatisfaction with the status quo that can spur new demands for international recognition and prestige (Gilpin 1981). Gilpin’s ideas have greatly influenced the way scholars have viewed the political implications of China’s economic growth over the last 30 years, providing a logic for a more externally oriented foreign policy out of Beijing. Debates about the future of Chinese influence around the world have taken a renewed importance with China’s promotion of the Belt and Road Initiative. Given the strategic importance of the Middle East as a trade hub linking Europe to Asia—not to mention the energy resources held in the region—it is not surprising that China is concerned with increasing its footprint and influence in Arab countries.

In this chapter, I discussed the Belt and Road Initiative, an ambitious and proactive Chinese foreign policy initiative that seeks to project power across Eurasia, including in Arab societies. The BRI represents a bundled set of financial and other investments through which soft power projection is being encouraged via economic ties and improved cultural connections. I have argued that investments associated with the BRI fall primarily into one of two categories. The first target of BRI interest involves the relatively wealthy Gulf states where Chinese investment comes at a time when these states are seeking to reduce their hydrocarbon dependency and to diversify their economies. The second relates to those relatively poor countries that are big investment risks where China is the only country in the world with the

resources and political will to carry out such long-term, costly developmental endeavors.

The BRI has the potential to shore up existing Arab regimes if—in the medium term—the BRI creates jobs or empowers existing autocrats through improving their repressive capacity. Job creation can increase perceptions of legitimacy and growing security cooperation can confer advantages to incumbent autocrats. Competition between the U.S. and China within the Arab region can also increase the leverage of individual Arab countries as they seek to pursue their interests. Trade and economic integration of the Arab region and China also speaks to the growing relevance of South-South economic ties and the likelihood of shift to a global order with “multiple modernities” (Kupchan 2012) in which Western values do not predominate.

Beijing’s efforts at soft power projection have been largely successful at increasing Chinese influence and prestige in Africa, Central Asia, and Latin America (Schweller and Pu 2011, 56). Whether Beijing will achieve its objectives in the Arab world will depend on if China can reduce the impression that investment is a tool of power politics and successfully navigate thorny concerns about control of infrastructure investments. Questions also remain about China’s ability to manage political and economic fallout related to the COVID-19 pandemic. While China’s economic slowdown and high levels of debt may make it difficult to sustain BRI-related infrastructure projects in the future (Lons 2020), China is already committed to the BRI and unlikely to abandon the effort given the large investments already made.

If material capabilities are shifting in a way that favors China, the U.S.-dominated order in the Middle East that has been the hallmark of the last 50 years may not persist. China’s growing economic interest in the Arab world over the last decade coincides with waning U.S. influence in the Middle East. As a result, a more assertive China implies complication of the Chinese-U.S. relationship. Glaser (2015, 50) has argued that the U.S. might accommodate Chinese interests to mitigate disparities associated with the political status quo. Wu (2021) argues that a “new Middle East” is emerging, characterized by geostrategic competition between both regional and global actors, including China. At least some of the issues will play out with implications for the struggle for political change in the Arab world.

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## 15 | Iran's Culture Wars in the Arab World

*Abbas Milani*

For the Iranian regime, the Arab Spring and the struggle for democracy in the Arab world posed a perilous paradox: It offered the chance for tactical gains against some of its adversaries but held serious threats for its strategic goals in the region. The regime—in its self-anointed role as defenders of the oppressed and leaders in the fight to bring about the final victory of Islam—claimed with no apparent irony that the democratic aspirations embodied in the Arab Spring were inspired by the Islamic Revolution of 1979 in Iran, in spite of its dark record of authoritarianism. At the same time, the loss and isolation of some of its allies and proxies—from Omar al-Bashir in Sudan to Hezbollah in Lebanon—and the swell of democratic aspirations in the Muslim world posed a grave challenge. As an important outside player in the region, the Iranian regime's response to these paradoxical possibilities was complex and multi-faceted.

The specter of Iran's nuclear program, the lingering danger of war between Iran and the U.S. or Israel, and Iran's aggressive use of its armed proxies in the Arab world in places like Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, and Yemen, has meant that much of the scholarly scrutiny on Iran's regional role has been focused on these tensions. Less noted, yet no less important, is Iran's projection of power through its sophisticated "ideological status apparatus"—one dedicated to promoting the regime's iteration of Shiism and Islam in the Sunni-majority Arab world.

The regime recognizes that militant proxies are best, and easiest, mobilized in moments of clear and present danger: They are, thus, tactical tools. The only way to sustain long-term strategic influence in the region—and even maintain the ability to mobilize militarized proxies in future—is by cultivating a cultural and ideological influence that

transcends such tactical exigencies. In the words of the influential structuralist thinker Louis Althusser, social theory often over-emphasizes the “material” and “military” apparatus of a state and undervalues the role of the “ideological state apparatus” in the consolidation of power and hegemony. In his view, everything from schools to cultural institutions, which “reproduce the conditions of production,” are part of this state ideological apparatus.<sup>1</sup> The Iranian regime’s ideological institutions thus help to cultivate its hegemony. They keep the “reproduction” of “volunteers” possible and attempt to curtail and confront the influence of Iran’s Arab rivals like Saudi Arabia, or international foes like the U.S., as well as face the challenges posed by the Arab Spring and movements in the region to promote democracy.

### Domestic and Regional Ideological Paradigms

It has become increasingly clear to the regime that, at home, its revolutionary Shiite discourse of martyrdom, piety, and messianism has lost much of its mobilizing or legitimizing influence. An “intergenerational divide” in the ranks of the regime’s supporters has shattered any illusion of a monolithic ideological consensus.<sup>2</sup> As a result, instead of focusing only on an orthodoxy of Islamic iconography and history, they have instead resorted to a heterodoxy of heroes and histories—some even from pre-Islamic Persia, denigrated by most in the regime not too long ago as a dark age of heresy.

A prime example of this rebranding was evident in the public relations campaign, launched around 2015, in support of Qasem Soleimani, the controversial commander of the Quds Brigade who played a key role in Iran’s regional strategy and was assassinated by the U.S. in 2020. As a recently leaked interview with Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif showed, Soleimani dictated regional policies. In the interconnected web of diplomacy, soft power, and military proxies in the Arab world, it was Soleimani who invariably made the final call. The campaign for his domestic rebranding as an Iranian hero included everything from producing films and music videos, to publishing photos of him kissing babies, to printing his portrait in elementary school-

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1. See Althusser (2001) for additional details.

2. For a discussion of the regime’s media activities, and their effort at rebranding, and the tensions within the ranks of the regime stalwarts, see Bajoghli (2019).

children's notebooks. Long before his death, he had been packaged not as a humble "soldier of Islam"—the way he often referred to himself—but as a modern-day Rostam,<sup>3</sup> the ultimate hero of Iran's mythohistory.<sup>4</sup> The harvest of this campaign came when he was killed, and large numbers of people in Iran participated in his elaborately choreographed funeral. The regime and its apologists went out of their way to argue that the size of mourners in the funeral was a measure of the regime's lingering popular support.

But this new domestic propaganda re-pivot, a conjuring of Iran's pre-Islamic past, has no appeal in the Arab world. There the regime fosters another vision—one imbued with an aversion to modernity, democracy, and the West—focused on fighting the spread of Wahhabi ideas; and mixed, of course, with a heavy pinch of anti-Israeli rhetoric. There, the image of Soleimani remains one of a great warrior and ally of the *Jihad*. The long-term impact of the regime's propaganda in spreading this vision, especially in regards to the Arab world's struggle for democratic change, is no less significant than the role of the regime's militant proxies.

### The Challenge of Modernity

For the last 150 years, the central problem of the Arab world, and certainly Iran, has been the question of modernity.<sup>5</sup> Debates about modern values—from human rights and democracy to rationalism and religious pluralism—have all been part of a contested meta-narrative about the nature and components of modernity, and its desirability. Should Iran or other Arab countries embrace modernity? And, if so, is there a path to doing it other than emulating the West?

The central tenets of the Islamic Republic's official ideology—most explicitly stated in *Velayat-e Fagih* or the guardianship of the Jurist, a theory of rule advanced by Ayatollah Khomeini in which power is claimed in the name of Allah for the clergy—has been a vision that is an unabashed foe of modernity and liberal democracy. Modernity and democracy have been seen by Islamic leaders, from Khomeini and

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3. For a discussion of Rostam and his place in the pantheon of Iranian mythology, see Firdausi (2007).

4. Firdausi (2007, 107–11).

5. See Ajami (1992) and Milani (2004).

Khamenei in Iran to Sayyid Qutb in Egypt and Hassan Nasrallah in Lebanon, as a continuation of the Crusades and at least partially aimed against Islam. In defiance of these concepts, the new Islamic response—particularly Qutb’s Sunni radicalism, and Khamenei’s Shiite iteration of it—privileges revelation over reason, putting Allah’s sovereignty and divine legitimacy over Rousseau’s popular will and the social contract, and declaring an irreconcilable enmity toward America as the ultimate “modern nation” and powerful purveyor of modernity’s ideas.<sup>6</sup> Resisting this “Greatest Satan” is, according to Khamenei, a *sine qua non* for an authentic Islamic identity. This vision further demonizes Israel as the beachhead for the modern project in the Muslim world.

A clever trope of this ideology, and one of the keys to its success, has been its ability to package its anti-modern and anti-American vision in a language that appeals to, and is evocative of, the rhetoric of leftist anti-imperialists and post-modernists of every hue. The bizarre infatuation of Michel Foucault with the early Iranian revolution, which he saw as a new path away from the pathologies of modernity, is a telling example of how effective this careful choreography of words has been.<sup>7</sup> The regime has also offered its odious anti-Israeli, and anti-Semitic, discourse in the more acceptable garb of anti-Zionism.

For years, Ali Khamenei, the most powerful man in Iran and the Supreme Leader since 1989, has been obsessed with what he calls the “Culture War”—and, specifically, the existence of a “Cultural NATO.” In a talk given at a university in the city of Semnan on November 9, 2006, Khamenei used the term “Cultural NATO” for the first time, describing a force geared against Islam and Iran. He went on at some length to recount a conspiracy, spearheaded not only by the U.S. but also by Zionists—even alluding to George Soros by referencing “that Jew whose name I don’t want to mention”—who are attempting to defeat Islam by advocating nihilism, materialism, individualism, and a rationalism devoid of Allah and faith.<sup>8</sup> Since then, he has repeatedly stated that America, in its animosity toward the Islamic regime and “true” Islam all over the world, as well as Zionism, have often tried to militarily attack and destroy the Islamic regime. To him, Bush and Clinton, no

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6. See Lipset (2003) for additional details.

7. For example, see Afary, Anderson, and Foucault (2005).

8. For the complete text of the speech, see Ali Khamenei, “Statements in the meeting of Semnan academics,” <http://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=3362>

less than Obama, Trump, and now Biden, have all pursued the same policy of attempting to destroy the regime—either with an iron fist, or the same fist clad in a velvet glove (Khamenei 2009). They are all enemies of “true” Islam: Any movement or government that does not accept this, in Khamenei’s view, are either tools of “American arrogance” or simple-minded fools. As he often repeats, for him Iran’s negotiations with the U.S., or the “Greatest Satan,” is only a ploy to expose America’s true hypocrisy and buy time in order to consolidate the power of Islam in Iran and the region.

In his self-referential and paranoid view, every challenge that the regime has faced over the past 40 years has been part of the “enemy’s conspiracy”—and, of course, the most powerful enemy of them all, the U.S. (Khamenei 2015). Khamenei believes that all direct political or military challenges to the regime have failed. Therefore, the U.S., Israel, and the West have changed tactics. To continue their attempts at regime change in Iran, and to thwart the rise of revolutionary Islam in the Arab world, they now primarily use “soft power.” More than once, Khamenei has quoted Joseph Nye and his theories, suggesting that all one must do to understand the extent of the Culture War conspiracy is to read Nye himself.<sup>9</sup>

For Khamenei, this has meant that everything from the advent of the Internet to social science, democracy, and women’s rights are mere tools of American and Israeli “soft power”—intent on weakening Islam around the world and causing regime change in Iran. In waging his endless and often quixotic wars against omnipresent “enemies” and their “cultural invasion,” Khamenei has taken draconian measures at home and abroad. Islam’s “soft power” is not only an indispensable weapon in defeating the West and its regional allies, but critical to fighting the insidious temptation of modernity and democracy. Moreover—to paraphrase Althusser—such ideological propaganda is indispensable for the “reproduction of the production” of proxies who are willing to die and kill for the cause. For these reasons, the Iranian regime has developed a sophisticated ideological apparatus, geared toward exporting its anti-modern, anti-liberal democratic message. Selling any ideology is difficult—selling the Iranian regime’s unique iteration of a Shiite ideology to the Sunni-dominated Arab world is even more so.

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9. See, for example, Nye (1990 and 2004).

### *The Weight of History*

When the Islamic Republic attempts to influence politics in the Arab world, it has to not only overcome historic sectarian conflicts between Shiites and Sunnis, but also the Arab-*Ajam* tensions. The first signs of divisions between Arabs and Persians can be seen in the *Quran*. In the chapter called *Al-Rum*, or “The Byzantines,” Allah reassures anxious Arabs that the Persians will soon lose to the Romans. “The Byzantines have been defeated. In a land nearby. Yet after being defeated, they will prevail. Within a few years.”<sup>10</sup> In Arabic, the term *Ajam* was used in the time of Mohammad to refer to Persians. Scholars have argued that *Ajam* is “generally a pejorative” term, originally referring to anyone who did not speak Arabic, but eventually becoming more focused on Persians.<sup>11</sup> Today, many Arabs still use the same word to refer to Iranians. This ethnic rancor goes both ways, with many Persian pejoratives for Arabs. In *Shahnameh*, the canonical text of Iranian nationalism, as well as many other more recent works of literature, one can find ample examples of Persian anti-Arab racism.<sup>12</sup>

The Iranian–Arab tensions are so profound that even Sheikh Nasrallah, the leader of Lebanon’s Hezbollah and arguably the most influential Iranian proxy in the region, has indicated that some Arabs have questioned Hezbollah’s reliance on Iranians. To assuage their anxiety, Nasrallah has stated that Iranian leaders over the past 40 years are not really Persians at all, but Arabs. Because Iranian leaders are mostly Seyyeds (a title in Iran for those who claim direct descent from the Prophet) they must therefore be descended from Arabs. According to Nasrallah:

In Iran we today don’t have an Iranian civilization; what exists there is an Islamic civilization; the religion of Mohammad, an Arab of Hashemi, Meccaen, Ghoreishian roots; and the founder of the Islamic republic is Arab in his paternal parentage and is the son of Allah’s prophet . . . and today the leader is Seyyed Ali Khamenei Goreishi, Hashemi; a son of the prophet, and of Ali, and of Fateme, who are Arabs. (Farahmand 2010)

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10. See Nasr (2015, 985).

11. For more details, see Bosworth (1984).

12. The *Shahnameh* is full of disdain for “lowly Arabs” who now aspire to the Persian throne. Sadeq Hedayat, one of Iran’s acclaimed modern novelists has repeated some of these racist comments about Arabs in many of his writings.

In short, Khamenei and the other rulers of Iran are in name Iranians but in lineage and emotional affiliations Arabs.

### *Khamenei's Culture Wars*

It is customary to think of Khamenei, the current Iranian Supreme Leader, as a disciple of Khomeini. In reality, he has been profoundly intellectually influenced and inspired by two other Islamists—one is a rabble-rousing Iranian Shiite cleric, Navvab Safavi. Khamenei was at the impressionable age of 14 when he first met Safavi, a young cleric who would become his political idol and role model. Safavi was the founder of a powerful group of Islamic terrorists and proselytizers called *Fada'yan Islam*, or the Devotees of Islam. An important component of Navvab Safavi's mobilizing tactics was the use of "individuals who . . . have disturbed the peace in neighborhood, like hoodlums, roughnecks, thugs and the neighborhood bullies."<sup>13</sup> Scholars have shown that, from the mid-nineteenth century to today, the Iranian clergy have used such rough-necks to enforce their writ and silence their opponents. In recent years, individuals recruited from prisons and ghettos have been used by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) to suppress opponents in Iran. For example, according to one of the top commanders of the IRGC, in 2009, up to 5,000 imprisoned criminals were freed, deputized, and used to suppress the democratic movement in Iran.<sup>14</sup> Other radical Islamist groups of every hue in the Arab world—from the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) to the Saudis in Yemen or Egyptian authoritarians at home—have a record of using these types of individuals to fight democracy and its supporters.<sup>15</sup>

Secular opposition groups, as well as Western intelligence agencies, have either ignored or embraced the rise of these Islamist forces, assuming that they could use their anti-communist zeal for their own

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13. Navab Safavi, quoted in Behdad (1997).

14. This remarkable confession by one of the commanders of the IRGC was later reaffirmed by a top IRGC leader. See Mizan News Agency (2015).

