



ANALYSIS

The path of least resilience:
Autocratic rule and external
powers in the Middle East

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LOWY INSTITUTE

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Almost a decade since the Arab uprisings promised democratic revival in the Middle East, most countries in the region remain firmly in the grip of autocrats. External powers, from Russia and China to the United States and Europe, have either helped the region's dictators stay in power, or have shaped their policies toward the region in the expectation that such regimes will persist. In effect external powers have made a bet on authoritarian resilience, not least because it has seemed an easier way to secure their respective interests.

But a closer look at two countries, Egypt and Saudi Arabia, where authoritarianism is often said to have been revived, underlines the way regimes are struggling to find a new basis for popular legitimacy. As a result, both regimes are becoming even more reliant than usual on repression, bringing with it risks of new explosions of civil unrest. External powers may have hoped they were making a safe wager on continued authoritarian rule in the Middle East. But the Saudi and Egyptian cases suggest that they have chosen instead the path of least resilience.

INTRODUCTION

Not all that long ago it seemed possible to conceive of the end of authoritarian rule in the Middle East. At the end of 2010 popular uprisings swept across the Arab states of the region. Long-time autocrats in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen were overthrown. Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad seemed destined to join their ranks. Even wealthy autocracies, such as those in the Persian Gulf, were shaken. Gulf rulers spent billions of dollars trying to inoculate their countries and those of the region from revolutionary contagion.

But the Arab uprisings were neither the beginning nor end of popular ferment in the Middle East. There were uprisings in the Palestinian Territories in 2001, in Lebanon in 2005 and Iran in 2009. In 2019, after many observers of the region had declared the so-called 'Arab Spring' over, the long-time rulers of Algeria and Sudan were overthrown as a result of popular unrest. By the end of 2019 Iran, Iraq and Lebanon witnessed new large-scale demonstrations, in every case met with brutal regime-launched violence.



*Anti-government protesters take to the streets in Cairo, September 2019.
Photo by Oliver Weiken/Picture Alliance via Getty Images.*

Despite these late blooms of spring, most external powers still seem to view authoritarianism in the Middle East as utterly resilient. Russia has helped this analysis become a self-fulfilling prophecy through its military support for ruling regimes in Syria and elsewhere. In more low-key ways, China has also backed the authoritarian status quo. But Western countries have not been that far behind Moscow and Beijing in concluding that authoritarianism in the region is as strong as ever and in shaping their policies accordingly.

How safe is this bet on authoritarianism in the Middle East? To examine this wager, this analysis will focus on two countries, Egypt and Saudi Arabia. At a glance they seem very different: Egypt is a poor, populous, military-led republic; Saudi Arabia is a wealthy, mid-sized monarchy. The former is seen by many external observers as too big to fail; the latter is often perceived as too rich to fail. But as this analysis will show, despite these superficial differences, the challenge that regimes in both of these countries face, and the solutions for which they are reaching, are similar.

Like their counterparts across the Middle East, the regimes in Egypt and Saudi Arabia face a fundamental challenge to their legitimacy that they are trying to address by re-financing and re-writing the social contract with

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their country's citizens. But these efforts are either unlikely to work, or unlikely to work fast enough, because neither regime is willing to change the political economy upon which the ruling system is based. As a result, both regimes are relying increasingly on repression to sustain their rule, but in ways that will actually accelerate the erosion of their legitimacy by pressure-cooking their societies.

The bet that external powers have made on continued authoritarian rule is therefore likely to prove a reckless one — albeit one that will have different consequences for different external players. The last section of this analysis will examine the policies of external powers and how these are likely to compound instability in the region. It will also outline a different approach that Western powers should adopt in responding to what is likely to be an extended period of turmoil in the Middle East.

EXPIRING SOCIAL CONTRACTS

At the beginning of 2019 it seemed that authoritarian regimes across the region had revived after the shock of the Arab uprising at the start of the decade. In Egypt the military regime of President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi was exercising almost total control over society. In Syria, Bashar al-Assad's regime had brutally clung to power and was consolidating gains against a largely defeated opposition. Nervous rulers in Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain had cracked down hard, and seemingly successfully, on even the slightest hints of dissent, including in some cases, within their own ruling family¹.

By the end of 2019, however, the resilience of authoritarianism in the Middle East seemed altogether more fragile. Popular protests saw the overthrow of long-time rulers in Algeria and Sudan. In Lebanon, Iraq and Iran these protests have become a serious challenge to the ruling elite. Even if these or other examples of protest fail, they illustrate that the legitimacy of many regimes in the region continues to erode.

Most regimes have used carrots as well as sticks to ensure regime survival and state stability.

