



## **FAILURE AND LONGEVITY: THE DOMINANT POLITICAL ORDER OF THE MIDDLE EAST**

Jonathan Spyer\*

*This article is part of a paper originally written for a project and conference on "Stability, Crises, and Democratization: The Arab World's Direction and the European Interests," co-sponsored by the GLORIA Center and The Military Centre for Strategic Studies (CeMiSS) of Italy.*

*The Middle East today is the "great exception" in terms of societal and political progress. In the last decade and a half, since the collapse of the former Soviet Union, authoritarian regimes have been making way for reform across the globe. In the Middle East, however, authoritarian rule, presiding over sluggish development, remains the norm. Almost without exception, the region remains divided between nationalist-military dictatorships of varying degrees of severity, and traditional, monarchical forms of government. Neither of these forms of governance has succeeded in developing successful, advanced economies or educated, mobile societies. The aim of this essay is to look into some of the processes that enable this situation to continue and to examine possible explanations for this state of affairs. The matter will be considered both through observation of region-wide aspects and by focusing on the specific experiences of a number of countries in the region. The countries to be studied include Egypt and Syria as well as a brief study of Saudi Arabia. Having completed the short foci on the experiences of the three countries named above, the article will conclude by attempting to locate and identify the key factors militating against domestically produced "regime change" in the countries of the Middle East.*

The general failure of Middle Eastern regimes to develop adequately the populations and societies that they control is an often-acknowledged aspect of the region. The statistics detailing failure in this regard have been catalogued in the UN Arab Human Development Report series. This series of annual reports depicts a region possessing impressive natural resources, yet beset by socio-political failure.

The Middle East today is the "great exception" in terms of societal and political progress. In the last decade and a half, since the collapse of the former Soviet Union,

authoritarian regimes have been making way for reform across the globe. In Latin America, once a bastion for authoritarian regimes of both left and right, the victory of democratic systems is near complete. In Central and Eastern Europe, among the former satellite countries of the USSR, the transition to representative government has, in general, proceeded with remarkable smoothness. Even in sub-Saharan Africa, the conduct of elections is no longer a novelty.

In the Middle East, however, authoritarian rule, presiding over sluggish development, remains the norm. Almost without exception,

the region remains divided between nationalist-military dictatorships of varying degrees of severity, and traditional, monarchical forms of government. Neither of these forms of governance has succeeded in developing successful, advanced economies or educated, mobile societies.<sup>1</sup>

Instead, unusually high state interference in the economy is a salient feature of the region. The public sector's share of the economy region-wide is the highest in the world. Distortions imposed by patronage and political interference further serve to prevent the development of normal, competition-based free market economies. The result is slow economic growth and low living standards. Around 20 percent of the inhabitants of Middle Eastern countries live on less than \$2 per day. Between 1965 and 2000, regional economies grew at a rate of three percent per annum. This is the slowest for any region in the world, with the exception of sub-Saharan Africa. The average growth rate of per capita income during the years 1982 to 2000 was one-half of one percent per annum—again, worse than anywhere but sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>2</sup>

When these figures are taken in conjunction with the high population growth of the region, the failure of education systems, and the generally low levels of scientific and technological development that characterize the Middle East, a picture emerges of a region beset by deep and systemic failure.

Yet the political instability one might expect would accompany such a situation remains curiously absent. To be sure, the Middle East is associated with extremist

political-religious ideologies, and the practice of political violence. But the movements advocating these ideologies have been singularly unsuccessful in their actual ability to achieve power. In terms of the governing systems, the regimes that preside over the region are notable for their longevity. The same movements, the same ideas, in some cases the same individuals hold power in the countries of the Arabic-speaking world as did so a quarter of a century ago. This is a seemingly counter-intuitive phenomenon. In other times and places, developmental and economic failure have naturally led to a change in the political dispensation. In many Arab countries, on the other hand, the authors of failure aspire to hand power over to their sons, even as they preside over poverty and stagnation. The aim of this essay is to look into some of the processes that enable this situation to continue, and to examine possible explanations for this state of affairs. This matter will be considered both through observation of region-wide aspects, and by focusing on the specific experiences of a number of countries in the region. The countries to be studied include Egypt and Syria as well as a brief study of Saudi Arabia. The experience of other countries relevant to the examination of broad trends and processes will be mentioned. Having completed the short foci on the experiences of the three countries named above, the article will conclude by attempting to locate and identify the key factors militating against domestically produced “regime change” in the countries of the Middle East.

These three countries were chosen as a focus, because it seems to the author that the

close observation of particular “case studies” offers the best chance for locating broader trends and processes. Egypt, as the most populous of the Arabic-speaking countries, is governed by the prototypical military-nationalist regime of the Arab world. The regime, however, is now the most flexible and civilianized of these regimes. Syria exemplifies the type of the undiluted military-nationalist regime. Saudi Arabia, meanwhile, is a unique combination of a particularly rigid Islamist ideology invested with vast wealth accrued from the country's oil reserves. In each case, the regime justifies itself with reference to key legitimating symbols deriving from the heritage of Islam, Arab nationalism, or more local factors. In each case, the regime is beset by deep-set structural problems, yet is not regarded as facing imminent danger to its survival deriving from domestic opposition forces. We will now turn to the key dynamics in each case that allow this situation to continue.

