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# Authoritarianism in Arab countries

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Recommended minimum time required: 2 hours

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## Introduction

Until the Arab uprising of 2011, both scholars and decision-makers have wondered why Middle Eastern political regimes had not followed the third wave of democratisation that affected Eastern European countries as well as many nations in Asia and Africa in the nineties.

While in the nineties (and even before) some processes of political liberalisation took place in the Middle East and North Africa, none of them culminated in a genuine democratic transition and, in some cases, repression and coercion even increased. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), in its prominent Arab Human Development Report released in 2002, also pointed out the existence of a freedom deficit in the region as one of the major handicaps of this region.

### Recommended introductory readings

**Ayubi, Nazih** (1995). *Over-stating the Arab state: Politics and society in the Middle East*. London: I.B. Tauris.

**Diamond, Larry** (2010). "Why Are There No Arab Democracies?". *Journal of Democracy* (Vol. 21, Issue 1, January 2010, pp. 93-112).

**Droz-Vincent, Philippe** (2004). *Moyen Orient: Pouvoirs autoritaires, sociétés bloquées*. Paris: PUF.

**Flory, Maurice; Korany, Baghgat; Mantran, Rober; Camau, Miche; Agate, Pierre** (1990). *Les régimes politiques arabes*, Paris: PUF.

**Guazzone, Laura; Pioppi, Laura** (2010). *The Arab State and Neo-Liberal Globalization: The Restructuring of State Power in the Middle East*. Reading: Ithaca Press.

**Huntington, Samuel** (1991). *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.

**Martín Muñoz, Gema** (1999). *El Estado Árabe, crisis de legitimidad y contestación islamista*. Barcelona: Bellaterra.

**Picard, Élizabeth** (dir.). (2006). *La politique dans le monde arabe*. Paris: Armand Colin.

**Schlumberger, Oliver** (2008). *Debating Arab Authoritarianism: Dynamics and Durability in Nondemocratic Regimes*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Most of the literature on this topic focuses on the Arab countries, distinguishing the Arab Middle Eastern countries from non-Arab Middle Eastern countries such as Israel, Iran and Turkey. Several types of political regimes coexist in the Arab world: monarchies and republics allowing for different degrees of political participation. In this particular region, the fact of being a monarchy or a republic does not preclude the level of political pluralism but the adaptation of these systems to domestic pressures may be different due to their distinct legitimacy. In the third section of this module, we will review categories that

have been introduced to qualify the varying degrees of authoritarianism, discussing whether soft authoritarian regimes are an intermediate step towards democracy or a way to assure the durability of these regimes.

## Objectives

1. Introduce students to the theoretical debates on the existence of an Arab exceptionality in a comparative analysis on democratisation.
2. Familiarise students with the concept of the rentier state and its effects on the study of democratisation and enduring authoritarianism in the Middle East.
3. Discuss the possibilities of democratic transitions led from the reformist elements of the regimes.





## 1. Is there an Arab or Muslim exceptionalism?

The need to identify the factor that hampers democracy in the Middle East has been particularly challenging because traditional explanations did not work in this specific part of the world. That is, conventional theories pointing at economic development and standard of living as the most stable and robust determinant of a country's propensity to democracy cannot explain the lack of democracy in the Middle East and North Africa.

Per capita income has been widely accepted to correlate with democracy since the well-known article by Seymour Lipset published in the *American Political Science Review* (Issue 53). According to him and Karl Deutsch (who published in 1961 in the same journal an article entitled "Social Mobilization and Political Development"), democracy is caused by a collection of social and cultural changes –including occupational specialisation, urbanisation and higher levels of education– that in turn are caused by economic development.

Generally speaking, the Arab region has made considerable and substantial progress in economic and social development since the 1960s, but this progress was not associated with increased political rights, much less democratisation. As said by Inglehart, if democracy resulted from simply becoming wealthy, then Kuwait and Libya would be model democracies.

For quite some time, Middle Eastern cases were almost absent from the most important works on political transitions, including those that explicitly focus on the developing world. This led many authors to concentrate on the peculiarities of this particular region, that is, on the aspects that make this region different and, thus, hostile to democracy, several authors referred to religion and culture.

The works of Bernard Lewis and Elie Kedouri underlined a hypothetical incompatibility between values and the Islamic religion that dominates the region. Some quantitative studies such as the article by Steven Fish entitled "Islam and Authoritarianism", argue that "even given limitations in the quality of the data, it is possible to conclude from the analysis that predominantly Muslim countries may be especially prone to authoritarianism".

This author argues that Muslim societies are distinct in a manner that may affect politics: the treatment and status of women and girls. By pointing at this specific factor and not to the essence of Islam itself the author argues – in contradiction with the thesis of Bernard Lewis– that democracy could take roots in Muslim countries as long as there is progress in the field of gender equality.

### Recommended readings

**Fish, Steven** (2002). "Islam and Authoritarianism". *World Politics* (Vol. 55, Issue 1, pp. 4-37).

**Inglehart, Ronald** (1997). *Modernization and Postmodernization*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

**Kedouri, Elie** (1994). *Democracy and Arab Political Culture*. London: Frank Cass.

**Lewis Bernard** (1996). "Islam and Liberal Democracy: A Historical Overview". *Journal of Democracy* (Issue 7, April 1996).

**Lewis, Bernard** (2002). *What Went Wrong? Western Impact in the Middle Eastern Response*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

**Posusney, M. P.** (2004). "Enduring authoritarianism: Middle East Lessons for Comparative Politics". *Comparative Politics* (Vol. 36, Issue 2.).