Some might argue that legitimacy in an authoritarian system hardly matters. But as the political history of the Middle East underlines, autocratic regimes actually rely on it a great deal. Most regimes have used carrots as well as sticks to ensure regime survival and state stability. This is because even with the vast resources that most Middle Eastern regimes dedicate to security, most of them have never had the means to govern their citizens in any sustained way by fear and coercion alone.

The main carrot that regimes use is their socioeconomic contracts with citizens. That is, in return for loyalty, or at least obedience, rulers provide citizens with the necessities of life. Mostly these are practical, material things: jobs, free education and health care, subsidised food and fuel. But the transaction has often included more intangible goods such as a

national ideology or a cultural or religious framework. The contract varies from states to state, as does its generosity (depending on how wealthy the state is, or how small its population is). Many regimes also have separate ‘premium’ contracts with particular segments of society such as the military, or certain clans, tribes or minority groups. In these cases, the transaction is more generous because of the importance of the group to regime survival. In some cases it might be the military or security elite that benefits from this generosity; in others, particular ethnic, religious or tribal groups.

Not all groups in Middle Eastern societies have been prepared to accept the specific terms of the social contract. Sticks have therefore been used to coerce or eliminate opponents and to compel citizens to accept the carrots the regimes offer, meagre as these are at times. As a result, the ruling system in most countries of the region has historically been a balance of consent and coercion, although the precise balance has varied between states. Moreover, at particular periods in their history, most regimes have shifted the balance depending on how secure they have felt, or the resources they have had to invest in the social contract.

The challenge that virtually every regime in the region now faces is that their ability to rely on consent — that is, their legitimacy — has been eroding. As I argued in my Lowy Institute paper *Remaking the Middle East*, the decay of the ruling system — in Arabic, the *nizam* — is the result of decades of poor governance, internal and external challenges, declining resources, growing populations and rising socioeconomic and political expectations.² The fact that 2019 ended in the Middle East with yet more popular ferment reflects the continued inability of regimes in the region to arrest that decay. In most cases things have, if anything, gotten worse.

Faced with this reality most regimes in the Middle East have tried to either re-finance the social contract or re-write it. Regimes have, for example, tried to make the state more solvent through economic reforms. But often these reforms require the reduction of the benefits provided through the existing social contract, such as food or fuel subsidies. The hope is that economic reforms will stimulate other forces, typically the private sector, to meet citizens’ needs. In some cases, regimes are also trying to identify other benefits (an easing of social or religious restrictions, or a great national project) to reinvigorate the contract.

Two examples of these efforts are found in Egypt and Saudi Arabia.

EGYPT: ‘REFORM’, RINSE, REPEAT

One of the most striking things about the Egyptian uprising of 2011 was that it followed at least a decade of state-led economic reform by the

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Mubarak regime. In the mid-2000s both the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank were lauding Egypt as an economic model for other countries. Privatisation had gathered pace, the government had undertaken comprehensive reform of the financial sector, and the Egyptian economy had become more open and international. Judged by macro indicators, the reforms seemed to be paying off. In 2010 economic growth in Egypt was just over 5 per cent. While not quite the heady 7 per cent of 2008 when Egypt's economy was booming, it was still reasonable.³

Egypt's economic reforms were accompanied by an explicit re-writing of the social contract. The Egyptian constitution of 1971 guaranteed citizens employment, health services and education. In 2007, however, Egypt's constitution was amended to specify that the role of the state was now merely to regulate the economy, with market forces to play the main driving role.⁴ This change in the social contract was one that was common across the region, even if it was not always so explicitly recorded. Regimes hoped to shift the burden of servicing the contract from the state to the private sector.

But this change in the social contract also helps explain one of the key sources of popular disgruntlement in the lead up to 2011. The state's contribution to the welfare of citizens in the social contract declined as the availability of public sector jobs shrank and as food and fuel subsidies were lifted. At the same time 'market forces' were not filling the gap in employment creation and public welfare provision. In part this was a function of structural weaknesses and inefficiencies in the economy that required time and sustained effort to address. But it was also a result of the way that a narrow group of economic players with ties to the regime captured many of the benefits of economic reform, while also blocking those reforms that threatened their interests.⁵

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It might be assumed that the new regime in Egypt would try to avoid repeating this mistake. Instead President Sisi's regime is once again pushing the kind of economic reforms that seem largely designed to keep the state solvent, enrich the regime's most intimate supporters, while impoverishing ordinary citizens. A range of austerity measures have been introduced, including the reduction of food and fuel subsidies. These have helped lower the budget deficit and drawn plaudits from the IMF.⁶ But the regime has done little to arrest the continued decline in living standards. The number of Egyptians living below the poverty line has almost doubled since 2000, and in 2018, roughly one-in-three Egyptians were living in poverty.⁷

The transformation of the Egyptian economy would be an enormous challenge for any government. Successful reform would need to go beyond piecemeal fixes such as a bit more privatisation, or deeper reductions in subsidies. Fundamental problems such as the weakness of the education system and the inefficiency of the state bureaucracy need to be addressed.