## **EGYPT**

With a population estimated at 77.5 million in 2005, Egypt is the largest state in the Arab world.<sup>3</sup> The country was the first to fall to the wave of Arab nationalist coups in the turbulent period of the 1950s. The Free Officers' regime, which came to power on July 23, 1952, was the prototypical Arab nationalist regime.<sup>4</sup> This regime has now held power for 53 years. No longer overtly a military junta, the regime holds power through the ruling National Democratic Party (NDP). The Free Officers' coup represented the end of centuries of foreign domination of Egypt. As such, the Free Officers drew on a

perceived legacy of misrule and plunder of the country's resources by foreigners. The language in which the regime chose to justify itself was one of nationalism, drawing both on pan-Arab ambitions (in the 1954-67 period) and later on the rich history of Egypt, as well as its Islamic heritage.<sup>5</sup>

The regime has failed both to achieve the military and diplomatic successes it promised, and to address the very deep developmental problems facing the country. In terms of the former, in the period 1954-70, under Colonel Gamal Abdel Nasser, Egyptian policy was characterized by a drive for regional hegemony that led it into a series of ill thought-out and disastrous adventures. These included the abortive attempt to begin the process of Arab unification with the formation of the United Arab Republic together with Syria in 1958. In addition, the lengthy and costly Egyptian involvement in the Yemeni civil war and of course the disaster of the June War of 1967 were the direct result of Arab nationalist ambitions. For a time, Gamal Abdel Nasser formed a genuinely charismatic presence in the region. His speeches, broadcast region-wide through Cairo Radio, elevated the Egyptian leader to the status of a sort of prophet of Arab nationalism. To a considerable extent, the ideas espoused by Nasser at that time set the tone for much of the language of legitimation that still dominates political discussion in the Arab world. However, the achievements of this creed never matched its lofty pronouncements.<sup>6</sup> This was as true on the local level as the regional. Economic protectionism and a pro-Soviet model of development failed to deliver economic prosperity. “National capitalism,” the name given to Egypt's

chosen economic system in the 1962 National Charter, succeeded in transferring a large number of private projects to state control. The result was the emergency of a bloated public sector. The hopes for prosperity and efficiency did not follow.

The *Infitah al-Iqtisadi* (“economic opening up”) of the Sadat period removed some of the state controls on the sclerotic Egyptian economy. The power of the state sector and “national capital” remains large in Egypt, however, and in terms of political power, its representatives reign supreme. During the Infitah period, wealth differentials widened, and a sector of “nouveaux riches”—whose supposed excesses and Western tastes are singled out by the Islamist opposition for criticism—appeared. Despite the (negative) attention lavished upon these people in political discussion, the Egyptian economy has never really moved beyond the boundaries of so-called national capital. The Infitah period after 1974 raised the private sector's overall share of industrial production, for example, from 24 percent in 1974, to 30 percent a decade later. An International Monetary Fund-led push for economic reform in the beginning of the 1990s has yielded some results, but the Egyptian illiteracy rate remains around 50 percent, the economy stagnant.

The regime's relations with political opponents were reminiscent of those of authoritarian governments elsewhere. While the liberalism that had dominated Egyptian life in the 1930s and 1940s was swept away, the nationalist regime encountered a more determined foe in the shape of the Muslim Brotherhood Association, founded in Egypt

in 1928. This prototypical Sunni Islamist organization was and remains the central domestic political challenge to the regime of the Free Officers/National Democratic Party.<sup>7</sup> During the Nasser period, the regime's relations with the Brotherhood alternated between attempts at co-optation and harsh repression. It has been the Islamists who have articulated the language of political dissent; and it has been largely Egyptian Islamists who, in a kind of re-run in reverse of Nasser's border-traducing charisma of the 1950s, have set the tone and laid down the organizational bases for Islamism across the Sunni Arab Middle East. This is so in an organizational sense—the Muslim Brotherhood's various branches constitute the main oppositional forces in Egypt, Jordan, Syria, and among the Palestinians. Exiles from Nasser's repression of the movement in the 1950s played a key role in educating the elite of Saudi Arabia to Islamist commitment (Osama Bin-Laden was himself the student of exiled Muslim Brothers, including the brother of legendary ideologue Sayid Qutb.)<sup>8</sup> It is also the case in terms of ideology, with such individuals as Sayid Qutb and Muhammad al-Farag laying down the essential contours for the more radical Islamist ideas that inform the extremist Jihadi elements of Islamism.<sup>9</sup> (Since the 1970s, the Muslim Brotherhood itself has been opposed to violence.)

Extremist Islamists attempted to plunge Egypt into chaos in the mid-1990s, and their failure led to widespread repression.

Today, Egypt remains largely suspended between the stagnation of the NDP regime—with its hold on the commanding heights of the economy and its tired nationalist

rhetoric—and the Muslim Brotherhood opposition—with the more extreme and violent Islamists a perennial disruptive factor. The regime—since the mid-1970s a pro-Western lynchpin in the region—is the beneficiary of generous subsidies from the United States.