Is the democratic deficit a phenomenon characterising all of the Muslim countries or only the Arab world? Alfred Stephan, for instance, in his article "Religion, Democracy and Twin Tolerations" makes a powerful critique of any deterministic association between Islam and authoritarianism. He emphasises that all great religions can reconcile with democratic ideas and empirical evidences support his claim by pointing out Muslim majority countries that sustain electoral democracies (Indonesia, Turkey, Bangladesh) and the millions of Muslims residing in democratic countries.

Stephan and Robertson will later argue that the electoral gap is an Arab phenomenon rather than a Muslim one. The studies conducted by Tessler and Gao showed that the support for democracy is not lower among Muslim individuals compared to other religious beliefs. Hisham Sharabi has also put the emphasis on the Arab factor. Sharabi elaborated on the idea of neopatriarchy, arguing that social life in the Arab societies, from the family level up to the national level, is dominated by a domination link in which authority is exercised by a paternalistic figure.

### Recommended readings

**Halliday, Fred** (1995). *Islam and the Myth of Confrontation: Religion and Politics in the Middle East*, London; New York: I.B. Tauris.

**Sharabi, Hisham** (1988). *Neopatriarchy, a Theory of Distorted Change in Arab Society*. New York: Oxford University Press.

**Stephan, Alfred** (2000). "Religion, Democracy, and the 'Twin Tolerations'". *Journal of Democracy* (Issue 11, pp. 37-57).

**Stephan, A; Robertson, G. B.** (2003). "An 'Arab' more than 'Muslim' electoral gap". *Journal of Democracy* (Vol. 14, Issue 3, pp. 30-44).

**Tessler, M.; Gao, E.** (2005). "Gauging Arab Support for Democracy". *Journal of Democracy* (Vol. 16, Issue 3, pp. 83-95).

More recently, several authors moved the debate to the conditions that explain the robustness and success of authoritarianism rather than the absence or failure of democracy. They argued that the emphasis on the study of democratisation (instead of authoritarianism) led authors to examine what did not exist instead of what was actually going on in the Arab world.

Eva Bellin's article in *Comparative Politics* is particularly illuminating on the elements explaining the robustness of authoritarianism. According to Bellin, the Middle East and North Africa are in no way unique in their poor endowment with the prerequisites of democracy. She argues, for instance, that the Middle East has indeed experienced the fledging emergence of a civil society (human rights groups, professional associations, self-help groups) only to see most of them repressed or co-opted by the state. Statist regimes have increasingly liberalised their economies (often under pressure from international forces) but autonomous political initiative by private sectors is typically punished.

Eva Bellin suggests that specifically robust coercive apparatuses in these states foster robust authoritarianism. How do Middle Eastern countries sustain such elaborate coercive apparatuses?

"Here is where access to rent comes into play. This access has long distinguished the region. (...) Their rent derives from different endowments –petroleum resources, gas resources, geo-strategic utility, and control of critical transit facilities. (...) This gives them access to substantial discretionary resources so that, even if the country is overall in poor economic health, the state is still able to hew to conventional economic wisdom and pay itself first, that is, give first priority to paying the military and security forces."

Similarly, the role of the armies and security forces during the uprisings of 2011 is widely seen as one of the major factors influencing the failure, the partial or the total success of these revolutions and is giving a new boost to the studies on the role of security forces in the Middle East. In fact, in an article published in 2012 Bellin argued that the trajectory of the Arab Spring confirmed that the comportment of the coercive apparatus is pivotal to determining the durability of authoritarian regimes in the Arab world (and beyond).

Other authors such as Holger Albercht and Olivier Schlumberger argue that we should examine dimensions that go beyond coercion in order to explain the durability of authoritarianism in the Arab world. According to them, sources of internal legitimacy for the Arab States consist of a combination of the following: (1) allocative power through international rent income (oil and gas) (2) traditional religious legitimacy and (3) distinct developmental concepts based on collectivist ideologies.

While traditional religious legitimacy has remained essentially intact, the other two legitimating foundations of Arab states eroded structurally as a consequence of world oil prices (the rent factor) or economic liberalisation, or both. Thus, over the past 15 years, the Arab regimes have faced a structural loss in political legitimacy. Throughout the Arab world, economic crisis and direct or indirect foreign pressure turned into virulent crisis of legitimacy. While all Arab regimes have been affected, the formerly radical progressive states were hit hardest because their prime basis of legitimacy was washed away.

Holger Albercht and Olivier Schlumberger, as well as other authors such as Volker Perthes or Ferran Izquierdo and Athina Lampridi-Kemou, underline that to explain the durability of authoritarian regimes in the region, it is fundamental to understand the dynamics of the politically relevant elites in these countries, how they reach power and which kind of mechanisms they utilise to preserve this privileged position.

Ferran Izquierdo and Athina Lampridi-Kemou describe the situation as follows:

“At the pinnacle of each system, we find a tiny minority of primary elites who control the majority of the power resources. These elites came to power after freeing themselves from colonial rule and winning the competition to control states. Since then, they have achieved great stability, closing the door to any outside elites’ renewal. In most countries, although not all, the central power core is usually very homogeneous, both at social and moral levels. In almost all Arab states, the state is the basic resource in the competition for differential power accumulation (...). Moreover, in most cases, the power of the state is based on foreign income and coercion, which increases the importance of other actors’ subordination to those who control it. Over time, regimes have acquired an incredibly introverted quality and become increasingly centred on personal ties, including those which are hereditary. This dynamic, commonplace in monarchies, has even occurred in republics.”

### Recommended readings

**Bellin, Eva** (2004). “The Robustness of Authoritarianism in the Middle East”. *Comparative Politics* (Issue 36, pp. 139-157).