15. However, it should be noted that individuals other than stereotypical criminals are also attracted to radical Islamist groups. In a major study of the social composition of such groups, scholars have found that "subjects such as science, engineering, and medicine are strongly overrepresented among Islamist movements in the Muslim world . . . engineers are alone strongly over-represented." See Gambetta and Hertog (2016).



ends. In a sense, the victory of Khomeini in Iran in 1979 can be seen as the consequence of an “Uneasy Alliance” that grew out of these miscalculations. The Shah, like Anwar al-Sadat in Egypt during the last decade of his rule, believed that his main enemies were leftists and secular democrats. Islamic forces were assumed to be allies. In Iran, the Shah followed a scorched-earth policy against any and all opposition to his rule; and yet Islamic movements—with the exception of the most radical—were given a free hand. The increase in the number of mosques, seminaries, and special religious organizations, as well as publishing houses dedicated to propagating religious texts, micro-credit Islamic banks, and Islamic organizations in virtually every profession, during the last decade of the Shah’s rule is remarkable both for its magnitude and for the fact that it was ignored by virtually every observer of Iranian politics.<sup>16</sup> Neither the Shah, his security organization, nor the U.S. and British intelligence agencies paid any attention to this spawning infrastructure, a budding army of “soft power” cadres and institutions that allowed Khomeini to spread his version of Islam. That infrastructure, operating under nearly all radars, made the clergy’s rise to power possible in 1979. Since then, first Khomeini and, even more emphatically, his successor Khamenei have been trying to repeat that experience by “exporting the revolution.”

### *Culture Wars and the Saudi Turn*

At the same time the revolution of 1979 was happening in Iran, a con-sanguine event in Saudi Arabia occurred with the occupation of Mecca. This event would also have a long-term impact, not just within Saudi Arabia but across the region, and especially for increased tensions with Iran. When the occupation first began in November 1979, the White House was desperately trying to find out what had happened—while also distracted by the American diplomats who had been taken hostage in Tehran that same week. The self-declared messiah responsible for taking over Mecca and holding thousands of pilgrims to Allah’s house hostage, Juhayman, was an ardent advocate for millenarian ideas. Adding yet another layer of complexity, a belief in millenarianism was one of the hallmarks of Iranian Shiites. Thus, when news of the seizure of Mecca finally reached Washington, the first U.S. intelli-

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16. For a remarkable litany of these organizations, see Asadi (2013) and Milani (2011).

gence assessment stated that it was the work of the Islamic Republic of Iran, and President Jimmy Carter was actually told that the hostage-takers could be Iranian (Trofimov 2007). In order to “keep Iran’s ambitions in check,” and to reassure the Saudis of U.S. resolve, a naval battle group led by the *USS Kitty Hawk*—“a nuclear carrier with eighty-five aircraft aboard, accompanied by five ships”—was immediately dispatched to the Persian Gulf (Trofimov 2007, 95).

However, it soon became clear that this was not the work of Iran, but a brand of radical Islamists that had developed in Saudi Arabia. In order to contain their terror in Mecca, a new social contract was eventually signed between the royal house of Saud and the Wahhabi leadership. The Saudi government, worried about the traditional ban on the use of arms in Mecca, and especially about the strict ban on the entry of non-Muslims to the holy city, did not dare move to militarily dislodge the rebels and regain control of the Holy Mosque. This problem was compounded by the fact that Saudi Arabia needed the French Foreign Legion and U.S. forces in order to get Muslim terrorists out of Mecca and free the hostages. The king requested a *fatwa* from a congregation of 30 top Wahhabi clerics that would allow the military to use arms and ammunition, as well as allow “infidels” into the Mecca sanctuary. After some discussion, a *fatwa* was eventually issued allowing for the use of lethal force in the Holy Mosque.

While the minutes of that crucial meeting have not been published, it is clear that a deal was made that changed the fabric of Saudi Arabia—and, by extension, much of the Muslim world. The clerics decreed that Juhayman and his rebels could be violently dispensed with. But his ideas, his jeremiad against the “libertine” ways of the House of Saud, were to be taken seriously and put into practice. Not long after that meeting, every whiff of liberal reform in Saudi Arabia was snuffed out. A more orthodox Arabia, and a Saudi government more dedicated than ever to the promotion of Wahhabi ideas around the world, were the inadvertent consequences of the two-week long seizure of Mecca. The sudden and rapid rise in the price of oil meant that, in the next four decades, Saudi Arabia would spend a staggering 87 billion dollars to propagate Wahhabi ideas around the world (Martin 2007). More than once, the controversial new Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia, Mohammed bin Salman, has decreed that his reforms are intended to take the country back from the dire and dogmatic consequence of that 1979 concordance with Wahhabi muftis. During that period, however, Saudi Arabia and its rival Iran were both advocating an equally anti-democratic,

anti-modern ideology which created a dangerous synergy against democracy in the Arab world.

### Iran's Culture Wars

It is impossible to track how much money the Islamic Republic of Iran has spent in promoting its ideas in the region. Reports about the murky activities of the Iranian regime's financial activities in a Beirut bank underscore the difficulties of an accurate assessment; however, one estimate puts the total budget for their ideological activities in 2019 at around 3 billion dollars (Badram and Ottolengri 2021). An examination of their "soft power" apparatus shows that the regime is determined to compete with Saudi Arabia and, even more importantly, the U.S. For example, much attention was given to the news that Iran had trained, armed, and paid stipends to about 160,000 Shiite militias as regional proxies (Nabavian 2015). The number of clerics, seminarians, proselytizers, and agents that have gone through the regime's theological-ideological training to promote anti-democratic and anti-modern ideas is no less sizeable. The ideas that form the theoretical foundations of this ideological war are partly about augmenting the regime's "strategic depth." (Iran's nuclear and missile program, as well as their role arming proxies, are the other components of this strategic vision.) At the same time, Khamenei's enmity toward modernity, formed and refined over the past 50 years, and his belief that we are nearing a new "historic turn" that will augur the universal victory of Islam and defeat modernity, materialism, and Western hegemony are necessary corollaries of his views. To Khamenei, not only is modernity a curse—but capitalism and socialism, liberal democracy and materialism, Judea-Christian hegemony and Western imperialism have all failed. The world is looking for a new source of salvation, and the Iranian iteration of Islam is it.

Khamenei's insistence about the necessity of fighting the ideological war has been a central part of his political ideology over the last 20 years. In one study, published in a journal connected to the IRGC—and tellingly called the *Scientific-Scholarly Journal For Culturally Guarding the Islamic Revolution, the Center for Islamic Human Sciences and Soft Power and Training of the Guards in Imam Hossein's Officers College*—found that from 2007 to 2009, Khamenei discussed the topic of the culture wars in 43 of his 89 talks (Aslani, Rahbari, and Ebrahimi 2017). His obsessive

rhetoric about a Cultural NATO is central to the preparation for this ideological Armageddon.

This emphasis on the cultural domain also played a key role in Khamenei's Manifesto, issued in 2019 on the fortieth anniversary of the revolution. Since its publication, sites and papers close to the regime, as well as ideologues of the IRGC, have gone out of their way to position the paper as a seminal text and strategic gospel for the "second phase" of the revolution. In one more "scholarly" article, the authors wax eloquent about the significance of the number 40 in numerology and Islamic history, arguing that the fortieth anniversary of the revolution and the publication of Khamenei's manifesto are auspicious indications of a rebirth and reinvigoration of the revolution, the first stage in a new "historic turn" (Karimzadeh 2020). In another, it is claimed that the Manifesto is, in terms of its textual significance, second only to the Constitution of the Islamic Republic and that its guidelines must be the backbone of the core curriculum of the regime's propaganda (*Abna* 24, n.d.).

While this emphasis on culture wars is partly driven by Khamenei's experience as a leader of a regime that has defined itself through its "opposition" (to the U.S., to Israel, or to modernity and secular democracy) and is thus obsessed with "enemies,"<sup>17</sup> its genealogy also goes back to his days as an unknown young cleric in the city of Meshed. In those years, he undertook the unusual task of translating four books written by Sayyid Qutb, the most influential theorist of Sunni political Islam. Khamenei's affinities for Qutb underscores an important fact: Beyond the commonly understood sectarian divide between Shiites and Sunnis, when it comes to political Islam and, more critically, the struggle for democracy in the Arab world, there is a confluence of ideas between the two. Even including the Wahhabi iteration of Islam, they together cohere into a focused rejection of modernity and liberal democracy. The ruling Shiite clerics in Iran, along with their Wahhabi adversaries in Saudi Arabia and other Sunni Arab autocrats in the region, are in one sense united in their counterrevolution against the Arab Spring and the democratic aspiration of the Arab peoples. For example, a recent study showed that Arab autocracies are trying to ideologically combat the democratic aspirations of their people through the pedagogical texts used in schools. Education is now ori-

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17. Aslani, Rahbari, and Ebrahimi (2017) cited 143 times Khamenei referenced "enemy penetration."

ented to train docile subjects, rather than responsible citizens (Alaoui and Springborg 2021). The unintended synergy of these disparate sectarian rejections of democracy and rationalism has created a powerful regional storm that helps undermine any possibility for the transition to democracy.

Central to Qutb's ideas was the notion of a cultural (and military) *Jihad* in order to establish a new "true" and "revolutionary" Islam. His political nemeses were thus "corrupt" Islamic rulers who ignored this *Jihad*, as well as modernity and liberal democracy. When he was a young cleric of little power, Khamenei translated four of Qutb's main books into Persian; as Iran's Supreme Leader, he put these ideas into practice. Khamenei has created a large number of institutions whose function is precisely to engage in this cultural war—a *Jihad*—of promoting ideas (Mirsepassi 2010). Today, there are no less than 29 centers operating in Iran which promote this ideology. However, these are only the known institutions—and only known because they have a line item in Iran's state budget. In 2019, a year of economic hardship, the total budget for 23 of these centers was 280 million dollars (*Mardom Salari* (newspaper) 2019). Once these numbers became publicly known and subject to considerable consternation,<sup>18</sup> the rector of one university defended their budget by suggesting that the school was a cultural arm of the Islamic regime, and that it has "recruited more foreign students" than any other university in Iran. He added that, outside of the students located in Iran, the university had a further 20,000 students in satellite campuses around the world, and 10,000 more engaged in "distance learning" (Icana 2019).

As large as their budgets are, in reality the sums represent only a part of the real funds available to them. From their statements, it is clear that they virtually all have access to "hidden" funds that come from endowments set aside for them, or profits from businesses that they own that can be used to further their activities. Moreover, Khamenei personally controls close to 100 billion dollars in funds, with no public accounting or knowledge of how those funds are used. Additionally, these centers pay no taxes (Rasooli 2019, Fact Nameh 2019); and many benefit from preferential rents or bank loans that often they do

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18. The number may be higher than official numbers suggest. The President's political consultant, Hesamodin Ashna, has implied that there are other, unnamed institutions besides *Jama'at al Mostafa* which do not appear in any official budget. For public opinion about religious foundations being considered in the budget line, see BBC News (2019).

not repay. Funding amounts from the IRGC and other religious endowments are not public, and thus cannot be measured. Moreover, in Arab countries like Iraq, Lebanon, and Syria—where these institutions are most active—the regime has developed a network of economic influence to augment its military and ideological presence. Iraq has been a smithy for this combination of soft-power, militant proxies, and economic influence. Although Iran's economic activities in Iraq in 2009 amounted to 7 billion dollars—including investments in engineering, mining, tourism, waterworks, transportation—scholars have pointed to the fact that “Iran's soft power probably constitutes the greatest long-term threat to Iraqi sovereignty and independence” (Eisenstadt, Knights, and Ali 2011). In a clear rebuke to the Iranian regime and its influence-peddling in Iraq, Ayatollah Sistani refused to meet with Ebrahim Raisi, candidate in the new presidential elections and a presumptive candidate to replace Khamenei as Supreme Leader when Raisi visited Iraq and Najaf. More recent demonstrations against Iran, both in the shrine of Imam Hussein in Karbala and in Lebanon, against what those citizens consider to be Iran's heavy-handed presence in their countries show the limits of this “soft power.” Nevertheless, the fact that half of the 29 institutions developed for “culture war” are geared toward promoting ideology *outside* Iran is an indication of how serious Iran has been in the pursuit of this soft power abroad.

Complementing this institutional outreach has been a plethora of “soft power politics” studies in a variety of scholarly journals and centers, many promoted by the IRGC. For example, in “A Comparison of Islamic Republic of Iran and America's Soft Power in the Middle East,” the authors conclude that the U.S. is weaker than the regime in its “soft power ranking” after comparing polls on the perceptions of Iran and the U.S. and the reporting of five international media outlets active in the region (Harsij and Touyserkani 2009). In another, the authors discuss what they call America's cultural diplomacy in the post-Saddam era, and offer a detailed examination of what they think are the critical elements of America's soft power. For example, they argue many cultural and educational initiatives are now a pillar of American foreign policy and hegemonic soft power, such as the Iraqi Young Leadership Exchange Program, the American University of Iraq in Sulaymaniyah, initiatives to promote female political empowerment, English-language classes, dance groups (like Battery Dance), and finally using tensions between different clerics to promote America's interest (Kazemzadeh 2019).

### *Jama'at Mostafa and Culture Wars*

Among the 29 institutions that comprise the bulk of the regime's state ideological apparatus, *Jama'at al Mostafa al Alamiye*, or the International Institute (University) of Mostafa, is by far the most influential, and well-funded. Though based in Iran, the fact that its name is Arabic and includes the word "international" underscores its global aspirations. When thinking about the *Jama'at* now, it is impossible not to remember the USSR's Patrice Lumumba University during the Cold War. Not only do the Iranian and Soviet regimes bear striking resemblances in their moribund last stages—ruled by septuagenarian men, moored to sclerotic ideas, deluded by self-serving fantasies about the power and appeal of their ideas, and maintaining total control through terror—the structure and functions of the two institutions also bear fascinating similarities. While there is no consensus on the effectiveness of the Patrice Lumumba University, its goal was clearly to increase the Soviet Union's "soft power" and train cadres—whether ideologues or outright agents of the Soviet regime—in order to promote Soviet ideology. As expected, conspiracy theories about the evil consequences of the university are in no short supply, from notable alumni like Carlos the Jackal and rebel leaders in Sri Lanka, to the bizarre claim by Ben Carson during the presidential campaign of 2016 that that Mahmoud Abbas, Ali Khamenei, and Vladimir Putin all got to know each other at the Patrice Lumumba University in 1968.<sup>19</sup>

The *Jama'at*, headquartered in Qom, has branches in Iran and 60 other countries, and runs 4,000 weblogs and 50 magazines in 40 different languages. The university claims that, since its inception, they have published a book a day in one of 20 languages. The central importance of the Arab region in this project can be seen in the special emphasis on the Arabic language in their curriculum and publications. A meeting between Iran's cultural attaché in Iraq and the leader of the Iranian-backed Shiite group Albasir demonstrates how the university's mandate fits into the regime's regional plans. In the meeting, it is made clear that *Jama'at* is the primary source for classes in how to fight the soft power of the enemy (read the U.S.), and in explicating principles of *Velayat-e Fagih* as well as the "thoughts of the Supreme Leader" in Iran.<sup>20</sup>

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19. For a history of the university, see Kret (2013), Katsakioris (2019), and Rubinstein (1971).

20. See for example, Mehr News Agency (2019a) and Mehr News Agency (2019b).

In appealing to students around the world, *Jama'at* publications argue that the path to salvation and “eradicating injustice from the world” is to promote Islamic values—and “only five percent of the people of the world are aware” of the values of Islam. They boast of having reached people in 114 countries and assert that they are a fully accredited university with short-term programs to train proselytizers, and longer programs for scholars. In one year, their paper *Payam Al-Mustfa* (2019) claims to have processed 35,624 dissertations, thesis, and proposals—the most in Iran. They provide full scholarships and stipends for the family of students. In another report, the rector of the *Jam'at* claims they have published more than 3,700 books in different languages, and that a core competency of their students is how to combat Wahhabism.

Only part of their work is dedicated to creating cadres and promoting ideology. As they themselves make clear, another part of their mandate is symbolic politics—more specifically, organizing mass demonstrations and Islamic and Shiite rituals in cities across the world. In recent years, from Sydney, Toronto, London to Los Angeles, there have been mourning rituals during Moharram—the month of mourning for Shiites for the battle of Karbala and the martyrdom of Hossein, the Prophet's grandson and a revered figure in Shiism.

The regime has also gone out of its way to ensure that on the day *Arba'in*—the fortieth day after the battle of Karbala—more “pilgrims” are sent to Karbala than go each year to Mecca. Before the arrival of COVID-19, the regime claimed that upward of 4 million pilgrims visited Hossein's shrine. While, to most Muslims, the effort to out-pilgrim Mecca might rightly seem as heretical, to the Iranian regime it is part and parcel of their culture wars to establish their iteration of Islam as dominant in the region and the world. Virtually all of this expansive ideological apparatus, including *Jama'at*, is used for this propaganda effort—partially intended to fight the Saudi influence in the Muslim world, and partly to enhance the power and prestige of the Iranian regime as the “mother city” (*Om'al Gora*) of Islam, historically a prerogative of Mecca.

### *COVID-19 and the Culture Wars*

As expected, COVID-19 has had a disruptive impact on the regime's culture wars, and particularly on the work of the *Jama'at*. The first epicenter of the virus was the city of Qom. When it was discovered that there



had been more than 700 Chinese seminarians studying at the *Jama'at* campus in the city alone—and the regime had refused to quarantine the city—the controversy turned political (Anatolia News Agency 2020). The leadership of the *Jama'at* tried to defuse the tension by claiming that it had asked all foreign students—not just at the *Jama'at*, but all seminaries in the city—to leave Iran. In later announcements, they said they were launching a massive online teaching program. As of July 2020, they claimed to have already created 250,000 hours of online curriculum (Abbasi 2021).