But it is not simply a matter of the reform challenge being too big for the regime to manage. As in the past, the benefits of economic reforms are being sequestered by a small segment of Egyptian society. Under Mubarak it was a group of business cronies close to the regime. Under Sisi it is the military which has been expanding its role and interests in the economy. Military construction and cement companies, for example, are benefiting from grandiose new infrastructure projects such as the construction of a new administrative capital. At the same time, this narrow cohort is preventing the more far-reaching reforms needed to fix deeper structural problems, such as the uneconomic pricing of scarce resources and the limited competition in many sectors of the economy, precisely because that cohort benefits from these inefficiencies.⁸

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The Egyptian regime, in common with many regimes across the region, essentially views economic reform as a technical problem. That is, the solution to the state's socioeconomic malaise is to find the right economic levers to pull, or indeed, to find the right people to pull them. But the military's role in the economy undermines serious, sustainable and inclusive economic reform, underlining the perennial problem: poor governance, both economic and political. Put another way, the problem is not Egypt's economy. The problem is Egypt's political economy.⁹

The two-track nature of Egypt's economic performance in recent years has led to both doom-saying and boosting analyses of Egypt's economic prospects. Some say the picture is neither as bright nor as gloomy as others predict.¹⁰ The issue is not, however, whether the Egyptian economy is about to collapse. In macro-economic terms it may well muddle through, as it has in the past. But without a significant improvement in economic performance *and* an accompanying improvement in the standard of living of most Egyptians, the regime's ability to sustain its legitimacy based on socioeconomic foundations will continue to erode.

SAUDI ARABIA: OLD PEPSI IN A NEW BOTTLE

It is not only resource-constrained, high-population countries in the region such as Egypt that have a problem. The ruling family in Saudi Arabia is another example of a regime attempting to remake the social contract to sustain its legitimacy. Saudi Arabia is in a far more favourable economic and demographic position than Egypt. But like Egypt, without a significant remaking of the state's political economy, the regime's legitimacy will erode, albeit more gradually than in Egypt.

The kingdom did not witness the large-scale protests that took place in other countries of the region in 2011. But Saudi Arabia's rulers were far from sanguine about their good fortune. As the uprisings swept across the

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region, the late King Abdullah announced a massive package of social and economic investments to the tune of some US\$130 billion.¹¹ Yet it has been King Abdullah's successor, King Salman, and his son, Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman, who have really driven the effort to both re-finance and re-write the kingdom's social contract.

Soon after his father came to power Mohammad bin Salman launched an ambitious, wide-ranging reform, dubbed Vision 2030.¹² Central to the plan was the need to address a critical problem. The rule of the Saudi royal family and the Saudi state's stability have long relied on oil revenues to provide its citizens with a generously subsidised social contract. This was buttressed by the religious legitimacy that came with the family's role as the 'custodians' of Islam's two holiest sites. The problem for the regime is that income from oil exports is not growing at a rate needed to sustain the socioeconomic contract. Meanwhile the regime's ability to use religion as a source of legitimacy has become much more problematic; religious opposition is on the rise, as are questions about the state's support for extremism abroad.

Vision 2030 is far-reaching in its intent. Economically, it wants to raise the share of non-oil exports in non-oil GDP from 16 to 50 per cent; to increase the private sector's contribution to GDP from 40 to 60 per cent; to almost double foreign investment; and to see a more than six-fold increase in state non-oil revenues.¹³ Socially, its agenda is even more ambitious: reducing religious and social restrictions on Saudi citizens, providing new entertainment options for young Saudis, and giving new rights to women.

In theory Vision 2030 anticipates a greater role for the private sector and private citizens in national life. But in practice this seems unlikely. There are structural reasons for this, not least the size of state-owned enterprises and the role that the regime has always played in setting political, social and cultural boundaries. But the main reason is simply that the regime socioeconomic goods has always been central to the way the royal family has governed. Despite Vision 2030's allusions to an increased role for the private sector in driving economic growth and of the importance of Saudis taking on greater individual responsibility, nothing about the way the plan has been implemented suggests the current regime views governance any differently.

For example, because foreign investment or corporate financing for domestic infrastructure projects has not materialised the state has picked up the slack.¹⁴ When the much-heralded initial public offering of a small percentage of Saudi Aramco¹⁵ failed to attract sufficient interest from international investors, the regime leaned on wealthy Saudis to make up the difference.¹⁶ The same applies to social reform, where the regime set up a state authority for entertainment — literally a "ministry of fun". This desire to maintain control was illustrated when the regime lifted restrictions on women driving and working while jailing dozens of female activists who

campaigned for those same reforms, underlining that it alone will dictate the pace of change.¹⁷



Trainee Maria al-Faraj takes a driving lesson in Saudi Arabia, June 2018; copyright Reuters/Ahmed Jadallah.