**Bellin, Eva** (2012). “Reconsidering the Robustness of Authoritarianism in the Middle East: Lessons from the Arab Spring”. In: *Comparative Politics* (Vol. 44, Issue 2, pp. 127-149).

**Bellin, Eva** (2018). “The Puzzle of Democratic Divergence in the Arab World: Theory Confronts Experience in Egypt and Tunisia”. In: *Political Science Quarterly*, (Vol.132, Issue 3, pp. 435-474).

**Droz-Vincent, Philippe** (2011). “Authoritarianism, Revolutions, Armies, and Arab Regime Transitions”. *The International Spectator* (Issue 46, pp. 5-21).

**Gaub, Florence** (2017). *Guardians of the Arab State: When Militaries Intervene in Politics, from Iraq to Mauritania*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

**Sayigh, Yezid et al.** (2011). “Roundtable: Rethinking the Study of Middle East Militaries”. *International Journal of Middle East Studies* (Issue 4, pp. 391-407).

### Recommended readings

**Albrecht, Holger; Schlumberger, Oliver** (2004). “‘Waiting for Godot’: Regime Change without Democratization in the Middle East”. *International Political Science Review* (Vol. 25, Issue 4, pp. 371-392).

**Izquierdo, Ferran; Lampridi-Kemou, Athina** (2012). “Sociology of power in today’s Arab world”. In: Ferran Izquierdo (2012). *Political Regimes in the Arab World: Society and the Exercise of Power*. London: Routledge.

**Perthes, Volker** (2004). *Arab Elites: Negotiating the Politics of Change*. Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers.

In the post-2011 context one of the topics that has attracted most attention is the revamped role of identity in domestic and regional politics. One of the ways in which regimes in the region have propped up their power and tried to guarantee survival – even before 2011 – is through the instrumentalization of sectarian identities. Sectarian entrepreneurs and political leaders have enhanced their power and deflected demands for change by manipulating fears of political exclusion, claiming to protect certain sections of the population from others or using sectarianism to discredit their political opponents and regional rivals. However, explanations of regional politics that are based on notions of Sunni–Shia antagonism are overly simplistic and may even lead to dangerous policy prescriptions, such as breaking up states along ethno-sectarian lines, fortifying autocratic governments’ repressive practices or reinforcing Orientalist understandings of the Middle East as “all about religion” and conflicts therefore endemic to the region.

### Recommended readings

**Abdo, Geneive** (2017). *The New Sectarianism. The Arab uprisings and the rebirth of the Shi’a-Sunni divide*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

**Darwich, May; Tamirace Fakhoury** (2016). “Casting the Other as an Existential Threat: The Securitisation of Sectarianism in the International Relations of the Syria Crisis”. In: *Global Discourse* (Vol. 6, Issue 4, pp. 712-732).

**Gause, F. Gregory III** (2014). “Beyond Sectarianism: The New Middle East Cold War”. In: *Brookings Doha Center Analysis Papers* (Issue 11). [Accessed: July]. <<http://brook.gs/2bl1yS3>>

**Hashemi, Nader; Danny Postel** (2017). *Sectarianization. Mapping the New Politics of the Middle East*. London: Hurst.

**Wehrey, Frederic** (ed.) (2018). *Beyond Sunni and Shia. The Roots of Sectarianism in a Changing Middle East*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

To sum up, next to controversial contributions that pointed out at the religious and cultural background of the Arab peoples as the factor that explained the democracy deficit in the Middle East and North Africa, other authors argued that what needed to be explained is the exceptional durability and robustness of authoritarianism in this part of the world. The strength of the coercive apparatus, the origins and composition of the politically relevant elites and, on top of it, the prevalence of the state as the main power resource have been presented as solid explanations for the exceptional authoritarian durability in this region.

## 2. The rentier state: definition and effects on democracy, authoritarianism and state-building

Hazem Beblawi in his seminal chapter written in 1987 defined a rentier state as a special case of a rentier economy (an economy which relies on a substantial external rent) “in which only few are engaged in the generation of this rent (wealth) while the majority of the population is being involved in the distribution and utilization of it” and “in which the government is the principal recipient of the external rent in the economy”. He argued that the distinction between generating wealth and its utilisation is not always clear but that in the case of the oil-producing countries, the role of oil revenues is so overwhelming that it can be approximated to be the cause of other activities. He adds that “an open economy with high foreign trade is not a rentier state, simply because it relies on the outside world, even if it generates its income from natural endowment (for instance, tourism) in as far as the majority of the society is engaged in the process of wealth generation.

The concept of the rentier state is widely seen as “one of the major contributions of the Middle East regional studies to Political Science”. While this concept has been extensively used to describe oil-rich countries from the Middle East, it has been adapted to study other oil-rich countries from Africa and Asia and has contributed to those authors that argue that there is a “resource curse”, meaning the paradox that countries with abundant natural resources (particularly fuel and minerals) tend to have less economic growth and lower development records. One of the specificities of the Middle Eastern context is that the pure or even hybrid rentier nature of several countries has been pointed out as a determining factor to explain their authoritarian and coercive inclination.

The claim that oil and democracy do not mix is often used by area specialists to explain why the high-income states of the Middle East have not become democratic and it is the central thesis of Michael Ross in his well-known article entitled “Does oil hinder democracy?” This article provides quantitative data supporting “both the validity and the generality of oil-impedes-democracy claim”. These data suggest that

“A state’s reliance on either oil or mineral exports tends to make it less democratic; that this effect is not caused by other type of primary exports [agriculture] that it is not limited to the Arabian Peninsula, to the Middle East, or to sub-Saharan Africa; and that it is not limited to small states. These findings are generally consistent with the theory of the rentier state.”