Even more fascinating was the change in *Jama'at's* discourse about the source of the virus. Taking their cues from Khamenei—who had, characteristically, suggested that the virus might have been made by the “enemy” in order to weaken Iran and China, and even specifically designed to target Iranian and Chinese genes—the initial focus of regime response was to blame “the enemy” and underplay the danger. However, leaders of the *Jama'at* took on a new tone. Instead, they claimed that the ravage of the virus is a demonstration of the “decline of liberal democracy” and modernity, and a sign of the curse of Allah on those who have abandoned Him. The only solace from the pandemic is to forfeit the false promises of humanism and modernity and return to Allah and embrace a theocentric world (Rafi'i 2020). In other words, in this culture war, even COVID-19 became a weapon against democracy.

## Conclusion

The Islamic Republic of Iran has important but conflicting interests in the struggles of the Arab world. First and foremost, it wants to thwart any spread of democratic ideas in the region. Through its vast state ideological apparatus, the regime has used its “soft power” to create the “strategic depth” needed to fight what it calls a “Cultural NATO.” In places like Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon, it has used its militant proxies to directly confront and contain the democratic aspirations of domestic citizens. But the struggle for democracy is as much about ideas and institutions as it is about power in the streets. The regime sees liberal democracy, modernity, and humanism as the most dangerous weapons of a cultural invasion and Western hegemony, and therefore has created a network of schools, seminaries, publishing houses, and cultural institutions in order to promote its anti-democratic version of Islam.

Modernity and democracy have failed, according to Khamenei, and the world is about to take a “historic turn” toward Islam. These instruments of “soft power” will thus help deliver the promised Islamic hegemony. When the struggles in the Arab world could be harnessed for the regime’s strategic interests, they were more than willing to opportunistically embrace them. But when the Arab world demanded transparency and democracy, equal rights for women, and a secular polity, the regime used its soft—and, when needed, hard—power to suppress their democratic aspirations.

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## 16 | The Arab Counter-Revolution

### The Formation of a Regional Alliance to Undermine the Arab Spring

*Toby Matthiesen*

Why did the Arab Spring fail? I assert, because of the Arab Counter-Revolution. Since the start of protests in Tunisia in 2010, a coalition of states and Arab regional forces has worked on the Arab Counter-Revolution (ACR) to undermine the Arab Spring. This alliance formed as the Middle East became polarized on three axes, with actors on each axis seeking to intervene across the region to strengthen their position. These axes were dominated by a group of countries not directly challenged by the Arab uprisings, in that their political systems were never upended, nor did they lose control over much of their territory. In contrast, they strengthened their position in the region. These countries included the wealthy Arab Gulf States, above all the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Qatar, but also non-Arab powers such as Iran, Israel, and Turkey.

The Arab uprisings further weakened an Arab state system already in disarray since the 2003 Iraq War and an increase in subsequent regional rivalries (Gause 2014; Lynch 2016; Matthiesen 2017). Two major alliances of political Sunnism, one led by Saudi Arabia and the UAE, the other by Turkey and Qatar, vied for supremacy. Saudi Arabia turned from a major supporter of political Islam (and the Muslim Brotherhood), to the leader of the anti-Muslim Brotherhood camp, alongside the UAE. The Muslim Brotherhood (MB), in turn, found well-organized and resourceful supporters in Turkey and Qatar, as argued by Ayça Alemdaroğlu and Gönül Tol in this volume. The third alliance was the so-called “Axis of Resistance” made up of Iran, Syria, Hezbol-

lah in Lebanon and pro-Iran forces in Iraq, the Huthis in Yemen, and Palestinian Islamists such as Hamas and Islamic Jihad (El Hussein 2010). The two coalitions of political Sunnism clashed amongst each other, and with the Axis of Resistance, as the region became polarized by rivalry between these three axes.

This chapter deals specifically with one of these three axes, the one led by Saudi Arabia and the UAE, which spearheaded the Arab Counter-Revolution. The actors of the ACR saw the early demands of the Arab uprisings, from social justice to more accountable government, as a threat, and worried about the trajectory of mass protests. They also worried about the ideological forces that might be brought to power by the uprisings, and that non-Arab regional powers might strengthen their position because of it (especially Turkey and Iran and their respective axes), or small Arab states such as Qatar. The ACR deepened patterns of a Middle Eastern regional system characterized by a high degree of penetration of the domestic politics of states by regional and international powers, and the utilization of transnational identities (Hinnebusch 2015, 2016; Salloukh 2017; Valbjørn and Bank 2007). The ACR is thus directed both against state rivals and at the domestic politics of Arab states. The ACR tried to penetrate the domestic politics of all Arab States to ensure pro-Arab uprising forces do not come to (as in Bahrain and Sudan) or remain in power (as in Egypt and Tunisia).

In fact, all three axes have intervened or tried to intervene in the domestic politics of Arab states. They intervene in part to prevent their relative rivals from gaining more power in those states, so in the case of the ACR to prevent both the “resistance” bloc, or the Muslim Brotherhood, from increasing their power. The ACR and the Axis of Resistance have at times appropriated the discourse of the Arab Spring (the former in Syria, and the latter in Bahrain and Yemen) when it suited their interests. But in general, the ACR and the Axis of Resistance have intervened against the masses in the Arab countries and against the will of civilian political movements, in order to ensure that the people of that country do not break with authoritarianism and subservience to regional powers. Arab protestors have understood this, with anti-Saudi and anti-UAE slogans widespread in many of the protest movements; these included the 2019 protests in Algeria and Sudan, along with anti-Iranian slogans in Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon, to a certain extent. Khalid Medani describes in this volume how in Sudan, neighborhood discussion groups apparently sought to educate the population on the regional interference of ACR states such as the UAE and Saudi Arabia. While

both these blocs rival each other, they are both counter-revolutionary, just in a selective fashion. The Turkey-Qatar-MB axis, on the other hand, has largely embraced the Arab uprisings, and sought to support them (but by pushing for MB gains across the region has alienated not just regional rivals, but also early revolutionaries that might be wary of the ascent of Islamists).

The ACR constitutes an alliance formation against an idea, a mode of politics, a way of speaking and protesting—and against the very idea that accountable and democratic government is possible. States have adopted harsh online and offline positions against discourse of the Arab uprisings, or criticism of ACR policy (indeed, criticism of the Qatar blockade or the war in Yemen has been punished with long prison sentences in the UAE and KSA, for example), as well as military interventions and bankrolling of coups and countercoups.

The seriousness with which ACR autocrats seek to stifle dissent can only be understood if we acknowledge that this is not just an inter-state rivalry, but one of states against ideas, and thus the mediums with which these ideas were disseminated need to be controlled. Social media, which from 2010 to about 2013 was akin to an Arab public sphere relatively free of censorship, has become a medium of control by the state. The satellite television channels, which in the early period of the Arab uprisings were also important, by and large discredited themselves as being partisan to this or that cause or political party. Even Al-Jazeera, Al-Jazeera Mubasher, and al-Jazeera Mubasher Misr (focusing exclusively on Egypt) eventually became seen as Qatari government mouthpieces with an openly partisan stance toward the MB. This tendency was reinforced after the blockade on Qatar (though Al-Jazeera continues to be one of the strongest Arab-language counter-voices to the ACR, albeit with diminished repute and viewership).

Ideologically, the forces that the ACR sought to counter varied, and included the leftist and liberal intelligentsia as well as the tech-savvy youth of the early “Arab Spring”—themselves heirs to different ideological trajectories and country-specific political movements. The forces also included Islamic, but anti-ACR, movements like the Muslim Brotherhood. The ACR generally stood against the notion of mass politics outside of state control. Over the course of the 2010s, the former group started to lose importance, and failed to institutionalize itself as a pan-Arab regional organization and did not manage to hold power in any of the Arab states; thus, the ACR ended up primarily battling the MB, or other groups allied to rivaling axes. This was in part because the

MB did in many contexts emerge as the winner of the protests and then elections in the countries that saw partial transitions, and its strong regional organization allowed it to take advantage of the situation. That the ACR positioned itself against both the Iranian and Turkish-led alliances at times led to a rapprochement between the latter that gained further traction after the blockade on Qatar that forced Qatar closer to Iran and Turkey, which established a military base in Qatar.

The core states of the ACR have established formal international alliances, one for the Yemen war, simply called the “Arab Coalition”—*al-Tahaluf al-Arabi*—and one to combat terrorism,<sup>1</sup> and one for the blockade of Qatar, which can in some ways be seen as the institutionalization of their ideas. The ACR also allied itself with Israel, first implicitly and since 2020, openly. In fact, the ACR and Israel were battling both a transnational political movement—the Arab uprisings—as well as state adversaries such as Iran, Turkey, and Qatar.<sup>2</sup> The “Axis of Resistance,” on the other hand, while counter-revolutionary in many contexts, sees itself as resisting Israel first and foremost, and derives a large part of its legitimacy from this resistance identity. Different relations with Israel intensified rivalries between the three axes.

### **Interventions of the Arab Counter-Revolution: Bahrain, Egypt, Syria, Libya, and Tunisia**

From early on, Saudi Arabia tried to align the ACR with its bid to counter Iran and Shiism in the region (which contributed to military interventions in Bahrain and Yemen). Because of its long and ambiguous relationship with the Muslim Brotherhood, the ascent of the latter posed a challenge, that when Brotherhood supporters became too vocal in their support for the Brotherhood in Egypt, led Saudi Arabia to turn against the MB in the region (with the exception of Yemen). Saudi Arabia’s regional strategy thus had two main aims: Countering Iran as well as countering the Arab uprisings and the MB.

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1. Islamic Military Counter Terrorism Coalition, founded on December 15, 2015, see <http://embassies.mofa.gov.sa/sites/usa/EN/PublicAffairs/Statements/Pages/Joint-Statement-on-the-Formation-of-the-Islamic-Military-Alliance.aspx>

2. Though in one of the core conflicts in the region, Syria, the KSA, Turkey, and Qatar were supporting the opposition, but fell out about which part of the opposition to back. This in turn exacerbated tensions between Turkey and Qatar on the one hand and the KSA, on the other hand.



The first major intervention of the ACR was the March 13, 2011, intervention into Bahrain, when Saudi troops crossed the causeway to support the crushing of dissent there. While Jordanian and Moroccan security personnel had long supported the Bahraini regime, and elsewhere in the Gulf, Jordan and Morocco refused to join an expanded Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), an idea floated by then King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia. Both countries only half-heartedly supported the ACR, although both are heavily reliant on governmental and private funding and investment from the GCC states. Despite being fellow monarchies with an interest in seeing the Arab uprisings stifled (both have experienced at times substantial protest movements), they differ on the strategy to achieve this aim, and they refused to fully participate in some of the military interventions of the ACR, as discussed by Samia Errazouki on Morocco and Sean Yom on Jordan in this volume.<sup>3</sup>

In the Bahrain intervention, anti-Shiism legitimized the crushing of what was described as a Shia uprising, a narrative that remained prominent in Saudi Arabia to gain support for anti-Iranian actions (Matthiesen 2013). Other ACR members put less emphasis on the anti-Shia aspect, and in the second half of the 2010s, a certain outreach toward Iraqi Shia actors required a toning down of the anti-Shia narrative, replacing it with an anti-Iranian one, despite the considerable overlap between the two.

The next major arena was Egypt, and to a lesser extent Tunisia, where the ACR became worried about the gains of the MB, who were supported by Turkey and Qatar. The key actors of the ACR were in 2012–13 planning to bring down the Mohamed Morsi government, as the MB in Saudi Arabia, emboldened by the success of their counterparts in Cairo, visited Egypt. Abdel-Fattah al-Sisi, who had previously been the Egyptian military attaché in Saudi Arabia, and in that capacity would have built up good relations with the Saudi deep state, was seen as a suitable replacement. In 2011, Qatar and the UAE first participated as regional partners in the NATO intervention in Libya, but then swiftly fell out and built up local allies on different sides of the political and regional divide. This foreign sponsorship exacerbated rivalries in the country, and was a key factor enabling its eventual division into two administrations. These were supported with arms, money, and diplomatic and media support by Qatar/Turkey (but also by the UN), and on

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3. See also Reuters (2019).

the other hand by the ACR, as well as Russia. This foreign patronage turned the war in Libya into a proxy war between the ACR and its rivals.

In Syria, Saudi Arabia saw an opportunity to support players it had a connection to, such as the Salafi Army of Islam, and undermine a strategic rival, the Ba'ath regime. Saudi Arabia's Syria policy would, however, put it at odds with other partners of its alliance, notably Egypt under al-Sisi, as well as the UAE, for whom the anti-MB angle outweighed other concerns. With the Ba'ath regime's military victory, after a massive counter-revolutionary push by the Axis of Resistance, the forces of the ACR sought to extract themselves from their failed Syrian adventure (Pierret 2017; Khatib 2019).

In Tunisia, the starting point of the Arab uprisings, the protest movement initially succeeded, and managed to get Moncef Marzouki, a long-time human rights advocate, elected president. Initially, the ACR did not devote significant efforts to Tunisia. But as Tunisia became a model for others to follow, opponents of the Nidaa Tounes (Call of Tunisia) party accused it of receiving significant support from ACR states, and of being part of a long-planned and well-funded strategy to keep the old regime intact and bring it back to power (Marzouki 2018). In this volume, these events are described by Lindsay Benstead.

### *Saudi Arabia, King Salman, and MBS*

The 2010s also witnessed changes in leadership in the core states of the ACR. Mohammed bin Zayed (MBZ) consolidated his position as the strong man in the UAE, and became the driving force behind the hawkish UAE foreign policy that on issues such as relations with Iran contrasts with the business-minded approach of Dubai. In KSA, on the other hand, a succession occurred. It was under King Abdullah that the Saudi policy to counter all the Arab uprisings except in Syria was put in place, and the military intervention in Bahrain took place. A strategy to stop the Arab uprisings and perceived gains made by state adversaries such as Iran, Qatar, and Turkey were thus in place. But under King Salman and Mohammed bin Salman (MBS), a shift ensued toward a more open embrace of Israel, an outspoken friendship and alliance with U.S. President Donald Trump (as opposed to the at-times tense relationship between President Barack Obama and King Abdullah), and a seeming U-turn on support of Islam in various forms at home and abroad to legitimize the Saudi state, as well as large-scale military intervention.

Related to this are social and economic reforms, some of the foreign policy adventures, as well as a makeover in the traditional avenues for Saudi power projection abroad, such as the Muslim World League (Hubbard 2017). The arrest and trial of what remains of the MB-related Sahwa leadership that did not embrace the patronage of the state wholeheartedly, most prominently Salman al-Awda, perhaps the most important pro-Arab uprisings MB leader in KSA, drove this to its logical conclusion.<sup>4</sup> Some form of Islamic legitimacy will still, however, be required by the state that sees itself as protector of the two Holy Places of Islam. A hint of this became apparent when a former leader of the Sahwa appeared on Saudi television during Ramadan 2019, apologizing for his past mistakes, denouncing his former comrades, and praising MBS and King Salman (Al Sherbini and Al Shurafa 2019). The new Saudi project became related to MBS's bid to outdo all his rivals in the succession to the throne, and it took a generally anti-Islamist outlook. MBZ and MBS took the unprecedented step of launching a major military confrontation in a neighboring country with conventional armed forces, as opposed to checkbook diplomacy, subversion, or the use of irregular proxies, as had been the norm. This intervention was the most costly and wide-ranging intervention of the ACR to date.

### *The Yemen War and the Gulf Crisis*

The Yemen war exposed the inherent contradictions in the UAE-KSA alliance. In its military strategy in the north of Yemen, KSA relied on cooperation with the Islah party, an umbrella party that includes the MB in Yemen, something the UAE and anti-MB forces in KSA loathed.<sup>5</sup> To counteract that, the UAE built up significant influence in southern Yemen, in Aden, with the Southern Transitional Council (STC), leading in 2019 to a partial drawdown of UAE forces and clashes between allies and proxies of UAE (STC) and KSA (forces loyal to the government of Abdu Rabbo Mansour Hadi) for control of Aden (McKernan 2019; Beaumont 2019). Subsequent agreements between Hadi's government and the STC brokered by the UAE and KSA sought to put aside those differences (Al Jazeera 2019).

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4. Al-Awda was first arrested because of a tweet urging harmony between KSA and Qatar, after positive indications to that effect, indicating the punishments that could be meted out against those not adhering to the strict lines of the state. He also authored a famous book in favor of the Arab uprisings.

5. I thank Stacey Philbrick Yadav for clarifying this point.

The Huthis, meanwhile, tried to present themselves at least discursively as trying to carry out the promises of the Arab uprisings—though little action followed that rhetoric. Their brutal tactics turned not least against the Yemeni youth that had led the 2011 protests, and their re-empowering the old caste of Zaydi Sayyid families alienated many, as described by April Alley in this volume. While the extent of ties with Iran are debated, they became part of the Axis of Resistance’s propaganda strategy (and the latter’s claim to support the “downtrodden” in Yemen).

Tensions that had been simmering between Qatar on the one hand, and KSA, UAE, and Bahrain on the other, came to the fore in the first years of the Arab uprisings. There were long-standing bilateral issues, including the notion that Qatar should not be able to play an outsized role, but they were exacerbated by Qatar’s support for the Arab uprisings and its support for the MB. This would culminate in the blockade of Qatar in 2017 by KSA, UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt (under Sisi). An invasion was threatened but made impossible by the presence in Qatar of U.S. and Turkish troops. Qatar quickly turned to Iran for food imports at the start of the blockade, cementing ties between the Qatar-Turkey and the pro-Iran axes, and undermining the strategic premise of the ACR of countering those two axes (Ulrichsen 2020).