Under U.S. pressure, current President Hosni Mubarak has backed away from openly grooming his son to succeed him. He has also permitted unprecedented free parliamentary elections this year. The result has been very significant gains for the candidates of the Muslim Brotherhood. Candidates associated with the Brotherhood are likely to control around 100 of the 454 seats in the parliament by the close of the election.<sup>10</sup>

There have been allegations of a cynical attempt by the regime to crush the liberal and democratic opposition in Egypt so as to convey to the West that the stark choice remains between the nationalist regime and the Islamist opposition.<sup>11</sup> To a large degree, however, such claims are exaggerated. The Brotherhood was able to win the level of support it has achieved, because it is perceived by very large numbers of Egyptians to represent the voice of authenticity and tradition, and of a long-standing campaign for change. Its militants have suffered in the movement's fight, and it is contrasted by many with the venality and corruption associated with the regime.<sup>12</sup>

Liberal forces, by contrast, such as the re-constituted Wafd Party, are seen as representing a privileged pro-Western few. The New Wafd has been driven by internecine power struggles in recent times, which have further reduced its political

effectiveness. They lack the seasoned structures of activism and welfare possessed by the Brotherhood (although Brotherhood candidates stood as part of the New Wafd in an early foray into electoral politics in 1984.)<sup>13</sup>

More than half a century after the Free Officers' coup, pro-market liberalism somehow retains an association for many Egyptians with past foreign rule and with subservience to foreign interests and ways. By contrast, the Islamist opposition is seen by some as representing an organically authentic product of Egypt itself, competing with the nationalist regime for the key mobilizing symbols around which political legitimacy is built.

The Egyptian regime's control of the armed forces remains secure. Indeed, in the last two decades, the Egyptian armed forces have undergone a radical and extensive process of modernization. The United States has given nearly \$28 billion in military aid since 1975. The result has been the creation of a modern, high-tech military capable of absorbing advanced Western weapons systems.<sup>14</sup> By the late 1990s, all but one of Egypt's 12 divisions was armored or mechanized. The Egyptian army is now equipped with M-1 A-1 Abrams main battle tanks—among the most effective in the world. These now account for 70 percent of Egypt's armored capability. The Egyptian Air Force, similarly, has successfully integrated the F-16 fighter, which now accounts for around half of its fighter capability.<sup>15</sup>

The police and the army are of course the “last line of defense” for all authoritarian regimes, and Egypt has relied on the loyalty of the security forces at moments of crisis in

the past. Following the assassination of President Sadat in 1981, for example, the army's loyalty played a crucial role in staving off further crisis. Again, in 1986, when the Central Security Forces mutinied, the army's role as a guarantor of the regime was vital.<sup>16</sup>

The regime is clearly aware of the need to maintain the loyalty of the armed forces, and this is ensured in a number of ways. The key task is preventing the successful infiltration of the army by the Islamist opposition. Success in this has not been total. The group that assassinated Sadat included a serving army colonel. Yet through the isolation of military personnel; efforts made in the dissemination of a republican, patriotic anti-Islamist ideology among the officer corps; and through the maintenance of a privileged status for the army's higher ranks and its front-line troops, the loyalty of the military has largely been maintained.

Part of this process has also been striving to the greatest extent possible to keep the army to only a minor role in actively confronting the Islamists. Since direct engagement with the Islamists would have the side-effect of exposing the army to Islamist ideas and possible infiltration, the military is mainly kept as a kind of reserve in this struggle, whose proven loyalty offers a deterrent to all who would consider a strategy of insurgency against NDP rule.<sup>17</sup>

Thus, while the regime has palpably failed to deliver the goods in terms of development or external achievements, its position remains relatively secure. First, this is because the liberal opposition lacks broad popular support, is associated with subservience to foreign authority in large parts of the public

mind, and lacks the structures and cadres necessary for a sustained campaign of opposition to authoritarian rule. In addition, the regime has proven able to manipulate political processes so as to turn the apparent increase of representation to its own advantage—for example, by affording Islamist elements freer rein to organize than liberal reform forces.

The regime is able to lay some claim to legitimating elements—such as hostility to Israel, and loyalty to Islam. Certainly it outdoes the liberal opposition in both these regards. Against the claims of the Islamists that it has betrayed these elements, the regime may point to the non-humiliation of the 1973 War and Egypt's subsequent regaining of the Sinai in peace negotiations. The regime has also been careful to pay lip-service to Islamic piety, since the time of Anwar Sadat. Under Hosni Mubarak, a respectful and understated attitude to Islamic traditions goes hand in hand with the careful monitoring of radical Islamist activities by the security services.

The loyalty of the armed forces has been kept secure by a combination of isolation of the military from the wider society, privileging of vital elements of the armed forces, and only limited use of the military in the process of confronting the Islamist opposition.

Since the 1970s, Egypt has been one of the main U.S. client states in the Middle East. The country is the most populous and powerful of the Arab states, acknowledged as a natural setter of trends throughout the region. Its continued presence in the pro-Western camp is thus a vital strategic interest

of the United States. The main opposition, that of the Islamist Muslim Brotherhood, is opposed by the West, and hence repressive measures undertaken by the regime against this organization are likely to be at least tacitly supported by the regime's sponsors.

## SYRIA

Syria may be said to represent the type of the undiluted Arab nationalist military dictatorship. Since March 1963, the country has been administered by a series of military regimes claiming loyalty to the Ba'th Party, an ideological grouping committed to pan-Arab nationalism. The regime of Amin al-Hafiz was overthrown by a group of radical leftist Ba'thist officers in February 1966. This group was led by a figure hailing from the minority Alawi community of Syria, Salah al-Jadid. The main contribution of this regime to the political history of the region was its primary responsibility for the escalation that culminated in the June War of 1967. Jadid was overthrown in his turn in November 1970, by a group of former associates led by a fellow Alawi, Hafiz al-Asad.<sup>18</sup> The Asad family have ruled Syria since that date. Hafiz al-Asad died in June 2000 and was replaced by his son, Bashar.