The unwillingness of the state to step back has been reinforced by the unprecedented way that the King and the Crown Prince have centralised power. In the past, responsibilities were at least shared out among key branches of the ruling family. Today even such limited decentralisation has been swept away. Virtually every economic, social and security lever is within the Crown Prince's immediate reach. Some might argue that Mohammad bin Salman needs this level of control to push through rapid change. But by concentrating so much power in his hands he has exacerbated jealousies and rivalries among other members of the Saudi elite and created a single point of failure for regime policies.

More importantly, such a central role for the state is not sustainable over the longer term, financially or otherwise — in fact, ironically, this seemed to be one of the main premises of Vision 2030. The Saudi state is not about to go bankrupt any time soon, but as its growing budget deficits illustrates, its financial trajectory on current trends is not a healthy one. This will mean that over time the regime will need to choose between running down its financial assets to keep itself solvent, or re-writing the social contract with its citizens, delivering them less benefits.

As in Egypt the problem is not simply a technical one. For example, there is a fundamental contradiction in maintaining an outsized economic role for the state and the regime and growing the private sector. Saudi governments have been trying to do the latter since the 1990s with mixed results. This is because the state, or in some cases the economic interests of key regime figures, repeatedly crowd-out the private sector by, for

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example, limiting the private sector's access to capital and markets, or manipulating or simply overriding economic regulations.

A similar tension is evident with respect to international investment in Saudi Arabia, or indeed the state's foreign investments. While the high level of control exercised by Mohammad bin Salman might be reassuring to some investors or economic partners, particularly those with a strong relationship with the Crown Prince, other investors will be nervous about the lack of robust legal frameworks around their investments. Investors will also be increasingly wary about reputational damage that may accompany economic partnerships with the kingdom. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that although foreign investment in Saudi Arabia rose from US\$1.4 billion to \$3.2 billion between 2017 and 2018, it was still substantially lower than its 2008 peak of \$39 billion.¹⁸

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It might be argued that the regime's social reforms will pick up any slack not covered by economic reforms in terms of sustaining regime legitimacy. At least according to anecdotal evidence these reforms seem to be popular among Saudis, some 60 per cent of whom are under the age of 30.¹⁹ Given the opacity of Saudi public opinion it is very difficult to tell how popular the Crown Prince really is. But it seems unlikely that new opportunities for entertainment will ever be able to substitute for the lack of economic opportunities. Moreover, the dramatic social reforms the Crown Prince is forcing through may result in a conservative backlash. The stabbing of three performers at a concert in Riyadh in December 2019 may hint at future unrest.²⁰

As with Egypt, the issue is not whether the Saudi economy will collapse or whether the social fabric will suddenly rupture as a result of the rapid changes that Mohammad bin Salman is pushing. The issue is whether these reforms will be successful enough, and occur fast enough, to sustain the regime's legitimacy. It must solve old problems, but also confront complex new ones. Climate change, for example, is likely to impact in a range of outsized ways on Saudi Arabia, including by driving up domestic energy consumption, and by eventually accelerating a global shift away from oil, Saudi Arabia's chief source of income.

SECURITISING THE SOCIAL CONTRACT

The question for both the Egyptian and Saudi regimes, and for other autocratic regimes around the region, is what else can provide a solid foundation for regime legitimacy while they are waiting for economic or social reforms to deliver. One option might be to increase the role of citizens in how the state is governed, giving them a greater stake and say in how economic and social challenges are managed. But democratising

the social contract does not seem to be on the agenda of any regional autocrat. Instead, what we have seen so far have been attempts to securitise it.

This securitisation is not simply the increasing use of repression by regional regimes — although this is certainly occurring. It is a process whereby regimes are substituting security for other social and economic goods in the social contract. That is, security is portrayed as a service that regimes are providing people in the same way as they provide education or health care. In using this approach, regimes have been almost entirely opportunistic. Across the region citizens recoiled from the turmoil and violence that followed the Arab uprisings. For many security and stability suddenly became more important than their socioeconomic needs: for most regimes in the region this was highly convenient because they were marginally better at providing the former than the latter.

Egypt illustrates well how this effort to substitute security for other components of the social contract has worked. The uprising in 2011 produced a new, vibrant political and social scene, but it was also enormously disruptive to the lives and livelihoods of many Egyptians. Tourists stopped coming to Egypt and foreign investors became wary of the country's instability. Ordinary Egyptians complained that their basic personal security had declined and even that the management of Cairo's notorious traffic problems had worsened.