### *The Horn of Africa and Sudan*

Because the UAE suffered heavy casualties early in the Yemen intervention (for which Qatar was blamed), and the KSA also sought to minimize casualties, much of the fighting in Yemen involved bombing from the air, or by Yemenis or foreign mercenaries, often from Sudan. It was not only the regular Sudanese Army that took part in the Yemen war, but also the Rapid Response Forces, parts of which were formerly known as the Janjaweed, who had become notorious for their role in Darfur. Significant political and financial capital seemed to have been accrued by its leader, General Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, also called Hemedti, who played a key role in the mass protests and the political transition in Sudan in 2019 (Wilson and England 2019; International Crisis Group 2019).

Protests against long-standing dictator Omar al-Bashir grew in size in 2019 and soon became too big to repress. Al-Bashir had been adept at managing domestic tensions, and playing off regional rivals Iran and Saudi Arabia against each other. Previously in the pro-Iran camp,

Sudan shifted its position to a pro-Saudi one, and Omar al-Bashir was given a slush fund by King Abdullah for his personal use (Burke and Salih 2019). At the same time, however, the fact that Omar al-Bashir's regime was built on an alliance with the MB, and that he maintained links with Qatar, as well as other reasons, including a trip to Damascus shortly before his downfall, meant the ACR states were not unhappy to see him replaced if their interests could be guaranteed.

But the UAE, the KSA, and Egypt worried that the protests in Sudan would reawaken the Arab uprisings, and that a civilian government would both fully undermine the war in Yemen and the broader appearance of an Arab authoritarianism as the only solution forward. Hemedti and the Rapid Response Forces were key in repressing protestors early on, after visits to meet MBS in Jeddah and to the UAE. The UAE and the KSA also promised to send aid to Sudan's Transitional Military Council to the tune of \$3 billion (Arab News 2019). In Sudan, the ACR thus also stands in conflict with the African Union and a desire of African countries to see strongmen in Africa replaced by democrats (Woldemariam and Young 2019). A power-sharing agreement was signed in August 2019 between the military and civilian forces involving a long transitional period (Wilson 2019).

The developments in Sudan are an example of how the ACR and its military interventions can influence political developments in third countries. The Horn of Africa, for example, has been directly drawn into the orbit of the Gulf states, and of the Gulf rivalries as well, as a hub for logistics for the war, but one that can also be used for peaceful and military activities once the Yemen war ends. The UAE has built up its footprint there, securing military bases along the sea routes that are vital for UAE shipping and for the security of shipping lanes connecting ports owned by Dubai World (Styan 2018; de Waal 2019).

### **Partisan Support: The ACR, the U.S., and Europe**

The Obama administration was, broadly speaking, at least rhetorically supportive of the Arab uprisings, and seemed to be willing to see MB governments come to power in key Arab states. It intervened militarily in Libya and Syria, and welcomed the election of Mohamed Morsi, while allowing the ACR military intervention in Bahrain. The at least partial support for the Arab uprisings, and for the MB, became a major

source of friction between the U.S., especially Democrats, and the UAE and KSA, and ensured that the latter two countries were keen to see a more pro-ACR president in the White House, and quickly established close ties with the Trump administration.

In the international arena, the ACR-led war in Yemen and the atrocities committed by the belligerents, likely amounting to war crimes, have led to much international outcry (Wintour 2019b). At the same time, however, the massive arms purchases and the funds flowing into war-related sectors—from consultancy to logistics as well as the building-up of a local arms industry—has meant that the UAE and KSA have strengthened alliances with the arms industry and parts of the political establishment in their core weapons suppliers, namely the U.S., UK, and France. Here, right-wing or centrist administrations have placed the importance of arms exports above human rights or a values-driven foreign policy, and have supported the countries involved in the Yemen war.

In a stark reversal, the U.S. redeployed troops to Saudi Arabia in 2019 after disturbances in the Gulf and explosions on oil tankers, pipelines, and port facilities (Al Omran 2019).<sup>6</sup> The Trump administration supported the ACR. It is widely assumed that President Trump, on his first foreign visit, which was to Saudi Arabia, gave some sort of green light for a punishment of Qatar, himself being apparently little aware of the strategic interests the U.S. has in Qatar (the U.S. Army moved from KSA to Qatar after the above-mentioned Saudi public critique of US troops there in the 1990s, and established a regional headquarter of the United States Central Command (USCENTCOM or CENTCOM) there). This made support for Saudi Arabia a partisan issue in the U.S. and across Europe, with the question of the stance on Saudi Arabia dividing opinions according to left-right binaries (Wintour 2019a; Cook 2019).

The countries of the ACR also supported the Trump administration's key Middle East peace plan, the Abraham Accords, and pushed for broader Arab support, including at a first conference held in Bahrain. This push further alienated Arab publics from the authoritarian

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6. U.S. troops officially withdrew in the 1990s after their deployment had led to the broad protest and indignation movement that would be called the Sahwa, the Awakening, and in which a local amalgam of MB and Wahhabi/Salafi networks were key.

rulers of the ACR, and strengthened the Washington-Tel Aviv-Abu Dhabi-Riyadh-Cairo axis. It is, however, a strong sign of alliance formation across the global and the regional levels, and one that crosses religious and identity divides, continuing along patterns established during the Cold War. The plan gave an idea of the long-term strategy of the ACR: No political rights, but infrastructure development, neoliberal investment strategies, real estate projects, tourism, technology hubs, and so on. MBS's utopian city Neom, located close to Israel in Saudi Arabia's northwest, epitomizes that strategy. Many of these projects have brought windfalls for foreign supporters of ACR states and continue a pattern of petrodollar recycling in return for political projection established during the Cold War and after the 1973 oil embargo (Spiro 1999).

A significant amount of authoritarian learning could also be observed, and was shared by the countries of the ACR and their non-Arab allies. Importantly, because the aim is in part to crush the ideas of the Arab uprisings and prevent connectivity and mobilization, much of which had taken place online—that is, digital surveillance technologies—were sold from Europe, Israel, the U.S., and China to the countries of the ACR. These also helped to influence debates on social media through the large-scale use of bots and Twitter troll farms, one of which was said to have been directed in Riyadh by Saud al-Qahtani, the MBS aide deemed responsible for Jamal Khashoggi's murder. The murder of the latter, a very public act of enforcing the acceptable limits by the ACR, occurred because Khashoggi was a regime insider who had defected; because he was embraced by the MB-Turkey-Qatar axis and grew close to Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, and because he was advocating the original ideas of the Arab uprisings and criticizing the core of the ACR's economic and political project: The rise of MBS and his economic reforms. In sum, a shared discourse, and legislation and practices intended to police deviations from this discourse, were put in place across the ACR states. The U.S. thus turned from a supporter of the Arab uprisings, at least on the rhetorical level, to a supporter of authoritarian "stability," as described by Sarah Yerkes in this volume. Also in this volume, Samer Abboud discusses how Russia supported the Axis of Resistance's counter-revolutionary policy, and Lisa Blaydes describes how rising global power China likewise was not interested in supporting democratic transitions, and was more comfortable with the ACR.

## 2019: Arab Spring 2.0 or Success of the Counter-Revolution

In 2019, Mohamed Morsi, Egypt's former president, died in an Egyptian jail after being deposed in a coup (a word the ACR despises, and prosecutes people for using it, insisting the Egyptian Army stepped in due to popular demand, and that it was thus a second revolution).<sup>7</sup> Egypt also saw protests in September 2019, and in the wake of them, mass arrests of what had remained of some of the intelligentsia and independent activists. The ACR had by this point become adept at learning the techniques of the Arab uprisings and adopting and using their tactics, such as mass protests and social media campaigns, to paralyze hostile governments to legitimize political takeovers, or to justify repression that would otherwise be hard to rationalize. The ACR has thus driven the Arab Spring *ad absurdum*.

The same year, Zine El Abdine Ben Ali died in exile in Saudi Arabia, to where he had fled as Tunisians were taking down his government. Few events could symbolize more clearly the alliances of the ACR. Ben Ali was not allowed to return to Tunisia and died in cushy exile. But by the time of his death, the ACR had put in place a regional order that had also strongly intervened in Tunisia to ensure that any possible transitions were limited, and had set as its goal the crushing of the movement that started in a provincial Tunisian town in late 2010. The success of the ACR was exacerbated by the fact that the so-called "Axis of Resistance" had itself adopted strongly counter-revolutionary measures, first in Syria and then in Iraq and Lebanon (where the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) implemented tactics it had employed against Iran's Green Movement in 2009). In Iraq, a mass movement, with broad support amongst Iraqi Shia, had taken to the streets for years, but protests intensified in 2019, directed against a political class widely seen as corrupt, and again sectarian and party politics that left most Iraqis on the outside looking in. The "Axis of Resistance," especially Iran and pro-Iranian Iraqi militias and politicians sensed that their control over Iraq was fundamentally in danger and intervened to suppress the movement with extreme force (Jabar 2018). These processes are elaborated on by David Patel in this volume. Simultaneously, Lebanon saw mass protests against the sectarian polit-

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7. For Egypt's strategies post-2013, see the discussion by Amr Hamzawy in this volume.



ical system, corruption, and Hezbollah's dominance of its politics, as argued by Lina Khatib, also in this volume. Hezbollah Secretary General Nasrallah initially endorsed some of the protestors' demands, trying to embrace the language of the Arab Spring, but once these protests also targeted the party and him specifically, Hezbollah and its allies moved toward repression.

## Conclusion

Simultaneous to the spread of the first protests as part of the Arab uprisings since late 2010, a coalition of countries, political blocs, personal networks, and individuals united to spearhead the Arab Counter-Revolution. Saudi Arabia and the UAE were key in this political bloc and have shaped its strategies and tactics and bankrolled it ever since. The ACR is directed both against an axis of regional states—the Turkey-Qatar-MB Axis and Iran's "Axis of Resistance"—as well as the general notion of the Arab uprisings, and the attempts by Arab countries to transition from authoritarianism to other forms of government. These three axes have used both soft and hard power to project their influence further across the Arab world, as discussed by Abbas Milani and Ayça Alemdaroğlu and Gönül Tol in this volume.

The efforts by the ACR to intervene even in small countries such as Tunisia have reinforced the notion that the Arab world is indeed a regional system, and every part of it matters more to actors within it, than do countries outside of it.<sup>8</sup> This is so because the Arab uprisings shared ideas and discourses that resonated in Arabic and across the Arab world. The ACR is thus not only an alliance aimed at countering the two rivaling axes, but also at the domestic politics of the Arab states, using tactics such as denunciation and demonization of opponents, mass surveillance of online communication, and a strict control of the Arab public sphere, coupled with promises of authoritarian stability and hydrocarbon-fueled oligarchic neoliberalism.

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8. This argument was forcefully made by Barnett (1998) for the twentieth century, but the post-2010 period has reaffirmed some of these notions. It needs, of course to be relativized in the sense that Arab states worry greatly about Turkey, Iran, and Israel, but they, with the exception of states that are directly affected or neighboring these states, worry much less about the acts of Ethiopia, Armenia, Georgia, Greece, Albania, Senegal, Portugal, Malta, or the domestic politics in those states, to name but a few examples.

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## 17 | Myths of Expansion

### Turkey's Changing Policy in the Arab World

*Ayça Alemdaroğlu and Gönül Tol*

Turkey's approach to the Arab countries has been transformed significantly over the last decade as the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) leaders became much concerned about Turkey's image and influence in the Arab region. This growing interest in relations with Arab countries had the goal of asserting Turkey's power as a regional leader, a vision also encouraged in international policy circles, and the U.S. governments under Presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama. Turkey's strong economic growth in the 2000s, along with democratic reforms made in the framework of the EU accession process, made Turkey a model of development and democracy in the region. Turkey's increasing prestige in the international scene also drew on a new foreign policy orientation that aimed to reconnect Turkey with other Muslim countries through increasing economic cooperation, political patronage, and cultural influence. This new foreign policy activism to carve a "big brother" role is dubbed as "neo-Ottomanism" by domestic and international observers.

However, the AKP's new approach and the projected pathway to global influence has not panned out as envisioned. After the early days of the Arab uprisings—which fueled the AKP government's aspirations to shape political transformations in the region, particularly in Egypt and Syria—Turkey found itself in a profoundly problematic position. The government's commitment to empowering Muslim Brotherhood-linked groups, mistaken calculations, and uncompromising response to political developments in both countries post-2011 have left Turkey with no allies or friends—other than Qatar—in the neighborhood. In

the face of mounting domestic economic and political problems, President Erdoğan has resorted to aggressive nationalism and military expansionism to preserve his populist authoritarian regime.

Turkey currently has a military presence in several Arab-majority countries, including Syria, Iraq, Qatar, Libya, Sudan, Somalia, and the NATO-led missions in the Balkans. The country's military footprint has not been this extensive since the demise of the Ottoman Empire. A great part of this expansion took place after 2015. Between 2015 and 2018, the share of military expenditure increased from 1.8 percent to 2.5 percent of the Gross Domestic Product (Hacaloğlu 2020). This period was also marked by mounting domestic opposition to the AKP's populist authoritarian regime, which culminated in the loss of the AKP's majority in Parliament after the June 2015 elections. In response, the AKP formed an alliance with the ultra-nationalists to regain majority in November snap elections.

Syria, Turkey's largest and most combative mission, sits at the intersection of expansionary foreign policy and the AKP regime's domestic troubles. Turkey's involvement in Syria began with military and organizational assistance to Syrian opposition groups. Since 2016, the Turkish military has conducted several operations, and the Turkish Army, together with Turkish-backed rebels, gained control over vast stretches of territory in the north, hosting nearly 4 million people. In three cities, including Al-Bab, Jarablus, and Tel-Abyad, Turkey exercises direct rule, opens schools, fixes hospitals, trains security forces, and appoints bureaucrats. These areas were also recently added to the Turkish lira zone.

Turkey's involvement in Syria took shape in the context of a weakening liberal-international order associated with three factors. The first was the tragic U.S. intervention in Iraq. A second factor was the disruption of the prevailing political order following the Arab uprisings. Finally, the ambiguous role of the U.S. in the Middle East, as Sarah Yerkes describes in this volume, combined with the first two factors to open space for a new set of actors—including Turkey—and associated power struggles in the region. Many in the international media analyze Turkey's military expansion as part of the neo-Ottomanist grand strategy (The World 2020). However, notwithstanding its appeal as a shortcut description of Turkey's new ambitions, this overused concept fails to explain the changing dynamics of Turkish foreign policy, particularly its heightened militarism, newfound expansionism, and troubled entanglement with the domestic crisis of Erdoğan's authoritarian regime.

Scholars have long recognized domestic politics' role in determining foreign policy choices (e.g., Hobson 1975 [1902]; Tilly 1985; Snyder 1991). The emphasis on domestic politics shifted Turkey scholars' focus from the international order to the national social, economic, and ideological factors of foreign policy, including the role of ideological and pragmatic politics in shaping the AKP's foreign policy revisionism (Kirisçi 2009; Zarakol 2012; Hintz 2018; Çağaptay 2019a; Tol 2019).

This chapter takes this analysis one step further to examine Turkey's changing relations with Arab countries, particularly Turkey's involvement in Syria as related to developments in domestic politics and the survival tactics of a populist authoritarian leader. The first section lays out the historical and domestic background to Turkey's recent opening toward Arab countries and will explain how this policy became untenable following the Arab uprisings. The second section offers a closer look at the conditions of the diversion from the "soft-power" and "zero-problems with neighbors" approach that once defined the AKP's foreign policy opening. It explains Turkey's military and administrative expansion in Syria, and how President Erdoğan and the Turkish military justify this policy primarily by the "myth of security"—the idea that Turkey's safety can only be maintained through expansion (Synder 1991). However, this policy stems from the parochial interests of nationalist groups, on which the political survival of the President and the AKPs depends. Moreover, as Turkey's involvement in Syria leads to costs that exceed associated benefits for security, peace, and prosperity in the region, this corresponds to what Synder refers to as "overexpansion." The final section elaborates on the costs of Turkish policy in terms of deepening ethnic cleavages, radicalization, and fragmentation in Syria.

### **"Neo-Ottomanism" and Turkey's Increasing Interest in Arab Countries**

The Turkish foreign policy has fundamentally transformed in the last two decades under the AKP rule from following a conventional protransatlantic agenda to a proactive and pragmatist approach to diversify its international partners and influence. This soft-power proactivism, often dubbed as neo-Ottomanism, reached an impasse in the Middle East in its relation to Arab countries. It is important to account for the domestic and international conditions of the emergence of this policy change to understand its predicament.

### *Foreign Policy in the AKP's Early Years*

The AKP came to power in 2002, about a year after its establishment, with a sweeping victory forming the first outright majority government that Turkey had seen in over a decade. While the leaders and the core of party cadres came from previous pro-Islamist parties, the new party distanced itself from religious ideology. Instead, it adopted a conservative democrat identity akin to Christian democrat parties in Europe. In the beginning, the party's leaders adhered to the pre-established foreign policy tenets: A pro-transatlantic perspective, hitherto actualized in Turkey's joining the Council of Europe in 1949, NATO in 1952, the OECD as one of its founding members in 1961, the EU Customs Union in 1995, and finally, becoming an EU candidate country for full membership in 1999. In the meantime, Turkey generally pursued an aloof approach toward Muslim-majority countries in the Middle East. While it took advantage of economic opportunities as they arose in Libya, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia, it was less concerned about domestic politics in these countries. Nor was pre-AKP foreign policy too focused on fortifying mutual relations. However, good relationships were formed with Israel, and Turkey became the first Muslim-majority country to recognize the Israeli state in 1949.