The Asad regime, which is dominated by members of the Alawi minority, rules ostensibly in the name of Arab nationalism.<sup>19</sup> Perhaps because of its very tenuous legitimacy, the regime has placed great stress in its loyalty to nationalist precepts and its hostility to Israel. The regime was a client state of the Soviet Union until the collapse of Communism, and its attempt to institute a Soviet-style planned economy has resulted in

failure and stagnation. Syria was an important element in Soviet support for insurgent and terrorist movements in the Middle East. The country's brandishing of the banner of radical nationalism enabled it to "punch above its weight" in regional terms. By presenting itself as the key "frontline state" still at war with Israel, the regime was able to attract funding from the oil-rich states of the Gulf. Syria never acknowledged the dominance of Yasir Arafat's Fatah over the Palestinian national movement. Instead, it presented itself and its allies as an alternative focus for what it tried to present as a more uncompromising brand of Arab anti-Zionism.

The Asad regime has failed to develop Syria internally. It also has only a mixed record in terms of external policy. Hafiz al-Asad succeeded in establishing Syria's voice in the region as the uncompromising guardian of Arab nationalist propriety. He was able to trade this in deftly by making himself a key U.S. ally in the war against Saddam Hussein in 1991. Syria possessed neither the strategic nor financial weight to be able to transform this position into one of lasting regional dominance. Notably, however, the regime was able to impose its dominance over Lebanon in the 1991-2004 period as a result of Asad's clever manipulation of the "trump card" of nationalist legitimacy which his regime had awarded itself. The fact that Syria established itself as the country that held the rubber stamp of Arab nationalist legitimacy was aptly characterized by Fuad Ajami in the following terms: "Syria's main asset, in contrast to Egypt's pre-eminence and Saudi wealth, is its capacity for mischief."<sup>20</sup> That is, the Syrian regime's self elevation to the position of guardian of nationalist purity

meant that the Syrian stamp of approval became of value. Syria's willingness to denounce other Arab governments for what it regarded as desertion from the true path, and its employment of terrorist groups as proxies made Syria under Hafiz Asad into a widely feared and respected regional presence.

Economically, Syria combines the worst aspects of a Soviet-style managed economy with the patronage and nepotism associated with a regime resting on a narrow natural base of support.<sup>21</sup> Thus, price controls, over-regulation, and bureaucracy combine with preferential treatment for Alawis active in the private sector to ensure failure. The country's entrepreneurial skills are to be found mainly among the country's Sunni majority. A business-minded, conservative Sunni upper-middle class remains in Syria. Yet since the Sunnis are less likely to be supporters of the al-Asad dynasty, they are also more likely to be kept away from the access to economic advantage that comes from closeness to the regime.

The country faced serious economic crisis in the late 1980s/early 1990s, brought on by declining oil prices and the disappearance of Soviet subsidies. The regime has managed to avoid the risks inherent in a major program of reform, however. The occupation of Lebanon ensured employment for Syrian workers at higher wages than available at home. It also offered lucrative possibilities for those connected to the elite to engage in smuggling and the drug trade. Syria also benefited from aiding Saddam in getting around sanctions on his selling of Iraqi oil. A rise in oil prices after 2000 confirmed the regime's "success"

in weathering the crisis while avoiding major structural reform.<sup>22</sup>

In terms of the domestic political scene, the regime has never built up the degree of legitimacy which has enabled its Egyptian counterpart to do away with the cruder elements of repression. Syria is a country with a Sunni Muslim majority, dominated by a largely Alawi clique. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, the Muslim Brotherhood attempted a rebellion, which the regime crushed with much brutality. Since then, and until recent months, quiet and stability in an atmosphere of extreme repression have characterized the internal Syrian situation. Yet the communal issue and the narrow base of the regime remain key matters of concern.<sup>23</sup>

Hopes for an opening up of the system on the accession to power of Bashar al-Asad were rapidly disappointed. Some minor and cosmetic reforms were enacted. Bashar released a number of Islamist prisoners held since the unrest of the late 1970s. A few meetings were held with selected reformers. A few small parties were permitted to organize, and a few articles critical of the regime allowed to appear in the state-run press. However, the regime flatly rejected demands emerging from this brief thaw, for example for freedom of speech and assembly, the release of all political prisoners, and the ending of martial law and the state of emergency.<sup>24</sup> Instead, clear warning signals were sent out by the regime through its organs in civil society, such as the Arab Writers Association. Through such bodies, and via speeches and statements, the regime firmly laid down the limits of dissent,

warning dissidents not to overstep them. When civil rights activists tried to organize a committee to promote their aims, they were reminded by the authorities that under the terms of martial law, no unauthorized gathering of more than five persons was permitted. A small number of activists were arrested, and a few token jail sentences were handed out to particularly prominent activists. With that, the moment of challenge passed. The regime used the powers available to it through martial law to crush dissent. It made use of the legitimacy afforded it by its claim to be leading the nation in a struggle to regain a lost part of the national patrimony (the Golan Heights) in order to justify its actions.

There is little doubt that the Syrian economy and society would benefit from the ending of the restrictions of martial law. It is obvious that Syria is not under such imminent threat as to make such curtailments of liberty unavoidable. In fact, in the 1990s, successive Israeli governments of both left and right expressed their willingness to part with the Golan Heights in return for full peace. Yet in a manner reminiscent of George Orwell's *1984*, the regime needs to maintain an artificial atmosphere of war and impending external peril in order to justify repressive measures whose real motivations are quite different.