More significantly, the Muslim Brotherhood's victories in parliamentary and presidential elections created fears — both real and manipulated — about what kind of Egypt would emerge under the Brotherhood's leadership. These fears culminated in large popular protests in 2013 that provided Sisi, then head of the military, with an opportunity to intervene. In a speech on 24 July 2013 at Cairo's military academy Sisi urged "all honest and trustworthy Egyptians" to come out onto the streets to give him the "mandate and order to confront violence and potential terrorism."²¹ Large numbers of people responded to Sisi's call — although the size of the protests remains disputed. What was clear, however, was Sisi's willingness to leverage this mandate to seize power.

At least initially Egyptians seemed to welcome the return to order and predictability, reflected in the genuine popular support that saw Sisi elected president in 2014. But as his popularity began to fall, Sisi continued to portray stability as his signature achievement and the key component of his compact with Egypt's citizens. As he noted in an interview in 2017:

"Stability has been achieved by comparison to what it was like before. No, of course the percentage of stability has increased in a very big and noticeable way. I am not the only one saying this, but everyone who is following up Egypt's affairs can see this."²²

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In Saudi Arabia the securitisation of the social contract has also seen the adoption of a belligerent form of Saudi nationalism. Historically, the ruling family tended to emphasise the state's Islamic identity as both the host of Islam's two holiest sites and as a benefactor for Islamic causes world-wide. Under the late King Abdullah, however, Saudi nationalism began to be emphasised more strongly, partly out of fear of Islamist currents that were gaining ascendancy in the early years of the Arab uprisings (some of which the kingdom had once supported).²³

Under the Crown Prince's rule, however, the nationalist narrative has struck a distinctly belligerent tone, both at home and abroad. The regime has adopted new language to condemn political dissidents as 'traitors' and foreign agents. Citizens have been encouraged to report on critics of the state and an app was even created for the purpose.²⁴ Arrests and executions of political opponents have been stepped up. Many of these have occurred at home, but in the dramatic killing of Saudi exile Jamal al-Khashoggi in the Saudi Consulate in Istanbul, the regime also demonstrated a new and more radical willingness to strike at domestic critics living abroad.



A poster of Jamal al-Khashoggi displayed at the "Torture in the Kingdom" event, hosted by The Freedom Initiative and Human Rights Watch, Washington, March 2019. Photo: April Brady/Project on Middle East Democracy

Regionally, the once-cautious Saudi foreign policy gave way to a major military adventure in Yemen, an ill-tempered effort to isolate regional rival Qatar, and a vigorous diplomatic campaign to contain Iran. Of these, the war in Yemen demonstrates most clearly the new forms of belligerent nationalism being wielded by the Saudi regime. It was in many respects an extension of the internal security paradigm: in the same way that the regime was fighting disorder and treachery at home, it was also fighting it in the region, supposedly in the interests of Saudi citizens. But in both

cases the regime placed a premium on citizens' loyalty to the King and his Crown Prince.

THE LIMITS OF SECURITY

There is, however, a flaw at the heart of the securitised social contract that the Egyptian, Saudi and other regimes across the region are trying to build. Because the insertion of security into the social contract has largely been opportunistic, it is only ever likely to prove a limited basis for extending and sustaining the regimes' authority and legitimacy. Ultimately regimes will confront one of two problems: if they are successful in providing security then citizens will again demand more from the social contract, especially the delivery of socioeconomic benefits; and if they are unable to provide security then regimes will start looking incompetent, including to their rivals.

In Egypt, there are signs that popular support for Sisi is declining, even if gauging this accurately is notoriously difficult given both the unreliability of opinion polling in the country and the scale of regime crackdowns upon the slightest hints of opposition, including in the media. While Sisi was never going to sustain the genuinely high levels of support with which he entered office, there is growing anecdotal evidence of Egyptians' eroding regard and deference toward their current 'strongman'.

One illustration was the curious case of Mohamed Ali, a former military contractor (and some-time actor) living in self-imposed exile in Spain. In September 2019 Ali released a series of online videos focused on the corrupt practices of the military and regime figures, including the president. It did not seem to matter that Ali had in fact been a military crony, and that his grievance against the regime was its failure to pay him accordingly.²⁵

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Mohamed Ali speaking online. Screenshot/YouTube.

At a time of growing economic hardship in Egypt the videos went viral and his regular updates became daily events. In what was likely uncomfortable to the regime, the videos highlighted the same themes of corruption and impunity that drove the Egyptian uprising in 2011.

The videos provoked small but vocal demonstrations across a number of Egyptian cities. That these protests occurred at all was remarkable given the serious consequences of even minor displays of dissent by the threat, the regime left nothing to chance. More than 3000 individuals were arrested, including veteran activists or opposition figures who seemed to have little or no connection to the demonstrations. In the wake of these protests police now stop ordinary citizens in streets to check their mobile phones to see if they have viewed or shared content disparaging Sisi.²⁶

In Saudi Arabia, too, there are nascent signs that a security-led approach to regime legitimacy is becoming problematic.