The AKP furthered this pro-transatlantic perspective by fully embracing the EU membership goal. During the first few years of its rule, Turkey became closest to its century-long quest to become part of Europe. In the EU accession framework, the AKP undertook significant political reforms to abolish the death penalty, eliminate torture, and deal with the Kurdish problem by extending cultural and language rights (Öniş and Yılmaz 2009). The EU commitment, along with International Monetary Fund-guided reforms, was instrumental in regulatory changes, decreasing inflation to single-digit numbers and attracting significant foreign direct investment. These changes, combined with the large-scale privatization of state enterprises, the expansion of the consumer credit market, and the booming construction and tourism sectors, created an impressive economic growth, advancing Turkey to the seventeenth-largest economy in the world and a member of the G20 (Kirisçi 2009).

The pro-EU policy agenda and economic growth helped the AKP gain support from social groups previously suspicious of the party. The widely supported democratization reforms in the EU accession framework also helped weaken opposing secularist nationalist groups



entrenched in the state (Hintz 2018). In the meantime, the AKP filled the state cadres with its supporters, especially with the Gülen Cemaat—a closely-knit religious network led by the U.S.-based Turkish Muslim preacher, Fethullah Gülen, who facilitated the AKP’s capture of the state bureaucracy.

In the 2007 general election, the party increased its votes from 34 percent in 2002 to 46 percent. In 2008, with the EU’s support, it successfully fought off the closure case opened against it at the Constitutional Court on the grounds of violating the secularism of the state. Confident of his popularity and ability to fight the secularist establishment, Erdoğan started taking control of the military, judiciary, and other institutions, which, as pillars of secularism, previously had closed down many political Islamist parties. In a wave of “kangaroo court” cases organized between 2008 and 2011 by Gülenists, many generals, journalists, and university professors were jailed. The imprisonment of nearly a quarter of Turkey’s high-rank military officials led to the resignation of top generals en masse in 2011 (Cağaptay 2019b).

### *Turkish Soft Power and “Zero-Problems” with Neighbors?*

Having consolidated its power at home, and amid confusing messages coming from the European Union about Turkey’s membership, the government focused more intensely on the regional neighborhood. By the time popular uprisings began sweeping the Arab world, Turkey had already forged close economic, political, and cultural ties. The rise of an Islamist-rooted party—particularly one that did not share secularists’ skepticism vis-à-vis the region—provided an opening to the AKP’s ascendancy in the Middle East.

Turkey embarked on a mission to transform itself into a regional superpower. To then Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu and many in the Arab world, Turkey—a democratic, secular Muslim nation participating in key Western institutions like NATO—could serve as a model for the Middle East. Trade and the historical, cultural, and social ties to the region became pillars of Turkey’s efforts to usher in a new era of strengthened relations with the Middle East. Hundreds of businesspeople accompanied AKP officials on their official visits to the region. The Middle East became a “hot” market for Turkish products. Turkey started mediating regional conflicts such as the conflict in Lebanon and between different Palestinian factions, Israel and Syria, Afghani-

stan and Pakistan, and Iran and the West, and playing a pivotal role in regional institutions.

Middle Eastern constituencies welcomed Turkey's involvement in the region. The Turkish Parliament's "no" vote on U.S. military deployment in Turkey during the 2003 invasion of Iraq elevated Turkey's image among Arab publics; this was despite Erdoğan's initial backing of the resolution in favor of the United States. Arab publics—frustrated with stagnant economies and lack of political freedoms—looked to Turkey as a democratic, prosperous Muslim nation aspiring to become a member of the European Union. Arab leaders welcomed Turkey's new activism, seeing it as an opportunity to advance their interests. Turkey's standing up to Israel was well received. The Saudi King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz's award to Erdoğan for his "service to Islam" underscored the new chapter in the relationship between Ankara and regional capitals. Another indicator of a volte-face in regional perceptions of Turkey was the standing ovation the then Turkish President Abdullah Gül's speech criticizing the Muslim world's track record on democracy and human rights at the Organization of the Islamic Conference received in 2010. Helping this shift in bilateral relations was the declining importance of Arab nationalism (Tol and Başkan 2018).

The AKP's engagement in regional affairs and use of the Ottoman past to reconnect with the Middle East resembled previous efforts. In the 1980s, Turgut Özal, a center-right leader who transformed Turkey into a market economy, had invoked the Ottoman Empire as a model to incorporate Muslim and Kurdish identities excluded by the Kemalist nation state, creating more inclusive and multicultural citizenship. Özal's approach translated into efforts to cultivate close ties with the Middle East and Central Asia. In the 1990s, following the Soviet Union's demise, Turkey's ruling politicians and diplomats focused much attention on the newly independent Central Asian republics to strengthen political and economic cooperation building on ethnic ties. Ismail Cem, a social democrat who served as the Foreign Minister in the late 1990s, pushed for a more assertive Middle East policy and made references to the country's Ottoman past to reconnect with the region. However, the interest in the Ottoman citizenship model did not measure to a geopolitical realignment or deviation from the transatlantic political agenda. The AKP's pre-2011 policy adopted a similar approach. The AKP's vision did not aim to replace Turkey's EU and NATO commitments (Fisher-Onar 2016; Çağaptay 2019a). Instead, it sought to

strengthen ties with Muslim regions and use them as leverage in relations with the EU and the U.S.

Former Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu (2009–14), who also served as prime minister between 2014 and 2016, laid out the three main pillars of the new foreign policy vision. First, implement the diversification of international partners and adopting a proactive policy to form new alliances. Second, prioritize former Ottoman territories in the Balkans, Africa, and the Middle East based on historical and religious connections. Third, achieve “zero problems with neighbors” via a soft power approach to further Turkey’s economic and cultural influence, assume a significant mediator role in regional and global issues, and become a pivotal actor that sets the order in its proximate geographies (Öniş and Yılmaz 2009).

Erdoğan and Davutoğlu were wary of the term “neo-Ottomanism,” which scholars and journalists used to describe Turkey’s new vision, due to the resentment it might generate in former imperial geographies (Fisher-Onar 2016). For instance, on January 17, 2011, Erdoğan wrote in *Newsweek*:

Turkey is becoming a global and regional player with its soft power. Turkey is rediscovering its neighborhood, one that had been overlooked for decades. It is following a proactive foreign policy stretching from the Balkans to the Middle East, and the Caucasus. Turkey’s “zero-problem, limitless trade” policy with the countries of the broader region aims to create a haven of nondogmatic stability for all of us. We have visa-free travel with 61 countries. This is not a romantic neo-Ottomanism: It is real-politik based on a new vision of the global order. (Erdoğan 2011)

The AKP’s soft power approach significantly facilitated economic relations with the countries in the Middle East. Turkey’s business with the region grew sevenfold between 2003 and 2012, to \$65 billion. A large part of this trade was the import of hydrocarbons and the export of precious metal, electrical equipment, vehicles, heavy machinery, and cultural products. The trade of services has also increased. Turkish companies gained a pivotal role in some of the largest construction projects across the region, such as Doha Metro and Abu Dhabi Airport. Turkish cultural products, notably Turkish television series, have found large audiences in the Middle East, thanks to Turkey’s extensive distribution network, which ranked as only second to that of the U.S. in the early

2010s (Bhutto 2019). Turkish cultural influence helped increase the number of tourists from the region. Especially when the turmoil in the Middle East took tourist destinations in Egypt and Tunisia off the list, Turkey filled the gap.

This new foreign policy orientation was not revolutionary; instead, it supported and benefited from the regional status quo. It worked to strengthen Turkey's relations in the region but respected the secularists' anti-Kurdish and anti-Islamist sensitivities. More significantly, the AKP refrained from using Islamic symbols in its public diplomacy, pursued a non-sectarian agenda, and advanced relations with immediate neighbors after securing their partnership in the fight against the PKK. The AKP's pro-Western foreign policy and its cautious approach vis-à-vis the Middle East helped the party's claim that it had broken with its Islamist past and had become a party that promoted close ties to the West. Pursuing this policy was necessary for the AKP not to provoke the secularist establishment that remained powerful more or less until 2010, and to consolidate its power at home. On the eve of the Arab uprisings, Middle Eastern analysts, also impressed with Turkey's record of economic growth, democratic reforms, and conciliatory foreign policy recognized it as a good example for other Muslim countries (Hamzawy 2007).

### *The Impact of Arab Uprisings on Turkish Foreign Policy*

The Arab uprisings changed everything in Turkey, particularly insofar as they provided Erdoğan with an opportunity to legitimize a further power grab at home. Erdoğan wanted to transform the country's parliamentary system into a presidential system, with few checks and balances. The coalition he formed supported his democratization agenda in his early years in power, but would not back his presidential ambitions. Hence, he turned to his conservative and Islamist base. To galvanize them, he embarked on a process of Islamization at home and in foreign policy. He often referred to the Islamic civilization and claimed Turkey's role as its leader.

The uprisings that started toppling secularist authoritarian regimes and paving the way for the rise of Islamist actors helped Erdoğan adopt a civilizational narrative at home that defined Turkey as a Muslim nation destined to lead the Muslim world. For the AKP elite, the “*new Turkey*” was rising up to claim its rightful place in a “*new Middle East*” where the influence of the West and Israel would be diminished (Ayata

2015). They framed the uprisings as efforts replicating the AKP's own experience as an Islamist-rooted party coming to power through democratic means and curbing the influence of secularist military (Özhan 2011). This narrative defining Turkey as a Muslim nation that had freed itself from the effects of Westernization and a Westernized elite provided Erdoğan the opportunity to legitimize his efforts to sideline his critics and reject power-sharing. He defined his supporters as "native and national" (*yerli ve milli*) and his critics as "alien" (Çınar 2018). He directed the country's institutions, including the judiciary, to serve the "national interest," while he criminalized opposition and consolidated power in his own hands. The civilizational rhetoric he adopted legitimized his power grab and paved the way for a more systematic Islamization politics. In 2012, Erdoğan launched a project to raise "pious generations." He poured billions of dollars into religious education (Alemdaroğlu 2018). Erdoğan also delegated welfare provision to faith-based voluntary associations, which started playing more prominent roles in various sectors of society, and implemented social and family policies designed to cater to the associations' religiously conservative base (Kaya 2015).

Erdoğan pursued a similar line on the foreign policy front. He turned increasingly anti-Western, supported Islamist movements in the region, and became a revolutionary power bent on changing the regional status quo he once supported. Erdoğan's victory speech, that he delivered after his party won a landslide victory of 50 percent of the vote in June 2011 elections, heralded his heightened regional aspirations and what was to come. His speech in the parliament was vivid: "Believe me, Sarajevo won today as much as Istanbul, Beirut won as much as Izmir, Damascus won as much as Ankara, Ramallah, Nablus, Jenin, the West Bank, Jerusalem won as much as Diyarbakır" (BBC 2011).

The fall of secularist authoritarian regimes, together with the AKP's consolidation of power in domestic politics, provided Erdoğan and Davutoğlu with newfound confidence to push pro-Islamist ideological agenda both at home and in the region. Erdoğan's strong support for the Muslim Brotherhood government in Egypt and his disavowal of the Abdel-Fattah al-Sisi's presidency was the epitome of this ideological push. However, this policy clashed with the interests of major players such as Saudi Arabia and the Gulf monarchies and their commitment to keeping the Muslim Brotherhood in check, and ultimately throwing

Turkey from the ideal of “zero problems” to the actuality of mounting problems with neighbors (Çağaptay 2019b).

Media representations of Turkey in the Arab world testify to this transformation and the failure of Turkey’s Middle East policy in the aftermath of the 2013 overthrow of the Muslim Brotherhood government in Egypt (Livas 2015). An article published in November of the same year, in the UAE-based *Al-Khaleej Daily* captures the reactions to the perception of Turkey’s Egypt policy in the region:

Turkey’s positions even reached the extent of crudely interfering with Egypt’s domestic affairs and inciting NATO against Egypt. Official Turkish political statements offend Egypt’s political values and its status in the Arab and Islamic world. Turkey does not have the right to interfere with Egypt’s domestic affairs. It seems that the AK Party, the ruling party in Turkey, is unwilling to revisit its positions concerning the regional situation. It even does not want to be loyal to its famous slogan, “zero problems.” The AK Party was sincerely hoping that Egypt, with all its history, civilization, and weight, would turn into a bridge for the Turkish dreams of expansion in Africa and the Arab world. However, this hope was chased away by the failure of the Muslim Brotherhood. (Livas 2015, 6–7)

The shift in Turkish foreign policy did not deliver the aspired results and left Turkey isolated in the Middle East, dependent on a fragile relationship with Russia and with weaker ties with its traditional allies, Europe and the U.S. (Selcen 2019; Erdemir and Koduyavur 2019; Çağaptay 2019a). Turkey’s involvement in the war in Syria was not only a final blow to the country’s image as a benevolent international mediator and soft powerhouse, but also marked the most ambitious international and military undertaking in the history of the Turkish Republic, with challenging outcomes for the future of politics in the region.

### **Turkey in Syria: Hard Power and Expansionist Foreign Policy**

Turkey’s changing relations with its neighbor Syria gives an important insight to understand the links of Turkish foreign policy to domestic power politics in the last decade (Tol 2022). Turkey and Syria—Ottoman

provinces before the empire's demise—share a long history and populations of Arab, Kurdish, and Turkmen with connections on both sides of the modern border. However, the relationship between Turkey and Syria since the early twentieth century has been shaped by several contentious issues. These issues include Turkey's annexation of Hatay Province in 1939; Syria's welcoming of the Kurdistan Workers' Party outlawed by Turkey since 1980; Turkey's concerns about Syria's fostering Arab nationalism in Hatay; Turkey's turning a blind eye (if not actively supporting) to Syrian Muslim Brotherhood groups aligned against Hafez al-Assad, and finally the contentious issue of water distribution, inflamed by Turkey's large dam projects on the Euphrates (Öniş and Yılmaz 2009; Özkan 2019; Marvar 2019).

Despite these tensions, the relations between the two countries improved significantly in the 2000s. Syria's decision to expel the PKK's leader Abdullah Öcalan in 1998—followed by Bashar al-Assad's ascendance to power after his father's death in 2000 and the AKP's election in 2002—turned a new page, albeit briefly, in the relationship. Syria became the first stop in the AKP's soft power expansion in the Middle East. As one observer articulated in the 2000s, Syria became “the bedrock of Turkey's much-vaunted move toward the Arab world and its re-engagement with regions on which Atatürk and his successive Kemalist Generals had shut a door,” overturning the long animosity between two countries (Alam 2020).

### *Turkish Involvement in Syria after 2011*

The U.S.'s increasing ambivalence about its role in the Middle East also allowed Erdoğan the opportunity to shape Turkey's foreign policy and involvement in Syria in line with his domestic calculations. The Syrian uprisings coincided with a new era in which Erdoğan consolidated power at home and sidelined his secularist opponents, ending the previous period when Erdoğan treaded cautiously at home and on the foreign policy front, in order to not provoke the secularist military. This new era called for an Islamist agenda at home and in the region. Supporting the Islamists who rose against Assad was part of that domestic strategy. The Syrian uprising presented Erdoğan and Davutoğlu an opportunity to topple what they called a “minority” regime and replace it with “true Muslims.” From the early days of the Syrian Civil War, Turkey—in coordination with Qatar and the U.S.—took on a significant role in the organization of

the Free Syrian Army by providing shelter, arms, health services, and military training within Turkey (Stack 2011). Meanwhile, Turkey also began to organize and arm Turkmen groups, to serve as critical assets inside Syria against Assad's forces and Kurdish groups (Xudosi 2019). Turkmen groups later joined with Turkish-backed Free Syrian Army groups to form the Syrian National Army (SNA) and played an important role in Turkey's operations, including their deployment to back the General Accord Government against the rebel forces (Deutsche Welle 2020).

In June 2012, upon Syria's downing of a Turkish jet and killing two pilots, Turkey declared Syria a "clear and imminent threat" (BBC 2012). In October 2012, the Turkish Parliament passed a resolution to authorize the government to conduct cross-border military operations. However, not before 2016, Turkey moved from sporadic cross-border clashes to a series of unilateral military operations in Syria.

The first operation, Euphrates Shield, was launched in August 2016 to remove the Islamic State off the border region between Jarablus and Al-Bab. But, equally crucial for Turkey was to stop the advancement of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)—a force composed of Arab and Kurdish forces—to prevent the establishment of a contiguous Kurdish-dominated territory at the border. The second operation, Olive Branch, launched in 2018, took over the Kurdish-controlled Afrin following the U.S.'s announcement to train a 30,000-strong border force. The U.S.'s decision to withdraw its troops from northeast Syria gave the green light to President Erdoğan to begin a third offensive, Operation Peace Spring, to SDF-controlled territory between Tel Abyad and Ras al-Ain in October 2019.

As Turkey's military actions in Syria continued to stifle Kurdish military forces, the Turkish government achieved a tenacious dominance beyond its southern border with direct rule in Tel Abyad, Jarablus, and Afrin, and through an autonomous administration in Idlib (Aydıntaşbaş 2020). Reports from the field indicated that the Syria Assistance and Coordination Center (SUDKOM)—a new government agency linked to Sanliurfa Governorate in southeast Turkey—helped coordinate the Turkish administration in what is designated as "the Operation Peace Spring Region." The SUDKOM together with Turkey's Red Crescent and the Presidency of Disaster Management and Emergency under the Minister of Interior, coordinated public services, such as public hygiene, provision of basic needs such as food, and clothing, as well as services for the reconstruction and betterment public building, streets,



and the environment. The recently opened courthouses, hospitals, schools and higher education institutions (Ashawi, Dadouch, and Coskun 2017, Beyer 2017, Hürriyet 2018) in northern Syria run either by bureaucrats appointed from Turkey or in consultation with them, were akin to an infrastructural Turkish state formation in the region (Adar 2020b). Together with the renewed signs of public buildings in Arabic and Turkish, and the creation of Turkish lira zone replacing the Syrian pound in Turkish-controlled areas and Idlib (Alsouria 2020), these developments beg the question about the durability of Turkish occupation and its effect on the postwar settlement in Syria.