Ross tests three possible explanations: a rentier effect, which suggests that resource-rich governments use low tax rates and patronage to relieve pressures for greater accountability; a repression effect, which argues that resource wealth retards democratisation by enabling governments to boost their fund-

ing for internal security; and a modernisation effect, which holds that growth based on the export of oil and minerals fails to bring about the social and cultural changes that tend to produce democratic government.

Other authors have focused on the study of the effects of the rentier state on state building. According to Schwarz, in his article in the *Review of International Political Economy*, these effects are twofold:

“First, excess oil revenue in the hand of the state reduces the state’s necessity to extract resources for its own population. Rentier states have the privilege to distribute and allocate excess oil revenues without references to economic consideration. Second, a high level of rentierism has a negative effect on the human, social and economic development of the country. While the economic benefit from oil-revenues may be only short lived, the long-term consequences are market distortions, corruption, unproductive economic resources and lack of human development.”

According to Schwarz in his article in the *European Political Science Review*:

“A central factor in analysing state formation in the Arab Middle East. It explains the emergence of institutionally weak states but does not hinder state making altogether; rather this differs in its process and outcome. While institutions might superficially look the same, they function differently and fulfil different roles (distribution and not extraction). Rentierism has contributed to the emergence of what has been called a ‘state class’, a ‘state bourgeoisie’ or a ‘rentier bourgeoisie’.”

### **Recommended readings**

**Anderson, Lisa** (1987). “The State in the Middle East and North Africa”. *Comparative Politics* (Issue 20).

**Beblawi, Hazem** (1987). “The rentier state in the Arab world”. In: H. Beblawi; G. Luciani. *The rentier state*. London: Croom Helm/IAI.

**Ross, Michael** (2001). “Does Oil hinder Democracy?” *World Politics* (Issue 53, pp. 325-361).

**Schwarz, Rolf** (2008). “The political economy of state-formation in the Arab Middle East: Rentier states, economic reform, and democratization”. *Review of International Political Economy*. (Vol.15, Issue 4, pp. 599-621).

**Schwarz, Rolf** (2011). “Does war make states? Rentierism and the formation of states in the Middle East”. *European Political Science Review* (Vol. 2, Issue 3, pp. 419-443).

Giacomo Luciani, in 1998, argued that based on the notion of ‘no taxation without representation’, the diminished need of the state to levy taxes from its citizens impedes the emergence of a strong state that legitimately represents its citizens.

In the Middle East the high level of wealth and welfare allocation has led to an implicit social contract that substituted political rights for state-provided welfare and to the co-optation of strategic social groups.

Luciani, in 1994, argued that

“The existence of a rentier state serves as a strong impediment to democratic rule and pluralistic institutions.”

But which is the casual mechanism? On the one hand, rentierism favours social institutions that are adverse to a democratic rule. Rent-based state formation leads to particular structures within rentier states. The allocation of rents follows political criteria (loyalty, proximity to rulers, family relationships) and thereby leads to a reinforcement of traditional loyalties and a lack of bureaucratic capacity. The preservation of tradition occurs within the vicinities of modern state institutions and represents a modern phenomenon captured in terms of neo-patriarchy, neo-patrimonialism, and neo-tribalism. Not only does the existence of a rentier state serve as a strong impediment to democratic rule, it also helps to conserve socio-political norms in Arab societies and polities, such as the patrimonial nature of social interaction and primordial loyalties, based on allocation patterns.

On the other hand, Schwarz argued in 2008 that

“Abundant oil revenues have permitted a degree of militarization which would have been impossible to maintain if states had to rely on domestic resource extraction for its financing.”

Michael Ross affirms that

“Rulers in the Middle East may follow the same tactics as their authoritarian counterparts elsewhere, but oil revenues could make their efforts at fiscal pacification more effective (...) Citizens in resource-rich states may want democracy as much as citizens elsewhere, but the resource wealth may allow their governments to spend more on internal security and block the populations’ democratic aspiration.”

But, what happens when the rent starts to decline, either because there is a decrease in production or a drop in the energy prices? This fiscal crisis occurred, for instance, in the eighties and led to two phenomena that will be analysed in depth in the coming section and the next module. On the one hand, it led several countries to start a process of political reform to recover part of an eroded legitimacy. On the other hand, it provided a fertile ground for opposition movements, and particularly for Islamist groups, to fill the gap providing social services and disputing the cultural and political hegemony of incumbent elites.

In 2019, two Arab countries that have suffered from a decline in energy revenues (Algeria and Sudan) experienced a new wave of protests which forced the resignation of Bouteflika and the toppling of Al Bashir. Certainly, the energy factor is not the only element that explains social unrest and the need by the regime to take extreme measures to contain people’s frustration, but it is one among the many elements that are to be taken into consideration when understanding the situation in these two countries.

### Recommended readings

**Beblawi, Hazem; Luciani, Giacomo (eds.)** (1987). *The Rentier State*. London: Croom Helm / IAI.

**Luciani, Giacomo** (1988). “Economic foundations of democracy and authoritarianism: the Arab world in comparative perspective”. *Arab Studies Quarterly* (Vol. 10, Issue 4, pp.457-475).

**Luciani, Giacomo (ed.)** (1990). *The Arab State*. London: Routledge.

**Luciani, Giacomo** (1994). “The Oil Rent, the Fiscal Crisis of the State and Democratization”. In: Ghasan Salamé (ed.) *Democracy without Democrats? The Renewal of Politics in the Muslim World*. London: I. B. Tauris (pp. 130-155).