In Saudi Arabia, too, there are nascent signs that a security-led approach to regime legitimacy is becoming problematic. In this case, however, the regime seems to be realising that it is reaching the limits of its current approach. The protracted war in Yemen, for example, may not be extracting a high price in terms of Saudi lives, but every day it drags on it undermines the Crown Prince's martial image and underlines the hollowness of the more militant brand of nationalism he has helped to propagate. Likewise, the effort to isolate and contain Iran and Qatar has run aground on some harsh realities about the limits of Saudi power and strategy. The muted Saudi response to a drone and cruise missile attack on a key oil facility by Iran in October 2019 seemed to reflect a new appreciation of those realities by Mohammad bin Salman. Reports of subsequent quiet diplomatic efforts by Saudi Arabia to improve the relationship with Iran reinforce this interpretation.²⁷

Nevertheless, for the moment there are few signs that the Crown Prince is paying a price domestically for the recent failings in Saudi policy either with respect to public support for him, or in terms of motivating rivals within the royal family. But as with his economic reform plans, the risk is not a sudden collapse in support for the ruling regime. Rather, these failings make it difficult for the regime to base its legitimacy and authority on this belligerent brand of Saudi nationalism. They also undermine the Crown Prince's economic reform plans by causing concerns among international investors about Saudi security and stability — something which may have already played a role in the disappointing international response to the initial public offering of Saudi Aramco.²⁸

SQUEEZING SOCIETIES

If authoritarian regimes in the Middle East are unable to reinforce their legitimacy by either reinvigorating the socioeconomic contract or securitising it, what are they likely to do? The short answer is, what they have always done; rely more on repression. This is already happening,

but there has also been a deeply consequential shift in how regimes balance consent and coercion in the way that they govern.

In Egypt, for example, President Sisi has not simply reverted to the authoritarianism of his predecessors. Egyptian regimes have always harassed, arrested or tortured critics and opponents. They have shut down independent media and limited opportunities for public expressions of dissent. They have built cults of personality around the ruler. But not since the time of the military rule of Gamal Abdel Al-Nasser have all of these measures been deployed simultaneously and so ruthlessly.

The most powerful opposition movement, the Muslim Brotherhood, has been systematically broken. But the bloody crackdown on the Brotherhood that followed the military coup was just the start of a broader campaign to restore 'stability'. In the months after the coup thousands of Egyptians were arrested, both Islamists and non-Islamists. Over time anyone who was seen as a potential rival to Sisi's rule, including within the military, wound up in prison. Independent media has been all but eliminated. So pervasive are these efforts to control society that they even extend to the supervision of the scripts and themes of Egyptian television soap operas.²⁹

In Saudi Arabia the level of repression is significantly lower than that being applied in Egypt, and, by lessening religious and social restrictions the regime is arguably introducing some pressure relief valves. Nevertheless, even in Saudi Arabia the centralisation and arbitrary exercise of power goes beyond that of previous regimes. The gruesome execution of Saudi dissident Jamal al-Khashoggi was just one example. The Crown Prince has also presided over a new round of repression of the kingdom's Shi'ite minority that has included mass executions.³⁰ Few segments of society have been spared arrests and in some cases torture, from civil society and religious figures to business people and members of the royal family.

Some observers will argue that it is precisely the control and repression now being exercised by regimes in Egypt and Saudi Arabia that makes them resilient. The modern history of the Middle East suggests that another outcome is likely. In the past when concentrated pressure was applied to a society the result was usually an explosion of instability or violence. In Egypt, a regime offensive against Islamists by Anwar Sadat in the 1980s produced a generation of radicals who later assassinated the president and launched a violent insurgency against the state in the 1990s. In Algeria in 1992 the military aborted an election and cracked down hard on mainstream Islamists, and then fought a decade-long conflict against their more militant progeny that killed more than 100,000 Algerians.³¹ More recently in Iraq, the mistreatment of Sunnis by Shia-dominated governments after the overthrow of Saddam produced hundreds of willing recruits for the movement that would eventually become Islamic State.

In fact, past autocrats in the Middle East came to understand that periods of ruthless repression needed to be leavened with periods when that pressure was eased. In Saudi Arabia former kings would regularly ‘rehabilitate’ political opponents after they had spent sufficient time in the kingdom’s prisons. In Egypt, for example, regular crackdowns on the Muslim Brotherhood were often followed by truces that allowed the organisation to operate publicly within agreed limits. Former President Hosni Mubarak was an unreformed autocrat but created new, if heavily circumscribed, avenues for political participation and relatively free discussion of national issues in the media.