### *Myths of Expansion and the Political Survival of Erdoğan*

International media portrays Turkey's military undertaking in Syria as another example of a neo-Ottomanist foreign policy (Berman 2019, Lin 2019, Papalucas 2019). This term has been used to capture a wide range of policies toward Syria, including Erdoğan's rapprochement with Bashar al-Assad in the late 2000s; his subsequent support for the Syrian opposition post-2011, and finally military incursions and direct rule in northern Syria. As a result, the label of a neo-Ottoman foreign policy does not engender a nuanced understanding of Turkish foreign policy. More specifically, it obscures a heightened militarism and domestic motivation for war-making as a contribution to the survival of Erdoğan's authoritarian regime.

In *Myths of Empire*, Jack Snyder (1991) examines why some states over-expand in a way that the costs of expansion supersede its benefits. According to Snyder, counterproductive aggression builds on the idea that state security can be protected only by expansion. The myth of security through expansion, Snyder argues, justifies the policies of domestic political groups, who have parochial interests in expansion, militarism, and economic control. These groups logroll their various imperialist or military interests and self-serving policies by using arguments about security and national survival (Snyder 1991). Pro-expansionists create myths or "strategic rationalizations" to outwit and gain broad support from the public about the significance of threats and the benefits of offensive strategies. A state over-expands because expansion always benefits a few people greatly and costs many people only a little.

The timing of Turkey's first full-fledged military incursion in Syria in 2016 provides us important clues about the domestic interests

invested in the expansion. Launched in August 2016, a month after the bloody coup attempt in Turkey, the first operation surprisingly took place amid the government's extensive purge of state institutions and military, sacking a third of armed forces for their alleged connection to the U.S.-based Turkish cleric Gülen, whom the government accused of masterminding the 2016 coup attempt (Emmott 2016). This second purge—which followed a first in the late 2000s conducted with the Gülenists against secularists—allowed Erdoğan to restore power by incorporating various military and security factions in his power bloc. It offered these factions—who share concerns about national security and territorial integrity, despite their ideological differences—a logrolling opportunity to shape foreign policy (Adar 2020a).

The war and the PKK's Syrian offshoot, Democratic Union Party—PYD's move toward autonomy in Syria—helped Erdoğan consolidate the nationalist militarist alliance, which he first turned to following his defeat in June 2015 parliamentary elections. Thanks to the electoral success of the pro-Kurdish party HDP, the AKP lost its parliamentary majority for the first time in 2015. Instead, forming a coalition government, the AKP made a *de facto* alliance with the far-right Nationalist Action Party in the run-up to the snap elections in November. The MHP threw its support behind Erdoğan and his presidentialism bid. Erdoğan embraced the MHP's anti-Kurdish stance and ended the government's three-year-long negotiations with the PKK, began criminalizing legitimate Kurdish opposition, and re-launched military operations in Kurdish cities in the name of fighting terrorism. In any case, the June elections showed Erdoğan that the so-called “peace process” with the PKK had stopped paying dividends. Together with the spillover violence from the Syrian war, the period between June and November has been one of the darkest, if not *the* darkest, periods in modern Turkish history.

Erdoğan's nationalist turn at home changed his priorities in Syria. U.S. cooperation with the PKK's Syrian offshoot, the PYD, made it all the easier to justify his anti-Kurdish platform inside Turkey. By repressing Kurds on both sides of the border, Erdoğan rallied the Turks around the flag and built a new power bloc with military and nationalist interest groups that would ensure his political survival. However, reminded of Synder's argument about the “myth of expansion,” Erdoğan speaks of Turkey's hard power interventions in the Middle East as a struggle for national unity and survival, likening its involvement in Syria to the Turkish independence war from the occupation forces following World War I.

Any struggle Turkey refrains from in Libya, Syria or the Mediterranean would come back to haunt the country at a bigger cost, Erdoğan said . . . We must wage this struggle, so the threats that target our national unity and survival don't come back to us in our own fatherland as terrorism, political and economic woes, or instability . . . We are waging a new struggle for independence as a country and a nation. (Ahval 2020)

While the government points at an array of rivals justifying its hard power policy in the Middle East, ranging from the U.S.'s support for Fethullah Gülen to the competition over new hydrocarbon resources in the eastern Mediterranean, the Kurdish issue remains its most enduring survival myth. The military operations in Syria since 2016 proved to be a handy policy to boost the nationalist vote and a new ruling coalition for Erdoğan's survival. But it is not just that. Military operations and newly controlled lands also mean business for Turkish construction companies to rebuild cities and towns, military industry to continue armed presence, and other sectors as new markets (Karataşlı 2019). Hence, the Syria theater helps Erdoğan manage his regime's political and economic crises. Although Turkey's support for anti-Assad rebels in Syria and its ambitions to create a zone free of Assad's forces and the Kurdish-led SDF have created many troubles for Turkey's regional position, the conflict has helped Erdoğan reconfigure a new domestic alliance that placed narrow interest groups in charge of shaping foreign policy (Adar 2020a). Erdoğan used the policies of the PYD to justify his nationalist turn, which helped him win election after election. The end result was the vote in the referendum that transformed Turkey's parliamentary system into a presidential one, with Erdoğan becoming its first president with extensive powers.

However, the costs of Turkey's expansion supersede the benefits for Erdoğan. Its most notable adverse impact relates to the surprising vulnerability of Erdoğan in the 2019 local elections. The AKP lost almost all major cities to the opposition. The two main, interconnected reasons for the loss were the increasingly negative reaction to the AKP's open-door policy to Syrian refugees, and the state of the domestic economy. Since 2013, as Turkey's economic indicators go from bad to worse, the reaction to Syrian refugees has increasingly grown. Turkey hosts approximately 4 million refugees. Refugees' rapid influx in the labor market and exploitation by local firms drive down the country's working-class wages (Karataşlı 2019).

Especially since 2018, the Turkish lira's historic plunge led to widespread bankruptcies and record-level unemployment and growing anti-Syrian attitudes in the society channeled into a political reaction against the AKP.

The costs of the war have not been limited to its impact on Erdoğan's political survival. After nine years of involvement in Syria, one can argue that Turkish policy contributed to not only prolonging the war but also thwarting the most palpable chance for resolving Turkey's 40-year-long conflict with the PKK, while further alienating its Kurdish citizens with repression and violence toward Kurds on both sides of the border. Turkey forced the PYD and Kurdish forces to strike a deal with Assad and impaired efforts to consolidate Kurdish autonomy in northern Syria. Still, it is not clear how this policy will affect Turkey's national security in the long run. Turkey's support for anti-Assad rebels in Syria and its ambitions to create a zone free of Assad's forces and the Kurdish-led SDF will likely bear more troubles for Turkey in its regional position and national security.

### **The Impact of Turkey's Intervention on Politics in Syria**

When the Arab uprisings started, the AKP elites spoke about "being on the right side of history" and "supporting democratic aspirations of the peoples of the Middle East." To support the "democratic revolutions," they positioned Turkey as the organizational hub for the Syrian opposition and one of its principal foreign backers. Ironically, however, Turkey also became one of the leading outside actors that destroyed the very "revolution" that it so fervently supported.

Until June 2011, anti-regime protests remained largely peaceful despite the many atrocities committed by the regime against the peaceful demonstrators. That changed in June, however, and Turkey had a hand in it. In the Syrian border town of Jisr-al-Shugur, tens of Syrian Army soldiers and security personnel were killed, and their bodies were mutilated and thrown in the river. Opposition activists claimed that their superiors killed the soldiers because they were trying to defect. Others claimed that according to electronic interception of opposition communication, the opposition killed the soldiers (van Dam 2017, 87). Whatever the truth was, at that point—and with Turkey's help—the anti-regime protests in Syria had turned into a civil war, and radical Islamists had kidnapped the demonstrators' call for freedom. A

Turkish journalist who found ammunition on the site made by Turkey's Mechanical and Chemical Industry Corporation (*Makine ve Kimya Endustrisi Kurumu*)—which consists of government-controlled factories that supply Turkish Armed Forces with military products—was fired, but the *Guardian* confirmed the arms transfer into Jisr-al Shughur from Turkey (Chulov, MacAskill, and Densky 2012).

As Samer Abboud's chapter in this volume argues, Turkey's involvement in the Syrian conflict weakened the Syrian opposition. Turkey threw its full support behind the Muslim Brotherhood from the very first day. The Muslim Brotherhood's dominant position on the Syrian National Council (SNC)—the opposition umbrella organization established in Turkey drew criticism from the groups fighting on the ground, undermining the SNC's power and contributing to its eventual demise. Turkey-based exiles' prominent place in the SNC drew criticism from the groups fighting on the ground and contributed to the group's weak position. Erdoğan's domestic agenda shaped Turkey's Syria policy and the groups Ankara supported in the Syrian conflict.

After Erdoğan's domestic strategy shifted in 2015, so did his priorities in Syria. As he embarked on an anti-Kurdish platform at home, resuming the fight with the PKK and criminalizing legitimate Kurdish opposition, toppling the Assad regime took a back seat to curbing Kurdish influence in Syria. To that end, Turkey pushed the Syrian rebels fighting the Assad regime in Aleppo to join its fight against Kurdish forces in the north. Turkey's move sapped the rebellion of its rebels and eventually contributed to Aleppo's fall in 2016. That year, Turkey launched its first military incursion into northern Syria to curb Kurdish advances. By 2017, Ankara was working with the Assad regime and its allies, which helped Assad consolidate the territorial gains he had made. In return, Damascus and its allies acquiesced to Turkey's second military intervention into Afrin, a Kurdish enclave, in January 2018 (Tol 2019).

Turkey's policies in Syria also prompted radical Islamist groups. Turkey's indifference toward—and even tacit support for—the Islamic State (IS), and other jihadists, accelerated the conflict's jihadization. Turkey allowed jihadist groups to establish their cells in Turkish cities. Syrian-based jihadists—such as Hay' at Tahrir al-Sham (formerly known as Jabhat Fatah al-Sham and Jabhat al-Nusra) and Ahrar al-Sham—quickly recruited Turkey's own radical Islamists. As Ankara refused to close its long border with Syria, citing humanitarian concerns for refugees, jihadists exploited the security vacuum. According to jihadists' accounts, Turkish officials turned a blind eye to the cross-

border jihadi traffic. Thousands of Turkish jihadists—many under the pretense of doing humanitarian work—traveled to Syria to join radical groups. Ankara was also slow to take action against the Islamic State and dragged its feet in allowing the U.S.-led anti-IS coalition to operate from its NATO airbase (Tahiroğlu and Schanzer 2017). In 2014, a Turkish truck stopped by Turkish gendarmerie officers illuminated the extent of Turkish support to the jihadis across the border. Despite the Turkish government's claim that the truck fleet was carrying humanitarian aid for Syria's Turkmen, the testimony of gendarmerie officers in court indicated that the trucks were moving rocket parts, ammunition, and semi-finished mortar shells (Pamuk and Tattesall 2015). Moreover, it was reported that Turkish intelligence officials were accompanying them to parts of Syria under jihadist control.

Turkish policies also intensified ethnic friction in Syria. Early in the conflict in Syria, Turkey pressured the Syrian opposition not to address Kurdish concerns and enlisted its Arab proxies to fight the Kurds. After its military interventions, Turkey pursued policies to change the ethnic make-up of Kurdish majority towns. Afrin was one of them. After Turkey and its Arab proxies swept in the northwestern Kurdish city of Afrin in 2018, nearly all its Kurdish residents were forced to flee as their homes were seized and redistributed to Arab families from areas captured by Assad's forces, which led to growing resentment among Kurds toward Arabs, deepening the Arab-Kurdish tension (Chulov and Saheen 2018). Turkey pursued similar policies in the Syrian towns it came to control. To uproot Kurdish self-rule in northern Syria, Turkey transferred hundreds of people to the northeastern city of Tel Abyad from the territories under its control (Taşkent 2020). There are widespread reports that Turkey's Arab proxies engage in looting and abuse against the Kurds in the areas they seize.

## Conclusion

Turkey's opening to the Arab Middle East under the government of the Justice and Development Party took place in the context of growing economic capacity, an interest in diversifying international partners, and in using new connections to leverage Turkey's position vis-à-vis its transatlantic allies. In the late 2000s, this Middle East orientation became an even more notable feature of Ankara's foreign affairs. This new vision entailed soft power expansion, formulated by Ahmed

Davutoğlu as “zero problems with neighbors,” and strengthened relations with countries that Turkey has historical, cultural, and religious ties with stemming from the Ottoman past. Analysts have dubbed this turn as “neo-Ottomanism,” indicating Turkey’s newfound ambition to revive influence in geographies that were ruled by the Ottoman Empire. While the term is a shorthand one, that captures the AKP’s ideological perspective, it limits a more comprehensive understanding of Turkish foreign policy under the AKP in two crucial ways. First, it blurs how the AKP’s priorities and strategies have changed about the Arab Middle East over the years. And second, it conceals how these changes are linked to power dynamics in domestic politics, particularly the survival tactics of Erdoğan’s authoritarian but crisis-laden regime.

The chapter builds on these two points, first, by explaining the circumstances and outcomes of Turkey’s increasing relations with Arab countries, the new soft-power vision, and the opportunities and challenges created by Arab uprisings. Second, by focusing on Turkey-Syria relations, it explained how the Syrian uprising and the ensuing civil war pushed a fundamental change replacing soft power vision with hard power tactics to expand Turkish influence. The chapter argued that the main cause of this shift was Erdoğan’s alliance with the ultra-nationalist party to preserve power after its defeat in the June 2015 elections. The AKP’s shift to militarist nationalism especially vis-à-vis the Kurds on both sides of the border brought not only an end to the so-called “peace process” with the PKK at home, but also paved the way to unilateral military incursions and Turkish control over a long stretch of territory with about 4 million people in northern Syria.

While Erdoğan justified Turkey’s operations in Syria in terms of national survival and security, in reality these operations aimed to sustain his power by solidifying the support of fringe nationalist groups and his voter base through a “rally around the flag” effect. However, Turkey’s Syria policy has neither served Erdoğan to the extent he projected nor strengthened Turkey’s national security in the long run. In addition to losing an unprecedented opportunity of conciliation with the Kurds in Turkey, Turkey’s adventure in Syria led to a prolonged war, deepened ethnic divisions, strengthened radical groups in Syria, and war-stricken populations on both sides of the border with an increasing financial and humanitarian burden on the Turkish government. The AKP’s significantly weakened electoral support in the 2019 local elections due to growing resentment toward Syrian refugees and economic problems indicated that the costs of Turkey’s involvement in Syria have far exceeded its benefits even for Erdoğan. As the financial

crisis further deepens with the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, the costs of Turkey's overexpansion will continue to rise.

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## 18 | Conclusion

### The Ongoing Struggle for Political Reform in the Arab World

*Larry Diamond*

This volume appears at a time of deepening recession for freedom and democracy in the Arab world, as well as globally. As our chapters make clear, and as the Introduction explains, the hopes for political opening and reform raised a decade ago by the Arab uprisings were rather quickly thwarted, squandered, or preempted in most of the region. By February 2012, popular protests had toppled long-ruling autocrats in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen; had challenged them in Syria and Bahrain; and had pressed demands for political reform in Morocco, Algeria, Jordan, Iraq, Kuwait, and Oman. Only in Tunisia, however, did a popular movement lead to a functioning democracy, or even to a liberalized autocracy. Elsewhere, reform prospects imploded or were crushed by internal divisions and strategic deficits among opposition forces, by external subversion, principally from rival oil-rich Gulf states, and by the superior political, financial, and coercive resources of the authoritarian regimes. In the most consequential of these reversals of fortune, the euphoric success of Egyptian protestors in toppling the 30-year reign of President Hosni Mubarak was followed by a chaotic period of political competition and fragmentation, in which the narrow victory of the Muslim Brotherhood presidential candidate, Mohamed Morsi, led to political polarization and deadlock, abuse of power, and finally a military coup on July 3, 2013. The author of that coup, General Abdel-Fattah al-Sisi, has proved to be more authoritarian than Mubarak was at any point during his rule, and more durable than most observers then imagined. In March 2011, military interven-

tion by Saudi Arabia, through the mechanism of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), saved the Bahraini monarchy, which was under siege by street protests led by the marginalized Shia majority. In Libya, Syria, and Yemen, the state collapsed into civil wars that were exploited and intensified by powerful external actors, including Russia, which saved the murderous regime of Bashar al-Assad. In Morocco, Algeria, Jordan, Kuwait, and Oman, varying combinations of (superficial) political concessions and political repression managed to maintain or restore the equilibrium of authoritarian rule.

Within a few years of the inception of the Arab Spring protests, the region had largely returned not to the status quo ante but to forms of political rule that were more repressive and certainly more intrusive, as a result of the growing reliance of Arab regimes—and particularly the resource-rich Gulf states—on sophisticated digital surveillance technologies imported both from China and from Western companies. The data tell a discouraging story. By 2020, the states of the Middle East and North Africa had declined by 17 percent in their average score on the annual Freedom House 100-point scale of political rights and civil liberties, compared to their levels in 2005.<sup>1</sup> As we see in figure 18.1, two other scales of democracy (the Economist Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index, and the Varieties of Democracy, or V-Dem, scale of Electoral Democracy) also showed significant declines, at least from the peak levels of freedom in 2012 or 2013.