The younger Asad has proved to possess little of either his father's political subtlety or his brutal resolve. The U.S. invasion of Iraq and Syria's support for the insurgency in that country have led to the withdrawal of forces from Lebanon. The subsequent murder of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik al-Hariri, with the possible collusion of the

Syrian regime, has placed Damascus under international pressure and focus of a type to which it is not accustomed. The signal achievement of Hafiz al-Asad was in avoiding having his regime bracketed along with those of Saddam's Iraq and Qhadafi's Libya. His son appears to have secured entry for Syria into this category, in the perceptions of the West.

In looking at Egypt, it was observed that the tacit endorsement of the West of repressive government deriving from strategic considerations, the weakness of the liberal opposition, the loyalty of the armed forces, and the ability of the regime to lay claim to important consensual symbols were the key elements that enabled the regime to secure its survival. What of Syria? To what extent do these conditions also apply to Damascus?

Regarding the opposition, accurate information on the state of the internal Syrian opposition is difficult to obtain.<sup>25</sup> However, the Asad regime—if left alone by outside forces—probably faces no imminent danger of internal overthrow. The Islamists have been largely silent in the last years. The liberal opposition was swiftly cowed following Bashar's ascent to power. So the Asad dynasty's practice of repression has proven effective in the short-term in increasing its chances for survival. If Bashar's rule proves excessively erratic, he may well be replaced from within, but this will not mean a transformation of the regime.

Regarding the security forces, the involvement of the military in politics dates back to the earliest years of Syrian independence. One of Hafiz Asad's most singular achievements as a ruler was to

successfully turn the Syrian military into a factor protecting his regime, rather than a perennial threat to it. In the period of the older Asad's rule, the Syrian army was called upon on a number of occasions to intervene to ensure the regime's survival. In 1982, for example, the loyalty of the security forces was crucial in crushing the revolt of the Muslim Brotherhood. In 1983, again, the army's loyalty to Hafiz Asad was instrumental in defeating the threat posed to his rule by his brother Rifat.<sup>26</sup> Asad has ensured the loyalty of the army by maintaining the domination of members of the Alawite community within its senior ranks. In turn, the generals themselves were tied to the regime through extensive patron-client relationships. Asad took care to integrate senior officers into the institutions of the Ba'th Party, and established competing security arms, including, most significantly, the Republican Guard, which is under the direct control of the President.<sup>27</sup>

While some commentators had suggested that the military's ties to the regime would weaken following the ascension of Bashar, the military appears, for now at least, to have rallied firmly behind the new regime. Yet once again, even if Bashar were to find himself replaced from within, this would not in itself alter the basic structures by which power is wielded in Syria.

The regime's attempt to use legitimizing symbols in tandem with its repression of opposition deserves attention. As Syria, unlike Egypt, does not have a very old and deeply felt sense of nationhood, the claims of the regime are correspondingly more shrill and brittle. The Asad dynasty cannot credibly

invoke a shared Islamic identity—the Alawis' very claim to be Muslim is widely contested. As noted above, however, the Asad regime has elected itself as the chief guardian of Arab nationalism. The extent to which this has any real meaning to the mass of Syrians is difficult to gauge. It may be assumed that the general and long-disseminated culture of permanent national crisis created by the regime goes some way towards achieving quiescence, if not consent, on the part of the population. The shallowness of this in the Syrian context is evident, however, and leads to the more openly coercive nature of rule in Syria, as compared to Egypt.

The key difference in the Syrian case may well be that the erratic adventurism of Bashar will lead to a much greater willingness to place pressure on the regime from the outside. The murder of Rafik al-Hariri, and the attempts by Syria to impede the UN investigation into this event, have united the United States and Europe in an attitude of anger toward the regime. At the time of writing, international pressure has already brought about a Syrian withdrawal from Syria, which constituted a severe humiliation for the regime. Currently, a real possibility of economic sanctions on Syria exists, deriving from the Hariri murder. Sanctions and other forms of pressure could be the factor that will lead to the fall of the regime, or the replacement of Bashar. If this indeed proves the case, it will be because Bashar proved unable to navigate with sufficient dexterity the course laid down by his father—which required the combination of internal repression, maintaining the “moral high

ground” in terms of nationalism and the fight against Israel, while simultaneously following a cautious, non-adventurist foreign policy. Bashar's support for the Iraqi insurgents, his failure to hold Lebanon, and the apparent clumsy attempt to retain covert influence in that country all constitute a diversion from that path.

In both the Syrian and Egyptian cases, then, simple repression, successful co-option of potential sources of discontent, and an active state security apparatus to repress others have combined with the manipulation and use of key legitimating symbols and the absence of an attractive domestic alternative to enable regime survival. The language of reform and democratic opposition remains weak. The educated and intellectual classes are kept in line through a combination of co-opting and repression. Western support in the Egyptian case plays an important role. In the case of Syria, the clumsy handling by Bashar Asad of his country's foreign relations have placed the regime under unprecedented pressure.