The other case worth looking at is Saudi Arabia. The country is one of the best examples of a rentier state. The extreme dependence on oil, combined with a large population (33 million people) and the absolutist nature of the Saudi monarchy, makes it particularly vulnerable to technological revolutions in what is often described as the global de-carbonisation process. As a consequence, the Saudi leadership intends to put in place a reform program aimed at diversifying the economy. This is known as Vision 2030 and includes opening Saudi Aramco to private investment, among others. The Saudi plan of reforms are also meant to modify internal power balances and to better connect with the expectations and needs of women and youth in an attempt to consolidate the popularity of the crown prince Mohamed Bin Salman and help purge the State and the family from critical voices. What is more, the arrest of civil society activists or the assassination of the journalist Jamal Khashoggi in Istanbul indicates that the Saudi leadership is not willing to share power but rather to concentrate it.

### **3. Liberalised autocracies and the applicability of the transition model to the contemporary Middle East**

Until the 2011 uprisings, we can identify four periods in which autocracies in the Middle East experienced diverse forms of political liberalisation. The first one, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century corresponded to the reforms undertaken in the Ottoman Empire (known as *tanzimat*), which led to many social, economical and political transformations including the adoption of a short-lived Ottoman constitution in 1876. Several parliamentary institutions were created, both at the Ottoman level but also in specific territories under Ottoman sovereignty but which enjoyed a large level of autonomy such as Egypt (the *Majlis a-Shura* was created in 1825) and Tunisia (the *Majlis al-A'la* created in 1861).

The second period dates back to the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with the celebration of competitive elections in Egypt, Syria and Iraq. The first modern political parties (communists, nationalists, liberals and islamists) were created in this period. However, this liberal experiment blossomed in a context of limited sovereignty as these three countries were subjected to direct or indirect colonial control. In their fight for independence, the victory of revolutionary coups in all these countries marked the end of this experience and introduced single-party systems.

The third period corresponded, in the seventies, with processes of economic and political liberalisation in countries such as Bahrain or Egypt. In Egypt, Anwar al-Sadat, responding to both internal and domestic pressures, introduced the *Infithah* (opening) programme, which mainly focused on economic liberalisation but which also put an end to a single-party system that had dominated Egypt since Nasser's revolution. However, this did not lead to full competitive elections, but rather to a hegemonic party system that allowed for some level of pluralism but excluded the possibility of an alternation in power. The transition to a multi-party system in Egypt in 1976 was followed by similar moves in Tunisia, Algeria, Yemen, Jordan and Somalia. However, these transitions were limited and were carefully crafted and controlled by the ruling groups of these countries.

The fourth period started at the end of the 1980s and lasted until the 2011 Arab uprisings. Most Arab regimes were forced to loosen their grip on power in the face of major political and economic shocks in the 1980s and 1990s and also in a context of renewed international pressures for democratisation in the 2000s which served as a justification for the US-led intervention in Iraq and which had an effect in other Arab countries, as they were forced to allow a larger level of political pluralism (e.g. Egypt) or at least introduce some

cosmetic measures in areas such as municipal elections (this is the case of most Gulf countries). All in all, these measures were more in the spirit of political liberalisation and not genuine democratisation.

As argued by Badawi and Makdisi while political liberalisations in the Arab world have entailed a measured expansion of political and civil rights and freedom of association, limits were often imposed on these rights to ensure they did not scale up to levels that would allow the citizenry to exercise collective control over public policy. Thus, the prospect of a regime losing power in an election was not conceivable.

### Recommended readings

**Brynen, R.; Korany, B.; Noble, P.** (eds.) (1995). *Political Liberalization and Democratization in the Arab World*. Boulder and London: Lynne Rienner.

**El-Badawi, Ibrahim; Makdisi, Samir** (2007). "Explaining the democracy deficit in the Arab world". *The Quarterly Review of Economics and Finance* (Issue 46, pp. 813-831).

**El-Sayyid, Mustapha Kamel** (1995). "The third wave of democratization in the Arab world". In: Dan Tschirgi (ed.). *The Arab world today*. Boulder and London: Lynne Rienner Publishers.

**Hourani, Albert** (1983). *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age 1798-1939*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

**Salamé, Ghassan** (ed.) (1994). *Democracy Without Democrats?: The Renewal of Politics in the Muslim World*. London: I.B. Tauris.

Despite these shortcomings, this process has been a major focus of scholarly attention since the early 1990s. The celebration of multiparty elections, fewer restrictions on the media, a higher level of individual freedoms and the proliferation of nongovernmental organisations have all contributed to the impression of a more liberal Middle East. In the 1990s, a group of authors highlighted the existence of some tentative processes of liberalisation in Arab countries and even spoke of a democratising mini-wave. The debate turned around the question on whether this limited and controlled liberalisation was a natural and intermediate stage that would lead to full democratisation, applying the existing literature on the study of transitions towards liberal democratic systems.

Most of the analyses conducted so far highlighted that these liberalisation openings were a strategy of authoritarian regimes to preserve their power and privileges. Raymond Hinnebusch argues that authoritarian regimes constructed institutions incorporating sufficient social forces to enable them to manage their societies, thus raising the threshold of modernisation beyond which authoritarian governance becomes unviable. While, subsequently, internal economic vulnerabilities and global pressures on these regimes became substantial, the post-populist solutions adopted, economic liberalisation and westward-looking foreign policy alignment, all allowed an adaptive pluralisation of authoritarianism (PPA) while obstructing democratisation.

Eberhard Kienle in his analyses on Egypt has elaborated on the existence of a process of de-liberalisation and he referred to a grand delusion, arguing that these strategies constituted a general *réprise de control* by the regime.