We can decompose the annual Freedom House scores into three scales of political rights, civil liberties, and transparency/rule of law (as I have done annually for some years now). As we see in figure 18.2, each of those scales have steadily declined since the demise of the Arab uprisings around 2012. In particular, after a significant increase in 2012, to an average score for the region of 0.36 (on a standardized scale of zero to one), the average level of political rights in the region steadily declined to 0.27 (lower than at any point in the years preceding the Arab Spring). Civil liberties have also modestly but steadily declined (to an average score of 0.32), and the rule of law has slightly declined (to

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1. This is the calculation of the author based on annual Freedom House data for the 16 Arab states listed in figure 18.1, plus Iran and Turkey (<https://freedomhouse.org/countries/freedom-world/scores>). For the purpose of this analysis, Sudan was grouped with sub-Saharan Africa, not the MENA region. The declines during this period on two other democracy scales were more modest however: 2.2 percent for the V-Dem scale of Electoral Democracy and 0.7 percent for the Economist Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index.

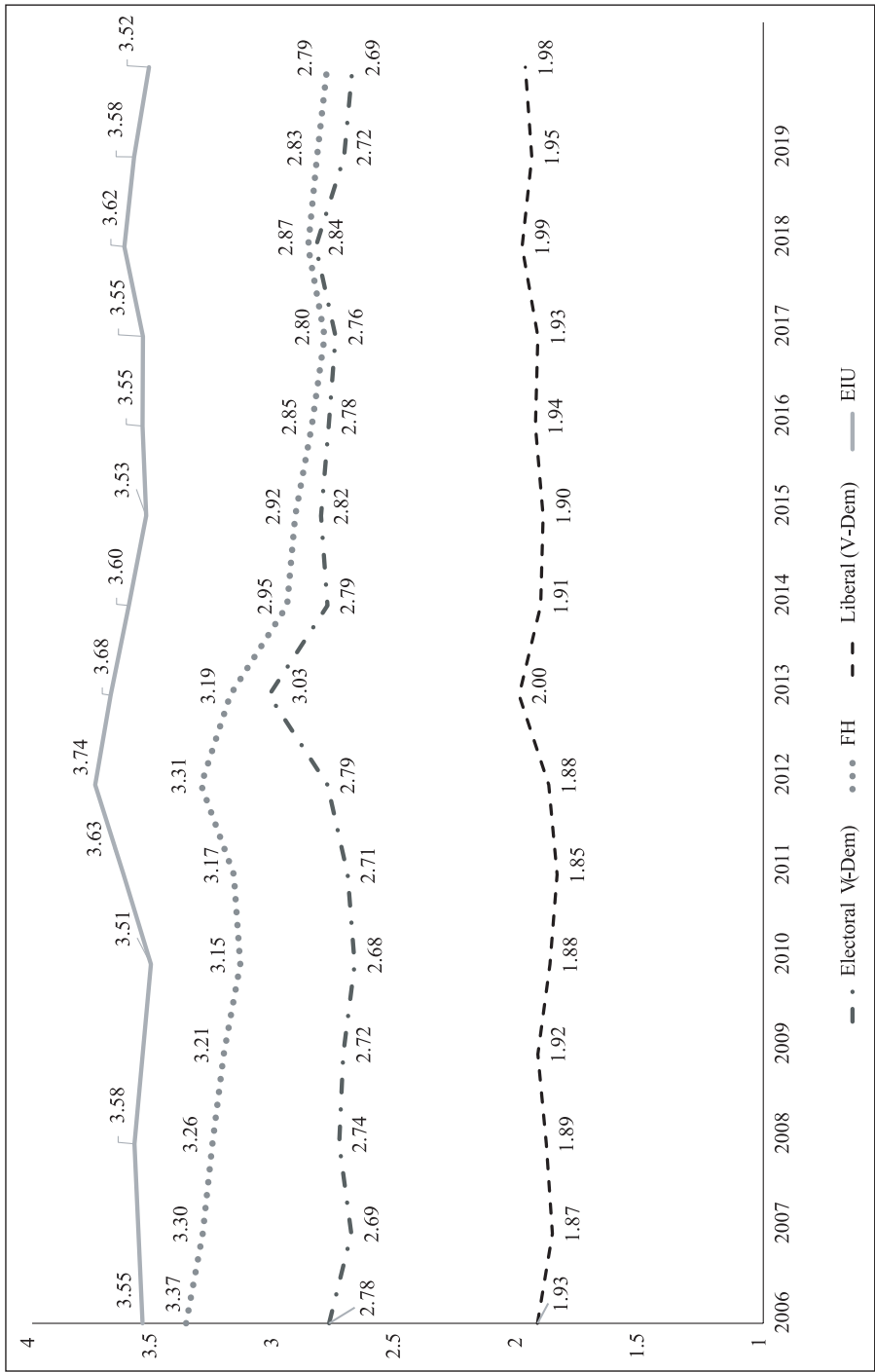


Fig. 18.1. Democracy Trends in the Middle East and North Africa

Source: Data from Freedom House, V-Dem, and EIU Democracy Index, 2006–19, <https://freedomhouse.org/countries/freedom-world/scores>

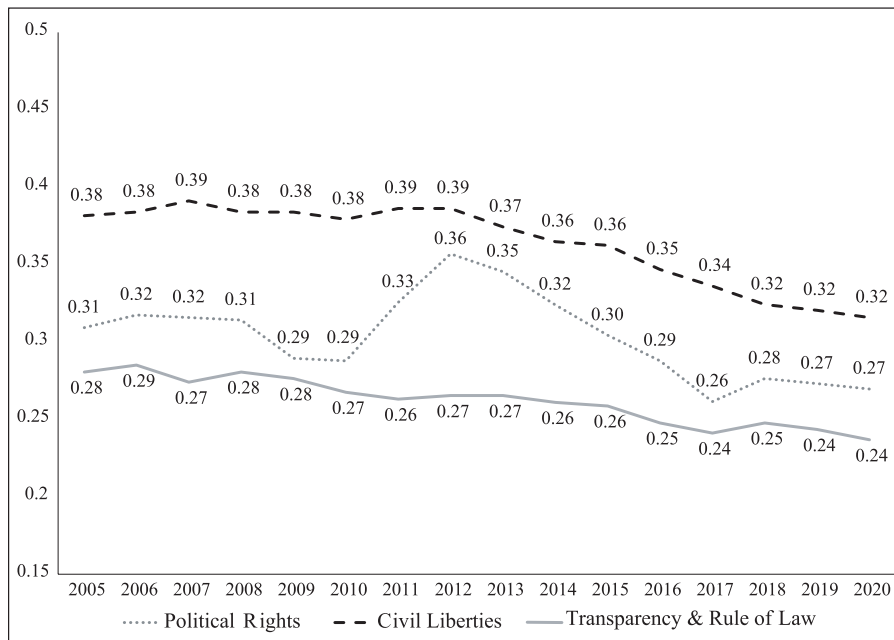


Fig. 18.2. Trends in Political Rights, Civil Liberties, and Transparency and Rule of Law in MENA (Freedom House Standardized Scores), 2005–20

0.24 at the end of 2020). Another way of grasping what has happened to aspirations for freedom in the Arab world is to examine these trends in comparison to other regions. On the Freedom House combined scale, the MENA region's 17 percent decline between 2006 and 2020 exceeded that for Latin America (8 percent), sub-Saharan Africa (13.6 percent), or the Former Soviet Union (14.5 percent), and was only exceeded by that for South Asia (23.6 percent).

The above figures are averages for the Middle East region. But the picture does not become much brighter if we look individually at the 19 states of the region. Table 18.1 depicts the changes between 2010 and 2020 in political rights and civil liberties for the 19 Muslim-majority countries of the Middle East and North Africa. (This table uses the more detailed 100-point Freedom House scale, with a maximum of 40 points for political rights and 60 points for civil liberties.) With the exceptions of the one country to complete and sustain (for a time) a democratic transition, Tunisia, and the one country that, at this writing, is in the midst of a transitional process that might lead to democracy, Sudan, levels of freedom have contracted perceptibly—even dra-

TABLE 18.1. Regimes of the Middle East on the Freedom House Hundred-Point Scale (2010 vs. 2020)

Regime Type, 2020	Countries	Trend	Political Rights		Civil Liberties	
			<i>(40 pts maximum)</i>		<i>(60 pts maximum)</i>	
			2010	2020	2010	2020
Electoral Democracy	Tunisia	↑	5	32	18	39
Competitive Authoritarian	Lebanon	↓	17	13	35	30
	Iraq	↑	12	16	13	13
	Turkey	↓	27	16	36	16
Pluralistic Monarchies	Kuwait	↓	19	14	25	23
	Morocco	↓	14	13	28	24
Closed Monarchies	Bahrain	↓	11	2	19	10
	UAE	↓	8	5	19	12
	Jordan		10	11	21	23
	Oman	↓	9	6	18	17
	Qatar	↓	10	7	18	18
	Saudi Arabia	↓	3	1	9	6
	Electoral Authoritarian	Egypt	↓	6	6	19
	Algeria	↓	11	10	25	22
Transitional Authoritarian	Sudan	↑	5	2	6	15
Theocracy	Iran		6	6	11	10
Failed States/Civil War	Libya	↑	1	7	1	8
	Syria	↓	1	-3	8	4
	Yemen	↓	11	1	18	10

Source: Freedom House, <https://freedomhouse.org/countries/freedom-world/scores> (accessed August 24, 2021).

matically—in virtually every other country in the region. Most of the Arab monarchies of the Gulf substantially narrowed political rights, civil liberties, or both.<sup>2</sup> Civil liberties took a nosedive in Morocco as well (to about the level of Jordan in 2020). Jordan and Iran saw little change in overall freedom levels, though by 2021 political rights further deteriorated in Iran with the most meaningless and manipulated elections in the long authoritarian history of the Islamic Republic. Turkey saw a dramatic further narrowing of political and civic space, and less dramatically, so did Lebanon. Yemen and Syria fell into the terror

2. I take as substantial, or at least worth noting, a change of three points or more on either scale.

of civil war. Egypt and Algeria failed to grow any meaningful degree of political competition, and the regimes became more repressive. Aside from Tunisia and Sudan, only Iraq and Libya measurably improved, but these gains were geographically limited or systemically modest.

## The Global Democratic Recession

The recession of freedom in the Arab world has not taken place in a global vacuum. From 2006 to the end of 2020, the proportion of democracies in the world has gradually declined, from 61 to 55 percent of all states, and from 57 to 48 percent of states above 1 million in population. And the percentage of people living in democracies has declined from 55 percent in 2006 to 47 percent in 2020. The year 2019 marked the first time since the end of the Cold War that a majority of states over 1 million in population was not democratic, and also the first time that a majority of the world's people did not live in a democracy.<sup>3</sup>

The decline in the proportion of states that are democracies has entailed two statistical trends. First, since the peak of the “third wave” of global democratization in the 1990s, the rate of transitions to democracy has been declining. In the 1990s, 43 percent of all authoritarian regimes gave way to democratic forms of government. That rate of democratic transition then declined to 20 percent in the 2000s and 17.3 percent in the 2010s. At the same time, the rate of democratic breakdown steadily increased. The percentage of democratic regimes that failed by one means or another (whether military coup, executive coup, or incremental backsliding) increased from a mere 6 percent in the 1980s to 10 percent in the 1990s, 11.5 percent in the 2000s, and 15.4 percent in the most recent decade (2011–20). The last half of the 2010s (2015–19) was the first five-year period since the beginning of the third wave in 1974 when more countries abandoned democracy (twelve) than transitioned to it (seven).

Beginning with the Green Movement in Iran in 2009 and going through the end of 2020, 21 countries experienced mass public protests or surprise defeats of autocrats at the polls that could have resulted in transitions to democracy. In addition to Iran and the six most serious Arab Spring uprisings in 2011–12, this list also includes the transitional

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3. For a more detailed delineation of the trends depicted in this section, see Diamond (2020, 2021).



process and 2015 national elections in Burma, the 2013 Gezi Park protests in Turkey, the January 2019 protests in Venezuela supporting the National Assembly leader Juan Guaidó's proclamation of himself as provisional president, the popular protests in Sudan that prompted the military to oust President Omar al-Bashir in 2019, the Hirak Movement protests in Algeria in 2019 (the largest in the country since the Algerian Civil War in the early 1990s), and the mass public protests that erupted on October 17, 2019, against the corruption and economic stagnation of sectarian rule in Lebanon (what has been dubbed "the October 17 Revolution"). Some of these openings looked particularly promising. When the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition was defeated in Malaysia's May 2018 parliamentary elections for the first time in the country's history, hopes for a transition to democracy were euphoric, and not entirely unrealistic (Lemière 2018). But political divisions and opportunism within the opposition coalition have stalled that transition and may now be unraveling it (Wong 2020). A similar fate fell upon Nigeria in 2015 when an incumbent president was defeated in an election for the first time in the country's 55-year history, but the country became only marginally more democratic (Soyinka 2019). While a few of these 21 transitional processes (for example, in Sudan) do not yet have clear outcomes, by late 2021, only three of these had resulted in democratic transitions (in Tunisia around 2014, in Ukraine in 2014, and in Bolivia, with a democratic election in 2020 restoring the democratic equilibrium). Most of the other transitional possibilities imploded or were successfully repressed or deferred by the authoritarian regime—in sharp contrast to the pattern before 2005.<sup>4</sup>

Both trends—accelerating democratic breakdown and diminishing democratic transitions—have direct and discouraging relevance to the Middle East, since the region is mainly populated by authoritarian regimes that now show little near-term prospect of democratic transition (or even political liberalization), while the one democracy in the region, Tunisia, was—at the time of this writing—in a process of democratic breakdown. On July 25, 2021, President Kais Saied invoked emergency powers, firing the prime minister and suspending Parliament, with the assistance of the military, which surrounded and closed the

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4. For a detailed list, see Diamond (2021, 31–32). To my list of 20 cases in that article, I have added here the case of Venezuela in 2019. For a review of successful democratic transitions earlier during the third wave of global democratization, see Diamond (2008, 39–55).

parliament building. The method of a democratically elected president seizing extraordinary powers and the populist rhetoric condemning the political class and claiming a national emergency (in this case due to the ongoing economic crisis and a severe COVID-19 outbreak) were similar to the process by which other elected populist leaders had squeezed and undermined democracy over the past decade.

Beginning in 2006, levels of freedom also started to recede in the world. The ratio of countries gaining in freedom to the number declining in freedom (according to Freedom House) fell to about parity in 2006, but has been only about 50–70 percent every year since—exactly reversing the pattern for the 15 years (1991–2005) following the demise of the Soviet Union. The overall impact of this political recession on freedom scores in the world has been modest (with aggregate global freedom scores on the 100-point Freedom House scale declining by 6.2 percent). But as noted above, the decline has been much greater in some regions—especially the Middle East. And since the democratic recession began in 2006, democracy has been failing in many big and strategically significant states, such as Bangladesh, Thailand, Turkey, the Philippines, and for the first time in a member state of the European Union: Hungary. These instances followed the executive-led strangulation (in the early years of the new century) of an emerging democracy in Russia and of a long-standing but deeply troubled democracy in Venezuela. As President Saïed’s seizure of power in Tunisia advanced into a longer-term sidelining of democracy, it followed in the footsteps of numerous other populist executive coups in the past decade. Other states, like Sri Lanka and Nepal, have moved back and forth or hovered on the precipice. And many democracies have been deteriorating in quality, including the world’s four largest—the United States, India, Indonesia, and Brazil—and the largest democracy in Central and Eastern Europe, Poland. In fact, there has been substantial democratic backsliding in many prominent established and third-wave democracies. From 2012 to 2020, Hungary declined by 19 points on the Freedom House 100-point scale, Poland by 11 points, India by 9, Indonesia by 9, Brazil by 7, the U.S. by 10 points, Mexico by 4 points, and Korea by 3 points.

Moreover, between 2005 and 2020, 20 of the 29 largest or most powerful countries in the world declined by at least three points on the 100-point Freedom House scale and only one improved. Globally, the overwhelming majority of the largest, most powerful, and influential countries have been regressing politically during the last 15 years.

Many advanced liberal democracies have become less liberal—most notably the most powerful liberal country, the United States, which as a result has had less geopolitical capital with which to promote democracy. Numerous electoral democracies have slid down the path of creeping authoritarianism, with less protection of civil liberties, weaker accountability and rule of law, and/or more intense political polarization, undermining the functionality of democratic institutions and the normative commitments that sustain them. A growing number of other electoral democracies have been breaking down. Competitive authoritarian regimes, such as Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda and Cambodia, have been squeezing out their competition, to the point where the latter three are now virtual one-party states. And regimes that were already deeply authoritarian—most notably China and Russia but including many of the Arab states mentioned above—have become much more so.

### **How Arab Publics View Democracy and Governance**

And yet, authoritarian rule in the Middle East cannot be considered stable, as the types of grievances that triggered the Arab uprisings still persist. Across numerous Arab countries, publics perceive widespread corruption in government and express low trust in political institutions, such as the national government and Parliament. Correctly, they perceive that freedom has contracted since the Arab uprisings of 2011–12. Overall, with a few exceptions (such as Egypt), they are more disenchanted now than a decade ago. In 2018–19, only one Arab country (Yemen) even reached the mid-point (five) on a zero to ten scale of public satisfaction with government performance (most countries had an average score of three to four).