Today’s crop of rulers, with their paranoid reactions to the slightest hints of dissent, appear to believe that it was Mubarak’s leniency that led to his downfall.³² Regimes seem so unsure of the utility of repression that their only solution is to apply it more strongly. The result is unlikely to be the stability and security that regimes, their international partners and many of their citizens desire, but what might be termed ‘accordion cycles’ of violence and instability. That is, in the same way that an accordion is played by compressing the instrument’s diaphragm, regimes are squeezing their societies to the point of explosion of protest and/or violence that, to extend the metaphor, then forces the instrument’s diaphragm open. But at that point, instead of addressing the pressures causing these demonstrations, regimes simply squeeze the diaphragm again until the next breaking point.

BETTING ON DICTATORS, AGAIN

For external powers interested in the stability of the Middle East, the prospect of accordion cycles of violence and unrest should be sobering.

For external powers interested in the stability of the Middle East, the prospect of accordion cycles of violence and unrest should be sobering. But the signs suggest that external powers are simply betting on the strong hand of the region’s autocrats — in some cases, because of a preference for these types of regimes, or in others, because of a weariness with the region.

The former is most evident in the policies of Russia and China. Both were anxious about the region’s popular revolts as they swept across the Middle East from 2010 — in China’s case so much so that they reputedly banned search terms related to the uprisings from the internet.³³ Both countries claim to have been duped into acquiescing to the humanitarian international intervention in Libya that paved the way for the overthrow of Muammar Gaddafi. If that really had been a misstep, neither made it again.

Since the Libyan crisis, Moscow and Beijing have decried what they have described as misguided liberal interventionism. But they have also been champions of their own brand of illiberal interventionism. A crude, if uncoordinated, division of labour has emerged, with Russia providing the

hardware and China the software to shore up regimes across the region. Russia's military intervened in Syria and the country is selling arms and providing mercenaries across the region. China has provided surveillance technology and training.

But even as Russia was throwing its full weight behind the Syrian and other autocratic regimes, the United States had begun hedging its own policy bets in the region. In Egypt, for example, when Sisi carried out his coup in 2013, the Obama administration wagged its finger at the new regime and cautioned it about prematurely ending Egypt's democratic experiment. But it also declined to formally label the event a coup, thereby avoiding any immediate Congressionally-mandated cut to a billion and a half dollars in aid. The Obama administration eventually froze that aid for a few years, but beyond this did little of real significance to signal its opposition to the deepening authoritarianism in Egypt.

The Obama administration's apparent ambivalence about the revival of authoritarian rule was repeated elsewhere in the region. In Syria, President Obama's failure to enforce his own red line over Assad's use of chemical weapons sent a clear message to the regime in Damascus that it could prosecute its survival with as much brutality as it could muster. The Obama administration also provided essential support to Saudi Arabia's disastrous war in Yemen, a military campaign that was in part designed to burnish the credentials of Mohammad bin Salman, while ignoring growing repression inside the kingdom.

It could be argued that Obama's pragmatism at least supported worthy aims: keeping a sharp focus on defeating terrorist threats in the region; maintaining a fragile regional consensus in favour of the nuclear accord with Iran; and breaking the habit of costly American wars and interventions in the region. Under President Donald Trump any pretence of making difficult, hard-nosed decisions in the service of laudable ends disappeared. Trump embraced the region's autocrats warmly, including Sisi in Egypt, whom he once quipped was his "favourite dictator", and Mohammad bin Salman in Saudi Arabia.³⁴

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Trump is, however, an easy target for moral opprobrium. While liberal European states regularly complain about Trump's illiberalism, they have pursued similarly transactional and pragmatic relationships with the Middle Eastern despots. Trump has crowed about how his close relationship with the Crown Prince has led to large arms purchases by Saudi Arabia from the United States. But France, Germany and the United Kingdom have also been enthusiastic, if less boastful, arms vendors to the region since the uprisings, selling everything from helicopter carriers and warships to smart weapons for the war in Yemen.³⁵



President Trump meets Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman at the G20 Summit in Japan, June 2019. Official White House photograph by Tia Dufour.

European pragmatism has not been isolated to weapons sales. Like the United States many European governments seemed initially to back, even at times to welcome, the region's potential political transformation. Several joined the early chorus for Assad to go; at least officially, EU policy continues to demand some form of political transition in Syria. But as Europe's focus has shifted to combatting terrorism and halting refugee flows, a reordering of priorities has taken place. In 2019 the first ever EU–Arab League Summit was held in Egypt. The title of the summit declaration — “Investing in stability” — left little doubt as to Europe's priorities.

DIGITAL DICTATORSHIP

The fact that external powers have continued or revived their relationships with the region's autocratic regimes may seem an understandable calculation. In pursuit of their national interests, governments are forced to deal with countries as they find them, not as they wish them to be. Yet, as they have in the past, external powers have gone beyond merely dealing with whomever they find in office in states across the Middle East. In many cases they are helping autocratic regimes to remain in power.