Daniel Brumberg, in his article entitled “The trap of liberalized autocracies” also argues that periods in which freedoms and rights are extended coexist with a reinforcement of the coercive apparatuses. In his review of contemporary political systems, Brumberg distinguishes between two groups: dictatorships or full autocracies (Syria, Tunisia, Libya and Saudi Arabia) on the one hand, and liberalised autocracies (Kuwait, Morocco, Jordan, Yemen, Algeria and Egypt) on the other. He argues that some level of economic and political dissonance “facilitates the juggling act that is central to regime survival. Rulers of liberalized autocracies strive to pit one group against another in ways that maximize the rulers’ room for manoeuvre and restrict the opposition’s capacity to work together. Yet such divide-and-rule tactics also gives oppositionists scope for influence that they might not have in an open political competition that yields clear winners and losers. Consensus politics and state-enforced power sharing can form an alternative to either full democracy or full autocracy, particularly when rival social, ethnic or religious groups fear that either type of rule will lead to their political exclusion.

Larry Diamond in his well-known analysis of hybrid regimes ranged all Arab countries in three groups: politically closed authoritarianism, hegemonic electoral authoritarian regimes and competitive authoritarianism. Not all authors agree on the utility of these categories. Based on Juan Linz assumption that limited pluralism is a defining element of authoritarianism, Albercht & Schlumberger consider that the relevant variable for classifying a policy as authoritarian is not its level of pluralism but whether pluralism is restricted or not, which is a simple yes-or-no question.

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**Brumberg, Daniel** (2002). “The Trap of Liberalized Autocracy”. *Journal of Democracy* (Vol. 13, Issue 4, pp. 56-68).

**Brumberg, Daniel** (2003). “Liberalization versus Democracy. Understanding Arab Political Reform”. *Working Papers* (Issue 37). Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

**Diamond, Larry** (2002). “Thinking About Hybrid Regimes”. *Journal of Democracy* (Vol. 13, Issue 2, pp. 21-35).

**Hinnebusch, Raymond** (2006). “Authoritarian persistence, democratization theory and the Middle East: An overview and critique”. *Democratization* (Vol. 13, Issue 3, pp. 373-395).

**Kienle, Eberhard** (2001). *A Grand Delusion: Democracy and Economic reform in Egypt*. London: I.B. Tauris.

**Linz, Juan** (1975). “Totalitarian and Authoritarian Regimes”. In: Fred Greenstein; Nelson Polsby (eds.). *Handbook of Political Science, Vol. III*. Reading, MA: Addison Wesley.

**Szmolka, Inmaculada** (2011). “Democracia y autoritarismos con adjetivos: La clasificación de los países árabes dentro de una tipología general de regímenes políticos”. *Revista Española de Ciencia Política* (Issue 26, pp. 11-62).

Besides this discussion on typologies of authoritarian regimes, the literature on the Middle East and North Africa has given particular attention to the function of elections and the composition and role of emerging civil society in this particular context. The article published by Albrecht and Schlumberger in 2004 is an excellent contribution in this particular domain. Their thesis is that multiparty elections and the proliferation of associations are mechanisms of authoritarian regimes to bolster internal and external legitimacy.

These authors consider that

“The authoritarian game was accomplished through a “social pact” between the ruler and the ruled, financed by the massive oil rents that flooded the region from the mid-1970s onward. (...) With fewer financial resources, Arab regimes simply change their co-optative strategies: they shift from allocative to inclusionary co-optation (...) with the aim of either widening a regime’s power base or directly controlling society.”

Regarding the elections, these authors argue that

“While the Moroccan or Jordanian parliaments, for example, may be elected democratically, this is not where strategic political decision-making takes place. Likewise, the Egyptian, Syrian and Tunisian presidents are elected but not in competitive elections. Lastly, the inner circle of approximately 15 generals that constitute *le pouvoir* in Algeria are not elected at all. Nowhere in the region can the centre of power be contested.”

On the proliferation of parties and associations they state:

“Rather than being forums for competing programs or ideas, most political parties (along with trade unions, professional syndicates, and chambers of commerce and industry) focus on access to decision-making power and resources. This also holds true for what is sometimes called the “loyal opposition,” that is, for those parties that criticize individual policies, but do not challenge the regime leadership (...) Nongovernmental organizations as independent agents of the aggregation and articulation of societal interests have been transformed into tools of co-optative control. True, some non-profit organizations have initially gone largely unnoticed both by Arab regimes and Western donors. Yet, as soon as such organizations try to aggregate and articulate interests autonomously, the regimes usually suppress or co-opt them and their leaders. States themselves establish parallel structures that resemble those of independent NGOs. (...) While the increasing number of NGOs and their widened activities do represent a change in themselves, they can hardly be considered as effective agents of change.”

Two researchers from the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Marina Ottaway and Michele Dune, analysed the politics of managed reform in the Middle East, arguing:

“There are people within the ruling establishments who see the need for change. Reformers within the ruling establishments can be important agents of political change – and particularly of carefully managed reforms”. They recognized that “because reform has been introduced mostly from the top, the goal has not been democratization but modernization, both as a genuine attempt to improve the quality and efficiency of governance and as a cosmetic device to make the system look better and thus more acceptable domestically and internationally.”

This brings us to the discussion, introduced in previous sections, on the composition of politically relevant elites. Looking at Arab public elites today, one evident feature is that elites have changed in their composition: in almost all Arab countries, private-sector business representatives have found their way into the politically relevant elites. In turn, many elite members with bureau-

cratic or military background have started to run private businesses. We do see a growing economisation of both political elites and policies. As a parallel development, established avenues of recruitment, via military academies or through the ruling party, became less attractive to the new generation.