In the fifth Arab Barometer (2018–19), only minorities in most Arab countries—and as little as 36 percent in Morocco, 28 percent in Lebanon, and 22 percent in Iraq—felt their government was doing anything serious to tackle corruption. Among the twelve countries surveyed in the fifth wave, only in the oil-rich state of Kuwait did a majority (77 percent) of the public rate the economy positively. Elsewhere, positive perceptions ranged from a low of 7 percent in Tunisia to 41 percent in Egypt, and in seven other countries or territories (Palestine, Jordan, Libya, Iraq, Sudan, Lebanon, and Algeria), less than a quarter rated the economy positively. Across Arab countries, positive assessments of the

economy (as an average weighted by population size) fell from 36 percent in 2012–14 to 26 percent in 2018–19. By that same weighted average, trust in government across Arab countries fell from 45 to 34 percent and was below a third in five countries that have been wracked by protests and instability: Morocco, Tunisia, Lebanon, Iraq, and Libya. The average percent perceiving freedom of association in their country fell from 70 to 48 percent (Arab Barometer, cited in Robbins 2020).

As have previous rounds of the Arab Barometer, the fifth wave conducted in 2018 and 2019, showed broad support for democracy in principle, but wariness about rapid political change and considerable sympathy for religious political parties. More than half of respondents in the region (54 percent) believed that “democracy is always preferable” (even when given two other options—that “sometimes” an authoritarian regime could be preferable, or that it did not matter). And nearly three-quarters of respondents in the region agreed that democracy may have problems but it is better than any other system. Levels of support for democracy ranged from around 70 percent in Algeria and Egypt to around 85 percent in Jordan and Lebanon (table 18.2). And Arabs do not believe that democracy is bad for the economy or a path to disorder. Across the five waves of the Arab Barometer between 2006 and 2019, and averaging all Arabs surveyed in each wave, attitudes about democracy have been remarkably stable (before and after the Arab uprisings) (Arab Barometer 2022). Only about 28–30 percent believe democracy is bad for the economy and consistently less than a third fear it leads to instability and disorder (fig. 18.3). By the same token, the belief that democracy, despite its imperfections, is the best system has also held steady at above seven in ten Arab citizens (it spiked to 80 percent in 2016–17 and then returned to 72 percent in 2018–19).

Half of all Arabs surveyed in 2018–19 favored a religious political party (with the percent ranging as low as around 30 percent in Egypt and Lebanon and as high as 62 percent in Palestine and 77 percent in Sudan). But only a third believe religious clerics should exercise influence over government decisions. In Egypt, Morocco, Tunisia, and Lebanon, under a quarter support this theocratic proposition, and only in Sudan does support for it rise (barely) above 50 percent.

During 2018–19, Morocco had a lower percentage than most Arab countries (but still nearly two-thirds) saying democracy is the best system, but it was the Arab country most impatient for political reform, with 49 percent wanting it “all at once” while only 40 percent opted for

TABLE 18.2. Attitudes Toward Democracy (in percent), Wave 5 of Arab Barometer, 2018–19

	Democracy Problems Yet Better	Democracy Always Preferable	Political Reform, Little by Little	Political Reform All at Once	No Reform
Algeria	59	42	—		
Egypt	70	42	54	39	3
Iraq	76	55	65	27	8
Jordan	85	73	81	16	2
Lebanon	83	58	65	28	7
Morocco	64	55	40	49	4
Sudan	71	43	69	17	12
Tunisia	79	64	78	14	6
Yemen	52	52	44	41	11
<i>Total Arab Sample</i>	72	54	63	28	6

Source: Arab Barometer, Wave 5, Online Data Analysis, <https://www.arabbarometer.org/surveys/arab-barometer-wave-v/> (accessed August 24, 2021).

“little by little.” (Only two other Arab countries had more than a third of the public wanting rapid political reform—Egypt and Yemen.) The relationship to age group is particularly noteworthy. Among all Arab countries, not surprisingly, young people are more inclined than older people to want to see political reform “all at once,” but still this sentiment represents a minority (32 percent, compared to 58 percent of youth who favor gradual political change). However, in Morocco, a strong majority of young people aged 15–29 (57 percent) want to see rapid political reform, compared to only a third of Moroccans over the age of 50 (table 18.3). Since it is young people who generally are the ones to rise up in protest, these data present should be read as a warning sign for Morocco’s stagnant authoritarian monarchy. An even starker warning sign have been the persistent street protests and suicides among destitute Moroccans, who have been driven to rage and despair—and even an instance of self-immolation remarkably similar to the event that triggered the Tunisian uprising—as a result of *al-hogra*, “a North African colloquial term meaning humiliation, degradation, and abasement” (Chograni 2021). Parliament is increasingly distrusted as a façade for royal autocracy, electoral participation is waning, and the state—unwilling to deliver on King Mohammed VI’s promised constitutional reforms—increasingly falls back on its last line of defense, repression. The brutal targeting of independent media and civil society

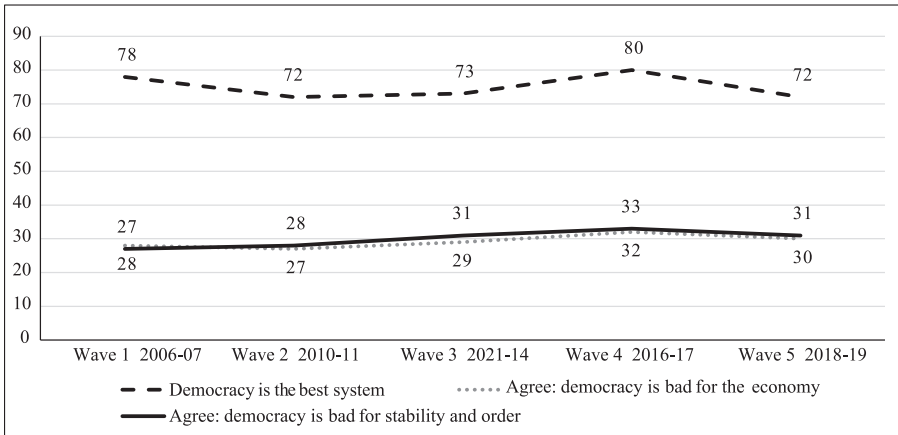


Fig. 18.3. Percentage of Respondents in Arab Countries Who Believe Democracy Is the “Best System,” “Bad for the Economy,” and “Bad for Stability and Order” (2007–19)

Source: Michael Robbins, “What Arab Publics Think: Findings from the Fifth Wave Arab Barometer,” Michael Robbins, January 28, 2020, Arab Barometer Data, [https://www.arabbarometer.org/wp-content/uploads/Arab\\_Barometer\\_CEPS\\_Presentation\\_Public-Opinion\\_2020.pdf](https://www.arabbarometer.org/wp-content/uploads/Arab_Barometer_CEPS_Presentation_Public-Opinion_2020.pdf) (accessed August 30, 2021).

is turning the country into “a monarchical police state” sitting atop “a powder keg of social, economic, and political grievances” (Chograni 2021).

Unfortunately, however, attitudes toward democracy—and toward the one actual, existing democratic regime in the region—have steadily deteriorated in Tunisia under the weight of corruption, economic stagnation, and generally inefficacious rule. As noted above, public disenchantment with government performance in Tunisia has been steadily rising. By March–April 2021, in the sixth wave of the Arab Barometer, public trust in government had fallen to fifteen percent.<sup>5</sup> As tracked across four surveys of the Afrobarometer (in 2013, 2015, 2018, and 2020), the percentage of Tunisians who say that democracy is preferable to any other form of government fell from 71 percent in 2013 and 66 percent in 2015 to 56 percent in 2020. Rejection of the authoritarian

5. This is the percent expressing “a great deal” or “quite a lot” of trust in government: Kayyali (2021). The results of the sixth wave were not available for online analysis when this chapter was written and so are not systematically represented here.

TABLE 18.3. Preferred Pace of Political Reform (By Age), Morocco and All Arab Countries (Average), 2018–19

	<i>Total</i>	15–29	30–49	50+
All Countries: Little by little	63	58	65	69
All Countries: All at once	27	32	26	22
All Countries: None	6	7	6	6
Morocco: Little by little	40	34	39	52
Morocco: All at once	49	57	52	33
Morocco: None	5	3	5	9

*Source:* Arab Barometer, Wave 5, <https://www.arabbarometer.org/surveys/arab-barometer-wave-v/> (accessed August 24, 2021).

option of one-party rule more or less held steady at 56 percent, but resistance to military rule declined from 56 to 50 percent. More tellingly—given the 2021 presidential coup—rejection of the option of abolishing Parliament and elections and letting the president “decide everything” declined from 78 percent in 2013 to 61 percent in 2018 and just 39 percent in 2020, foreshadowing the considerable public support that greeted President Saied’s emergency decree. These trends are more understandable when we consider that the percentage of Tunisians who rated their political system “a democracy with major problems” or “not a democracy at all” (as opposed to a full democracy or a democracy with only minor problems) increased from 27 percent in 2013 to 46 percent in 2020. By 2020, while 94 percent of Tunisia’s public trusted the Army, 68 percent the police, and 75 percent the president, only 21 percent expressed “a lot” or “some” trust in the Parliament, which was seen as the most corrupt institution (more than civil servants or tax officials). By 2020, nearly two-thirds of Tunisians (63 percent) judged that corruption had increased a lot or somewhat, and 72 percent thought the country was going in the wrong direction in terms of governance and the economy.<sup>6</sup> These are the kinds of sentiments that precede or accompany a crisis of democracy.

6. I am grateful to the Afrobarometer for providing this data.

Overall, democrats in the Arab world can draw encouragement from the fact that democracy remains a broad aspiration of Arab publics, who also, by and large, remain skeptical if not outright distrustful of their authoritarian governments. But the erosion of democratic trust and legitimacy in Tunisia must be counted as a sobering development.

### **Prospects for Political Reform in the Arab World**

Another way of assessing the state of political progress in the region is to examine trends in the quality of governance, as measured annually by the World Bank's Worldwide Governance Indicators. In general, the states of the Middle East and North Africa have not been progressing toward better governance. In fact, on every one of the six indicators of the quality of governance—on such measures as voice and accountability (essentially democracy), political stability, rule of law, and control of corruption—the average percentile scores of states in this region steadily declined from 2009 to 2019 (table 18.4). The decline in the average percentile score for political stability was particularly sharp, dropping from roughly the 39th percentile (among states globally) in 2009 to the 28th in 2019. Rule of law declined from the 47th to the 43rd percentile, and control of corruption from the 47th to the 41st. Some states, like Jordan and Morocco, essentially stagnated over the course of the decade at moderately poor (or in the case of Algeria, quite poor) levels of governance, but (beyond the states that slipped into civil war) others experienced notable and even alarming declines. In particular, while General al-Sisi's 2013 coup pledged to restore governability in Egypt, the data (at least as measured by the World Bank's surveys) tell a different story. Between 2009 and 2019, Egypt fell from the 14th to the 8th percentile globally on voice and accountability, from 26th to 13th in political stability, from 47th to 37th in government effectiveness, from 47th to 19th in regulatory quality, from 53rd to 38th in rule of law, and from 36th to 28th in control of corruption. Some of the declines in governance in Lebanon were also dramatic, with the country falling from the 40th to the 18th percentile in government effectiveness, from 29th to 20th in rule of law, and from 22nd to 12th percentile in control of corruption.

In states without the bountiful resource wealth of the oil-rich Gulf states, these levels of governance are simply not good enough to pro-



TABLE 18.4. Trends in Governance in the Middle East and North Africa, Average Percentile Rank for States of Middle East and North Africa

	2009	2014	2019
Voice and Accountability	23.29	25.10	24.04
Political Stability and Absence of Violence/ Terrorism	38.75	27.66	27.98
Government Effectiveness	49.10	45.33	43.25
Regulatory Quality	47.28	43.96	41.09
Rule of Law	47.44	44.39	42.90
Control of Corruption	46.94	44.14	41.25

Source: World Bank, World Governance Indicators, <https://info.worldbank.org/governance/wgi/> (accessed August 24, 2021).

duce robust and sustained economic growth. Even before the calamity of the pandemic descended on the region's economies and societies (causing the economies of the region to contract by 3.7 percent in 2020), economic growth was mediocre at best during the decade of the 2010s. The growth rate of gross domestic product for the region ranged from about 2.5 to 4 percent from 2011 to 2015, spiked to nearly 5 percent in 2016, and then fell to 1.6, 0.9, and 0.5 percent in the subsequent three years. With lavish aid from the Gulf states, Egypt's economy did better, averaging over 4.5 percent annual growth during the latter half of the decade. But poor to mediocre governance generally produced weak to lackluster economic growth, averaging only about 3 percent in Morocco, 2 percent in Jordan, and about 1.5 percent in Tunisia, while Lebanon's economy contracted sharply in 2018 and 2019 and then nearly imploded in 2020.<sup>7</sup>

These rather anemic numbers take on more significance when viewed against the momentum of population growth in several states of the region. Among regions of the world, the Arab world has the highest annual rate of population growth—1.9 percent—save for sub-Saharan Africa. However, this pace of population growth is not evenly distributed across countries. Generally, population growth is highest in precisely those countries with the weakest economies, the greatest instability, and hence the most difficult prospects for generating the needed expansion in jobs, schools, and public infrastructure: Egypt (1.9 percent growth rate), Iraq (2.3), Yemen (2.3), Sudan (2.4), and Syria

7. World Bank, Online Data Bank, <https://data.worldbank.org/> (accessed August 15, 2021).

(2.5). These states also have high percentages of their population under the age of 15, which generates a serious source of potential political stability down the road.<sup>8</sup> Instability particularly looms in economically sluggish countries where a third or more of the population is under the age of 15: Egypt, Jordan, Iraq, Yemen, and Sudan. (And in Algeria and Syria, the proportion stands at 31 percent.) Many states of the region—particularly the Gulf states and others further along in development, such as Turkey, Lebanon, and Tunisia—are now well along in the demographic transition to lower birth rates, slower population growth, and older populations. In these countries, the median population age is around 30 or well above it. But in the poorer and more unstable states, it is under 25 (for example, Egypt Jordan, and Syria) or even around or slightly under 20 (Iraq, Sudan, and Yemen). These countries seem likely to experience recurrent protest and unrest, but not in circumstances favorable to democratization. Governance is generally poor (though better in Jordan), the economies are weak, and, under pressure of population growth and climate change, environmental conditions are becoming increasingly stressful. Egypt by its sheer size presents the greatest concern: Its population is expected to grow from a little over 100 million today to 160 million in 2050, when it would be the eleventh most populous country in the world.<sup>9</sup> It is a safe prediction that there will be some new eruption of large-scale and probably youth-driven protests well before then if Egypt cannot find its way to more effective governance. But Iraq's population is also growing rapidly. By 2050, it is projected to have over 70 million people, and that will probably be at a time when oil revenues (which now account for 40 percent of the country's entire economy) will have declined significantly because of the urgent global need to transition to renewable energy. Morocco has a higher median age (nearly 30) and a much lower population growth rate (1.2 percent), but as we saw above, its political conditions are deteriorating, and its youth appear more demanding of rapid political change.

If governance does not become dramatically more effective, more forward-looking, and less corrupt, the urgent issue for many of these countries may increasingly become not just political accountability but

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8. World Bank, Online Data Bank, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.0014.TO.ZS> (accessed August 15, 2021).

9. Institut National d'Etudes Demographiques, Population Projections by countries, [https://www.ined.fr/en/everything\\_about\\_population/data/world-projections/projections-by-countries/](https://www.ined.fr/en/everything_about_population/data/world-projections/projections-by-countries/) (accessed August 15, 2021).

sustainability in the most basic sense. Most Middle Eastern countries exist in arid to semi-arid conditions, and in an era of global warming, their freshwater resources are rapidly depleting. Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and Iran face potentially critical water shortages (Bozorg-Haddad et al. 2020). But much of the region, including the entire Gulf, will be stressed. A 2015 study found that 19 of the 33 most water-stressed countries by 2040 will be in the Middle East and North Africa (Maddocks, Young, and Reig 2015). Just as the Syrian drought of 2007–09 helped to create the conditions (such as displacement of rural populations, and rising food prices) for a meltdown of the political order in 2011, so future droughts will destabilize political orders in the region (Goldstone and Diamond 2020).

For now, authoritarian rule has reasserted itself in most of the region. In the Arab Gulf states, the prospects for democratic change appear dim in the near to medium term, as strong states with extensive resources and relatively high capacity in both administrative and security terms confront weak civil societies. With the United Arab Emirates setting the pace as a kind of Singapore of the Middle East (with levels of governance under authoritarian rule that place it in the upper quartile of the world's states), the Arab Gulf states have diversified their economies, established lucrative sovereign wealth funds, and considerably strengthened their military and security apparatuses. In the process, the strongest among these states (Saudi Arabia and the UAE) have also enhanced their capacity to intervene militarily once again if necessary to suppress instability in the weaker ones. With some small exceptions, perhaps Kuwait, only intra-elite divisions (triggered, for example, by a tyrannical reign by Mohammed bin Salman in Saudi Arabia) seem to hold forth the prospect (however slim) of catalyzing liberalizing political change.

Elsewhere, the old order will be hard-pressed to hold indefinitely. The fundamental grievances of the Arab Spring—corruption, economic hardship, limited opportunities, and a lack of political voice and accountability—have hardly been addressed. In some of these countries, political leadership is either increasingly feckless (as in Morocco) or entirely lacking (as in Lebanon). Sooner or later, rulers in these countries will face another reckoning with a young and frustrated public, and its rallying cry will once again be “Karama”—dignity.

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