#### **SAUDI ARABIA/THE GULF MONARCHIES**

The factors listed above are applicable more generally to other countries in the region, including regimes ostensibly committed to very different and even opposing ideas to the Arab nationalism notionally espoused by Egypt and Syria. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, for example, in the early post-war period represented the opposite pole to the Nasser regime. The oil-rich Gulf kingdom maintained a pro-Western stance throughout the Cold War, presenting itself as the

representative of conservative Islam. The kingdom rests on a historic alliance between the Saud monarchy and clergymen committed to the ultra-conservative and rigid Wahabi stream of Islam. This alliance survived early tremors, and appears secure.<sup>28</sup>

Despite the very obvious differences, similar factors may be discerned in the desert kingdom as were identified as the central elements that have enabled regime stability despite developmental failure in the nationalist regimes of Egypt and Syria. Once again, the monarchy has signally failed in the tasks of development. In this case, vast oil wealth has not been used for societal advancement. The main opposition to the status quo is represented by Islamist groups, with liberal reformists extremely weak. Once again, the regime maintains a clear and unchallenged control of the forces of repression, and once again, the regime is able to lay claim to symbols of legitimacy which ground and entrench its rule in the eyes of at least a section of the population.

The traditional monarchical systems of the Gulf have navigated very profound social changes in the last decades. Modernization has taken place at a rapid pace, fuelled by oil wealth. Rising educational levels have led to increased pressure on governments. The monarchies have lived through moments of regional turbulence—fueled by the great ideological movements of Arab nationalism and then militant Islam. At such times, there have been widespread expectations of their imminent demise. Yet change has been successfully resisted. Strategies for regional democratization show no sign as yet of making any greater impact on Gulf political systems.

This is not to say that all is well: Tribal and regional cleavages are very strong in Saudi Arabia. Not all Saudis share the Wahabi outlook that has been imposed upon them. The Shi'a population of the eastern province, for example, has strong links with fellow Shi'a in Bahrain, and southern Iraq. Saudi Shi'a are the subject of overt discrimination in the employment market and are taught the ultra-conservative Saudi religious ideology in schools—which regards Shi'a Islam as close to a form of apostasy. Saudi Shi'a face routine harassment at the hands of the security services. Elsewhere in the Gulf, for example in Bahrain, harassment of the Shi'a is less overt, but their greater demographic presence in the population means that expectations are higher.<sup>29</sup>

Even among the Sunni in Saudi Arabia and elsewhere, there are strong doctrinal and geographical differences. Militant Islam is a constant, worrying presence.<sup>30</sup> Occasionally, as in the seizure of the Grand Mosque in Mecca in November 1979, its clash with the existing monarchical regimes has become violent and bloody. More generally, a network of Sunni radical Islamists has emerged in Saudi Arabia in the last two or three decades, developing from within mosques and organizations supported by the regime. The radical fringe of this movement shared the common experience of fighting against the Soviets in Afghanistan and today constitutes the foundational core of the global Sunni Jihad movement.

Meanwhile, international Shi'a Jihadi networks—supported by Iran—have also been active in Saudi Arabia and elsewhere in

the Gulf. The Bahraini Hizballah organization, trained and financed by the Iranian Revolutionary Guard in the 1990s, is an example of this as is the Iranian orchestrated unrest at the Haj throughout the 1980s, culminating in the deaths of hundreds of Iranian pilgrims in 1987.<sup>31</sup>

Yet for all this, the position of the monarchy appears secure. The Saudis possess thorough control of the armed forces, and through their large, well-staffed security forces they maintain a close observation on all attempts at civil organization. This situation pertains also in Bahrain, and to a lesser extent in the smaller, more tranquil monarchies. At the same time, the security services limit themselves to active engagement only with anti-regime political activities. Citizens not involved in overt opposition can expect to largely be left alone by the state, with the partial exception of the Shi'a of Saudi Arabia.

The large scale co-optation of opposition is a notable feature of Saudi Arabia and other Gulf monarchies. The threat of repression and the promise of co-optation form complementary elements of the monarchies' survival strategy, with co-optation sometimes rapidly following repression, and vice versa if the carrot is seen to have proved ineffective. These, combined with the playing off of opposition groups one against another and the attempt by the regimes to portray themselves in a light favorable to the ideological climate of the day have served to ensure their survival.

In terms of the latter, it should be noted that the Saudis in particular have considerable ideological capital on which to

draw. If fealty to perceived notions of traditional Islam is the highest legitimating factor, then the Saudis may make a strong case for themselves, possessing, as they do, a certain incontestable authenticity deriving from their nomadic Arab origins and martial tradition.

Internal channels within the huge royal family have until now succeeded in organizing peaceful transitions of power. Regarding possible liberal and secular opposition, no fully fledged secular civil society can be said to exist in Saudi Arabia. However, the monarchy, in common with its counterparts in the Gulf, makes use of consultative and appointed bodies in order to maintain communication with society. The extent and vibrancy of such bodies varies substantially across the Gulf. Such associations are particularly strong in Kuwait, for example, where a vibrant civil society has come into being. In Saudi Arabia, by contrast, such forums are notably weak.

No unified, country-wide middle class with a clear sense of itself is present in the country. An active Islamist opposition clearly does exist. Yet the Saudi monarchy is clearly not in immediate danger. First, the kingdom reported this year a record budget surplus of \$57 billion on the back of surging crude oil prices, which will enable it to vastly increase spending.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, the regime has a clear Western commitment to its survival and uncontested control over the forces of repression.

Thus, despite the very different nature of the Gulf monarchies and the societies they preside over, when compared with the nationalist regimes further west, it may be observed that systems of control, repression,

legitimization, and co-optation of a notably similar nature have enabled the monarchies to maintain control and survive.