... Chinese companies are helping regimes to shore up their rule digitally.

Russia's support for the Syrian regime is the most obvious example of this. But a more interesting and telling illustration is the way Chinese companies are helping regimes to shore up their rule digitally. China is already attracting attention for its growing use of highly sophisticated surveillance technology to maintain order at home. But it is also exporting such technology abroad. As one report has noted, this reflects both the increasing sophistication of this technology, but also a strategic decision

by the Chinese leadership to become an international pacesetter in the field.³⁶

Nevertheless, China's role is increasingly being documented. For example, according to the AI Global Surveillance Index, the Chinese company Huawei has become the leading exporter of such surveillance technology by a significant margin. The same index identifies a number of Middle Eastern countries as importers of this technology including Iran, Iraq, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Algeria.³⁷ According to a separate report from Freedom House, China is also willing to provide training to foreign officials to support such technology sales. It notes, for example, that officials from Iran, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Lebanon and the United Arab Emirates have all attended training seminars on 'Cyberspace management' in China.³⁸

While it might be tempting to portray this as technology-sharing by autocrats, the truth is that companies from Western countries are also engaged in this trade. American companies, including IBM, Honeywell and Gatekeeper, are all selling AI surveillance technology to Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.³⁹ Gatekeeper has, for example, sold facial recognition technology to Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.⁴⁰ The UK firm Hugslock has provided so-called "intelligent" man-hole covers to Saudi Arabia that embed surveillance systems into city streets.⁴¹ Western governments might claim that sales by private Western firms do not necessarily reflect official policy. But efforts to regulate the trade in these technologies (in the same way that arms sales are regulated) have been faltering for a number of years already.⁴²

Western governments might also argue, as would their Russian and Chinese counterparts, that in permitting the export of these technologies they are helping to address genuine policing and security needs. To some degree this is true. But Middle Eastern regimes have long blurred the line between individuals and groups that could legitimately be defined as terrorists and those who are merely opponents of the regime. In practice regimes have used these technologies against a wide variety of targets.

American companies, including IBM, Honeywell and Gatekeeper, are all selling AI surveillance technology to Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.

FALSE PRAGMATISM

Western governments often defend the need to engage with autocratic regimes in the Middle East on national interest grounds. These interests, it is argued, dictate dealing with unpalatable regimes for a variety of hard-nosed reasons, including to counter terrorism and prevent the irregular movement of people. This sentiment in favour of more pragmatic and less-principled engagement has been reinforced by the failure of purportedly liberal-minded interventions in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya over the last two decades.

The perceived failure of liberal interventionism in the Middle East has also been reinforced by the apparent success of illiberal interventionism. It might be argued that because Russia and China treat regimes in the region as they are rather than as they should be, their influence and power has grown at the West's expense.

But Russia and China can support brutal, autocratic regimes in the Middle East precisely because they do not suffer the consequences of such policies, specifically the violence and instability that produces, among other things, extremism, terrorism and refugee flows. Despite Russia and China's role in propping up regional regimes, Middle Eastern terrorists still largely target Western countries. Refugees in the region are not risking their lives to flee violence and instability in the region to find sanctuary in Russia or China.

Western policy needs finally to live up to the liberal ideals and values it has long professed but failed to practice — not just because it is the right thing to do, but also because it is the smart thing to do. During the Cold War there may have been less scope to quibble with how regimes ran their states. The West's main interest was who ran these states and specifically whether they were aligned with the Soviet Union or the West. But now that the West's primary interest in the Middle East lies in stemming terrorism and refugee flows, the character of regimes and how they run their states has become paramount.

This is not, however, an argument for new liberal interventions or efforts at regime change. There are more modest but still liberal approaches that can be adopted. These would include, among other things, not providing legitimacy to the worst of the region's autocrats through summits, conferences, trade and investment missions; reducing arms sales to the region, particularly to those countries engaged in the region's many civil conflicts; and agreeing on new international mechanisms to control the export and use of surveillance technology. It would also mean providing political protection and other forms of non-military support for those indigenous actors promoting meaningful, incremental and peaceful change.

Such approaches might only work over the longer term. But they are a better option than backing regimes that are driving their societies, one way or another, to new rounds of violence and instability.

Critics will argue that a more genuinely liberal approach will simply hand greater influence in the region to Russia and China. But this has happened anyway. So why not seek to establish new norms for what should and should not be sold or done in the region by all external powers? Leaders in Western countries often complain about a decaying international rules-based order. The Middle East would be excellent ground upon which to start rebuilding it.

Western policy needs finally to live up to the liberal ideals and values it has long professed but failed to practice ...

NOTES

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