On a similar token, Izquierdo and Lampridi-Kemou (2002) argue that

“Present-day competition for power within the regime is mainly brought about in generational terms. The children of elites who settled in power after decolonization are now disputing with the gerontocracy over primary roles, generating repeated tensions between the old and new guard. This may be reflected in small transformations in the system, particularly in the processes of economic liberalization. However, neither the old nor the young elites are interested in alternatives to the system; they only seek to find advantages in the circular competition within the same regime. Therefore, the new guard’s insistence on economic liberalization is, in many cases, a consequence of the old guard’s control over foreign income and the state’s coercion apparatus, i.e. the military and the *Mukhabarat*; the young must therefore focus their interest on other resources such as capital, in order to gain some kind of presence. Nonetheless, the objective for them all is still state control, since this remains the foundation of power in Arab countries despite incipient economic liberalizations.”

To sum it up, liberalism is not a recent phenomenon in the Middle East and North Africa. The last period of political and economic liberalisation in the Middle East and North Africa (starting in the 1990s) has reflected the need to accommodate authoritarian systems to a new domestic and international reality rather than a genuine willingness of these regimes to evolve towards a genuine democratic system. The celebration of multiparty elections and the proliferation of NGOs and professional organisations did not challenge the incumbent regimes. Yet, this period of controlled and limited liberalisation can provoke tensions among the politically relevant elites, which, in some cases, will be presented in generational terms.

#### Recommended readings

- Albrecht, Holger; Schlumberger, Oliver** (2004). “‘Waiting for Godot’: Regime Change without Democratization in the Middle East”. *International Political Science Review* (Vol. 25, Issue 4, pp. 371-392).
- Izquierdo, Ferran; Lampridi-Kemou, Athina** (2012). “Sociology of power in today’s Arab world”. In: Ferran Izquierdo (2012). *Political Regimes in the Arab World: Society and the Exercise of Power*. London: Routledge.
- Ottaway, Marina; Dune, Michelle** (2007). “Incumbent Regimes and the ‘King’s Dilemma’ in the Arab World: Promise and Threat of Managed Reform”. *Carnegie Paper*. Washington: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

## 4. The Middle East after the Arab Spring: Back to Authoritarianism?

The authoritarian regimes in the Middle East, referred to as “Sultanistic dictatorships” by Jack A. Goldstone (2011),

“May often appear unshakable, they are actually highly vulnerable, because the very strategies they use to stay in power make them brittle, not resilient.”

The most recent evidence for the vulnerability of these regimes has been the Arab uprisings. Starting in late 2010 in Tunisia, the resentment of Middle Eastern societies against the ingrained problems of flawed justice, security and political apparatus engulfed the region in an eruption of diffusing waves of popular protest. These protests in demand of structural change came with high hopes of reform, yet, in the long run, many authoritarian regimes demonstrated considerable resistance against the uprisings. While some regimes were toppled, as in the case of Tunisia and Egypt, and many regimes were shaken for the duration of the uprisings, the so-called Spring did not manage to force a transition to a post-authoritarian form of government. Rather than structural reform, in most cases, the uprisings gave rise to the recovery of authoritarian security states.

How did the authoritarian regimes in the Middle East resist and come through these sustained mass waves of popular protests? Although, in most cases, the authoritarian elite managed to cling to established and deeply entrenched political practices, there were other dynamics that were key to the resilience of the authoritarian regimes.

The authoritarian regimes faced with mass protest were forced to adapt their policies to this new environment either by remodelling their existing practices or by transforming these practices substantially, if necessary. The former case, which was the common regime response to the uprisings in most of the Gulf countries, led to the enhancement of “authoritarian upgrading”, specifically targeting the challenges posed by the uprisings. Heydemann defines the concept of authoritarian upgrading based on five main elements: appropriating and containing civil societies; managing political contestation; capturing the benefits of selective economic reforms; controlling new communications technologies; and diversifying international linkages.

Heydemann further claims that authoritarian upgrading involves

“Reconfiguring authoritarian governance to accommodate and manage changing political, economic and social conditions that emerge as a defensive response to challenges confronting Arab autocrats.” (Heydemann 2007, pp. 1-2)

### Recommended reading

Goldstone, Jack A. (May-June 2011). “Understanding the Revolutions of 2011: Weakness and Resilience in Middle Eastern Autocracies”. *Foreign Affairs*.

This was a pre-Arab Spring practice, re-applied and extended to consolidate authoritarian rule. In the latter case, regimes demonstrated a sharp rupture from authoritarian upgrading and turned to extremely exclusionary and oppressive models, as in the cases of Syria and Egypt.

In his 2014 article, Heydemann argues that

“The restructuring of the authoritarian practices are consistent with the inability of Arab regimes either to sustain redistribution and guarantees of economic security as the basis of state-society relations and conceptions of citizenship, or to establish viable, market-oriented political economies capable of addressing massive, systemic employment crises and ameliorating chronic conditions of economic insecurity that are especially acute among youth.”

### **Recommended readings**

**Heydemann, Steven** (October 2007). “Upgrading Arab Authoritarianism”. *Brookings Institution Analysis Paper* (Issue 13). The Saban Center for Middle East Policy at the Brookings Institution.

**Heydemann, Steven** (4<sup>th</sup> December 2014). “Arab autocrats are not going back to the future”. Monkey Cage, *The Washington Post*.

Another concept that has been commonly referred to in the literature to explain the resilience of authoritarian regimes during and after the uprisings is the diffusion of regime responses to the protests, and the similarity of the measures taken and their intensity. With respect to this concept, Heydemann argues that

“Authoritarian upgrading is shaped by ‘authoritarian learning’, a process of transnational diffusion in which lessons and strategies that originate within and outside the Middle East are diffused across the region, traveling from regime to regime and being modified in the process, and regimes learn from one another, often through explicit sharing of experiences.”