## CONCLUSION

This essay has discussed three countries which for a variety of reasons set the tone for much of political debate in the Arab world: Egypt, Syria, and Saudi Arabia. The mechanics whereby power is held in a sparsely populated oil-rich monarchy such as Saudi Arabia differ enormously from those of an over-populated republic such as Egypt. The nature of the groups that must be appeased or co-opted and the content of the ideas and symbols that confer legitimacy are widely divergent. Yet it would be equally mistaken to dismiss the common elements that enable these regimes, unsuccessful in all but holding power, to continue to wield that power.

The means used by the regimes to hold power have similarities from country to country. In all cases, the free flow of information and criticism that are essential to the building of successful modern economies and societies are absent. While successful development depends on them, successful regime survival depends on their absence. Regime control over the media in all Arab countries remains rigid.

Yet even independent Arabic media channels have not cared to deviate from the general line of anti-American, anti-Western, and anti-Israel feeling. This fact should serve to remind us that Arab regimes appear to possess at least a partial legitimacy in the eyes of those they rule. They do not rule by coercion alone. Rather, their ability to depict

themselves as having at least a plausible claim to be representing universally shared symbols and values is crucial. This claim is in turn “thickened” by the production of intellectual work by members of an intelligentsia in effect turned into clients by the regime.

The insurgency in Iraq, and the failure to predict it, indicate the lack of understanding in the West of the apparent embeddedness of basic ethnic/religious identification that is subject to mobilization against perceived external enemies. The regimes themselves have become masters of the art of manufacturing external threats where none actually exist in order to mobilize and make use of these sentiments. The use made of the Arab-Israeli conflict and the supposedly threatening and expansionist nature of Israel is the best example of this.

Throughout the Arab world, the inability of liberal opposition forces to ground their campaigns credibly among wide sections of the populace and to speak in terms familiar and appealing to broad masses of people strengthens the hand of the regimes. Pressures for reform from the United States or other outside forces can be resisted, since the regime may credibly point to the nature of the (Islamist) opposition forces seeking to unseat it internally, and justify repressive measures in terms of preventing the ascension to power of such forces.

The invasion of Iraq in 2003, and the subsequent occupation of that country, has undoubtedly had the effect of issuing a very real challenge to the ongoing dominance of the authoritarian regimes in the region. Despite the resentment on nationalist grounds

of the invasion, which was near universal, the sight of one of the great pillars of authoritarian rule being brought down and humiliated has led to an opening up of discussion among the Arab intelligentsia. The increasing boldness of the opposition movements in Egypt and the movement against Syrian rule in Lebanon are evidence of this.

It now appears unlikely, however, that the shifts emerging as a result of the Iraq War will succeed in having a lasting impact on the sclerotic political order of the region described above. In the examples discussed, it was noted that only Syria appears to be in potential danger, and this is primarily for geo-political rather than domestic reasons. The younger Asad simply seems to lack the political acumen necessary to maintain Syria's status as the self-appointed arbiter of Arab nationalist purity, while at the same time attempting to avoid antagonizing stronger outside powers. Even so, the Damascus regime may still succeed in riding out the storm. The Syrian opposition is fractious and its leaders largely unknown to the Syrian public. The possibility of a rallying around the regime out of a fear of sanctions or foreign invasion should also not be discounted.

The other regimes discussed above, meanwhile, do not appear to be in imminent danger. The combination of selective co-optation, repression, and the manipulation of legitimating symbols, combined with the weakness of liberal opposition and the Western fear of the existing Islamist opposition are likely to enable regime survival.

\* Dr. Jonathan Spyer has served as a special advisor on international affairs to Israeli Cabinet ministers. He is currently a research fellow at the Global Research in International Affairs (GLORIA) Center, Herzliya, Israel.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Barry Rubin, *The Tragedy of the Middle East* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 1-32.

<sup>2</sup> See United Nations Arab Human Development Report, 2002. Available at: <http://hdr.undp.org/>.

<sup>3</sup> Egypt - Country Profile, Oxford Business Group, <http://www.oxfordbusinessgroup.com>.

<sup>4</sup> For a concise account of the emergence of the Free Officers' regime and the political system it established, see Sally Ann Baynard, "The Arab Republic of Egypt," in David E. Long and Bernard Reich (eds.), *The Government and Politics of the Middle East and North Africa* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1995), pp. 303-27.

<sup>5</sup> For the adoption by the Free Officers of Arab nationalism as their creed, see Paul Salem, *Bitter Legacy: Ideology and Politics in the Arab World* (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 1994), pp. 45-46. For a more theoretical examination of the development of Arab nationalist ideas in Egypt, see Bassam Tibi, *Arab Nationalism* (London: Macmillan Press, 1990), pp. 178-84.

<sup>6</sup> Martin Sicker, "The Nasserist Era, 1952-67" in Martin Sicker, *The Middle East in the*

*Twentieth Century* (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger Publishers, 2001), pp. 203-17.

<sup>7</sup> Mohammed Faour, *The Arab World after Desert Storm* (United States Institute of Peace Press, 1993), pp. 55-75.