While regimes have benefited greatly from authoritarian learning after the start of the Arab uprisings, Marc Lynch states that

“Although protesters across the region adopted a common language and followed a similar script, the political dynamics that ensued did not, and the ‘Arab uprising’ model of rapid, unstoppable, and generally nonviolent mobilization forcing the president to step down actually happened only twice (in Tunisia and Egypt).”

He adds that, in Bahrain, Libya, Syria and Yemen, protracted violence or state failure overtook peaceful protests, and that most of the wealthier Gulf States deflected protests through a combination of repression and co-optation while learning from the mistakes of other regimes and taking steps to support one another’s survival strategies.

### **Recommended readings**

**Bank, A.; Edel, M.** (June 2015). “Authoritarian Regime Learning: Comparative Insights from the Arab Uprisings”. *GIGA Working Papers* (Issue 274).

**Heydemann, Steven** (2016). “Explaining the Arab Uprisings: Transformations in Comparative Perspective”. *Mediterranean Politics* (Issue 21).



**Heydemann, S.; Leenders, R.** (2011). "Authoritarian Learning and Authoritarian Resilience: Regime Responses to the Arab Awakening". *Globalizations* (Vol. 8, Issue 5).

**Kitchen, Nicholas et al.** (May 2012). *After the Arab Spring: Power Shift in the Middle East?* LSE IDEAS Special Report.

**Lynch, Marc** (2014). *The Arab Uprisings Explained: New Contentious Politics in the Middle East*. New York: Columbia University Press.

**Lynch, Marc** (2016). "The New Arab Wars: Uprisings and Anarchy in the Middle East". *Public Affairs*.

**Lynch, Marc et al.** (2015). "The Arab Thermidor: The Resurgence of the Security State". *POMEPS Studies* (Issue 11).

**Lynch, Marc et al.** (2016). "Transnational Diffusion and Cooperation in the Middle East". *POMEPS Studies* (Issue 21).

When assessing the phenomenon of authoritarian learning (but also what has already been described as a counter-revolutionary wave), two cases deserve particular attention: Syria and Egypt. In the case of Syria, Assad has been able to remain in power not only due to the support received by its international and regional allies but also because of his ability to infuse fear among the population. The manipulation of sectarian identities and, more so, the strategy to focus the repression on the most moderate and pacific voices of the opposition – indirectly favouring the rise of radical jihadi groups – has helped him to secure the support of segments of the society that were undecided or supported the uprising at the very beginning. As with Egypt, what is particularly interesting is the extent to which Al-Sisi fears any form of dissent, including from his inner circle. There have been purges in the security sector, arrests of civil society activists are constant and the constitution has been amended to allow Al-Sisi to remain in power until 2030. International NGOs, but also analysts, are warning that Egypt has undergone the largest crackdown on freedoms in its modern history.

Together with authoritarian learning and authoritarian retrenchment, another political trend after the Arab Spring has been the strengthening of violent non-state actors, the expansion of areas of limited statehood – often referred to as "ungoverned spaces" – and the increase of cases that can be considered as weak, failing or failed states.

War and foreign meddling have undoubtedly contributed to erode state capacities. A wide array of armed non-state actors – militias, insurgent groups, terrorist organisations and mercenaries – challenge states' claims to monopoly over the means of violence and territorial control and are approached by actors of the international system as key or even legitimate partners. Armed conflict and the proliferation of armed non-state actors have similarly strengthened illegal economic networks across the region. The weakening of state institutions (internal sovereignty) does not, however, imply a corresponding unravelling of the territorial nation-state. In fact, the sovereign state system and territorial boundaries are more resilient than is widely assumed and many regimes in

### Recommended reading

**Cook, Steven** (2018). "Sisi Isn't Mubarak. He's Much Worse". *Foreign Policy*. [Accessed: 18 December 2018]. <<https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/12/19/sisi-isnt-mubarak-hes-much-worse/>>

the region have upgraded surveillance and territorial control tools. This is a key element to be taken into account when discussing whether the region is transiting towards a new regional order or is witnessing a change within order.

### **Recommended readings**

**Bøås, Morten; Kathleen M. Jennings** (2007). "'Failed States' and 'State Failure': Threats or Opportunities?". In: *Globalizations* (Vol. 4, Issue 4, pp. 475-485).

**Call, Charles T.** (2010). "Beyond the 'Failed State': Toward Conceptual Alternatives". In: *European Journal of International Relations* (Vol. 17, Issue 2, pp. 303-326).

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**Del Sarto, Raffaella A.** (2017). "Contentious Borders in the Middle East and North Africa: Context and Concepts". In: *International Affairs* (Vol. 93, Issue 4 (July), pp. 767-787).

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In the years to come, we will be able to assess how successful these strategies have been. We will also be able to evaluate the impact of the strategies on the political systems of the region. Will regimes opt, at some point, for liberalization strategies to facilitate their own survival? Or will repressive measures be even harsher to contain social discontent?

## Summary

This module provides an overview of how political scientists have explained the democratic deficit in the Arab world and the authoritarian resilience in this particular region. While some authors have pointed at cultural and religious factors to explain the lack of democracy, others have identified rentierism, the nature of the state as a power resource, and the exceptionally robust coercive apparatuses as elements that favour authoritarian resilience. This module introduces the discussion on typologies of authoritarianism and the concept of liberalised autocracies to qualify those regimes which undertake political and economical reforms but which did not end up in the establishment of democratic systems. It also explores the concept of “authoritarian upgrading” and “authoritarian learning” to explain why most of the uprisings did not trigger a transition to democracy.



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