<sup>8</sup> Kenneth Katzman, *Al Qaeda: Profile and Threat Assessment* (Washington, DC: CRS Report for Congress, August 17., 2005), <http://www.fas.org>

<sup>9</sup> See Ahmed Hashim, "The Strategy of Bin-Laden and al-Qaeda" in *Newport Papers: A Series of Point Papers from the Naval War College and the Navy Warfare Development Command for Senior Leadership in Response to Critical Issues*, December 19, 2001, [http://www.oft.osd.mil/library/library\\_files/document\\_203\\_newport\\_papers.pdf](http://www.oft.osd.mil/library/library_files/document_203_newport_papers.pdf).

<sup>10</sup> Sharon Otterman, *Muslim Brotherhood and Egypt's Parliamentary Elections* (Council on Foreign Relations), December 1, 2005. <http://www.cfr.org/publication/9319/>.

<sup>11</sup> For example Jackson Diehl, "Mubarak Outdoes Himself: Election Fraud Backfires," *Washington Post*, December 5, 2005, <http://www.washingtonpost.com>. Also Khairi Abaza, "Egyptian Legislative Elections: A Reading of the Results" (Washington: Washington Institute for Near East Policy), *Policywatch 1061*, December 12, 2005, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org>; Khairi Abaza, "Political Islam and Regime Survival in Egypt", (Washington: Washington Institute for Near East Policy), *Policy Focus 51*, February 2006, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org>.

<sup>12</sup> Ayelet Yehiav, "Post-elections Assessment: The Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt's Parliament," *Jaffee Center for*

*Strategic Studies*, Vol. 8, No. 4 (February 2004), <http://www.tau.ac.il/jcss/>.

<sup>13</sup> Fayza Hassan, "The Last Pasha's Den," *Al-Ahram Weekly*, No. 519, February 1-7, 2001, <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2001/519/special.htm>.

<sup>14</sup> Hillel Frisch, "Guns and Butter in the Egyptian Army" in Barry Rubin (ed.), *Armed Forces in the Middle East: Politics and Strategy* (Portland, Oregon: Frank Cass Publishers, 2002), p.97.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, p. 98.

<sup>16</sup> Joseph Kechichian and Jeanne Nazimek, "Challenges to the Military in Egypt," *Middle East Policy*, Vol. 5, No. 3 (September, 1997), p. 129.

<sup>17</sup> Frisch, "Guns and Butter in the Egyptian Army."

<sup>18</sup> Daniel Pipes, "The Alawi Capture of Power in Syria," *Middle Eastern Studies*, 1989. <http://www.danielpipes.org/article/>.

<sup>19</sup> See Ariel I. Ahram, "Iraq and Syria: The Dilemmas of Dynasty," *Middle East Quarterly*, Vol. 9, No. 2 (Spring 2002), <http://www.meforum.org/article/171>.

<sup>20</sup> Fouad Ajami, "Arab Road," *Foreign Policy*, No. 47 (Summer 1982), p. 16.

<sup>21</sup> See Steven Plaut, "The Collapsing Syrian Economy," *Nativ*, Vol. 13, No. 1 (January 2000), <http://www.acpr.org.il/nativ/>. Also Nimrod Raphaeli, "The Syrian Economy under Bashar al-Assad," *Inquiry and Analysis Series No. 259*, Middle East Media and Research Institute, January 13, 2006, <http://memri.org/bin/articles>.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>23</sup> Paul Taylor, "Syria Muslim Brotherhood Leader Scents Power," *Scotsman*, March 18,

2006, <http://news.scotsman.com>. This article includes an interview with Syrian Muslim Brotherhood leader Ali Bayanouni and discusses the possibility of the imminent replacement of the Bashar Asad regime.

<sup>24</sup> Farid N. Ghadry, "Syrian Reform: What Lies Beneath?" *Middle East Quarterly*, Vol. 12, No. 1 (Winter 2005), <http://www.meforum.org/article/683>.

<sup>25</sup> Najib Ghadbian, *Testimony to House Committee on International Relations: Challenges and Prospects of Political Liberalization in Syria*, April 21, 2005, [http://www.house.gov/international\\_relations/109/gha042105.pdf](http://www.house.gov/international_relations/109/gha042105.pdf).

<sup>26</sup> Eyal Zisser, "The Syrian Army on the Domestic and External fronts," in Barry Rubin (ed.), *Armed Forces in the Middle East: Politics and Strategy* (Portland, Oregon: Frank Cass Publishers, 2002), pp. 113-29.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>28</sup> See John Habib, *Ibn Saud's Warriors of Islam: The Ikhwan of Najd and Their Role in the Creation of the Saudi Kingdom, 1910-1930*, (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 1978).

<sup>29</sup> Toby Jones, "Seeking a 'Social Contract' in Saudi Arabia," *Middle East Report* (228) (Fall 2003).

<sup>30</sup> For a background and analysis on Saudi Islamism see Joshua Teitelbaum, "Holier Than Thou: Saudi Arabia's Islamic Opposition," *Policy Papers No. 52* (Washington D.C.: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2000). Also 'Saudi Arabia Backgrounder: Who are the Islamists?' *ICG Middle East Report No. 31*, September 21, 2004. Also Mamoun Fandy, *Saudi Arabia*

---

*and the Politics of Dissent* (New York: Palgrave, 1999).

<sup>31</sup> Reuters, "Iranians to Shun Mecca Trip," May 21, 1990, <http://query.nytimes.com>

<sup>32</sup> Agence France Presse, "Saudi to build 26-billion-dollar new city," December 20, 2005. <http://www.breitbart.com/news/2005>.