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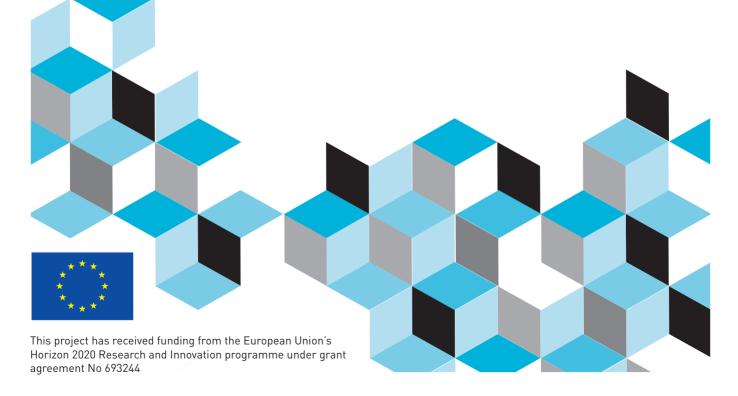No. 30, January 2019

# RESTORATION, TRANSFORMATION AND ADAPTATION: AUTHORITARIANISM AFTER 2011 IN EGYPT, SAUDI ARABIA AND IRAN

**Rasmus Alenius Boserup**, **Eckart Woertz**, **Hiba Hassan**, **Erzsébet N. Rózsa** and **Luciano Zaccara**

**Middle East and North Africa Regional Architecture:**
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# RESTORATION, TRANSFORMATION AND ADAPTATION: AUTHORITARIANISM AFTER 2011 IN EGYPT, SAUDI ARABIA AND IRAN

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## ABSTRACT

Following the push for reform during the popular uprising in 2011, authoritarianism is once again dominating domestic politics and power relations in the MENA region. Drawing on data collected during field trips to Cairo, Tehran, Beirut and Kuwait city, the authors of this MENARA report analyse three distinct ways in which political leaders in Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Iran have stood their grounds since 2011 by. The report shows that the region's autocratic leaders have adopted highly distinct strategies to cope with the challenges they have been confronted with internally – including strategies of "restoration", of "transformation" and of "adaptation". The report ends by suggesting that European leaders, in spite of their limited leverage and resources, have a long-term strategic interest in fostering alternative forms of political regimes in the MENA region.

## INTRODUCTION

Over the past half century, the authoritarian regimes in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) have displayed a remarkable ability to adapt to new circumstances, to grasp opportunities, endure challenges and to restore themselves in the cases where they were overthrown (e.g. Bellin 2004, Heydemann 2007, Schlumberger 2007). With the exception of the toppling of the Shah of Iran in 1979, authoritarian regimes in the MENA region have successfully used the coercive powers of police, intelligence apparatuses, military and paramilitary groups to repress popular uprisings and armed insurgencies that appeared to threaten their survival (Hafez 2003, Bozarslan 2011). While a series of military coups and counter-coups occurred in the first two decades of the postcolonial period (1950s and 1960s), incumbent authoritarian leaders in the MENA region grew increasingly capable of controlling and containing the military during the 1970s – although military coups and interventions into politics did continue in several of the region's republics on a reduced level, as witnessed by Turkey in the 1980s and the Algerian experience in 1991. During the first decades of the 21st century, these regimes furthermore proved capable of enduring international pressure for democratization and reform led by the USA and supported by several European powers (Kienle

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2007, Sayyid 2007, Boserup 2012).

In this respect, the year 2011 represented a remarkable rupture with the recent political history of authoritarian regimes in the MENA region (e.g. Gause 2011, Hudson 2011, Lynch 2011, Bellin 2014). During spring and summer 2011, autocratic leaders in several of the region's republics came under unprecedented pressure when mass protestors challenged the social contracts, and political competitors from within and outside the regimes sought to capitalize upon the protests to increase their power bases and overthrow incumbents. In this process, heads of state in Tunisia and Egypt were forced out of power during the first weeks of 2011 and over the following months leaders in Yemen and Libya were also ousted – in the Libyan case partly as a result of military support from NATO. As surprising and novel as this was, the toppling of incumbent authoritarian leaders only occurred in a few of the MENA region's 20-plus countries. Most of the monarchies in the oil-rich Gulf, but also in Jordan and Morocco showed remarkable resilience. The same is true for Iran and Turkey, which evinced increasingly authoritarian tendencies. In the majority of countries in the region, authoritarian leaders were not threatened in their survival. Neither did all authoritarian leaders who faced mass protests and armed insurgents succumb to the pressure. Contrarily, authoritarian leaders would in several cases orchestrate unprecedented levels of repression and exclusion – as seen, for instance, in Syria (Heydemann and Leenders 2013) or on a more modest scale in Bahrain (Shehabi and Jones 2015) and the United Arab Emirates (Amnesty International 2014). In other cases, including Algeria and some Gulf monarchies, the regimes were able to use economic incentives to defuse parts of the protests (Martinez and Boserup 2016), and in a case like Morocco the regime was able to reduce the pressure by introducing swift reform initiatives, even before protestors had taken to the streets on a large scale. As time progressed, several of the countries where authoritarian leaders had been toppled in early 2011 would also see authoritarian practices restored as has been the case in Egypt after the coup in June 2013. With the exception of Tunisia, the MENA region today hosts no fully functioning liberal democracy, but rather has seen a persistence and hardening of authoritarianism and a twist towards increasingly illiberal or "quasi-" democracies such as Turkey and Israel (Henry and Springborg 2010, Cammett et al. 2015).

This report analyses three distinct examples of how authoritarian regimes in the MENA region have prevailed after the ruptures of 2011. It opens with an analysis by Rasmus Alenius Boserup of the restoration of authoritarianism in Egypt in the wake of the military coup led by General Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, in June 2013, who would later become president. Drawing on interviews conducted with political stakeholders and experts in Cairo during Spring 2018, Boserup shows that the restoration of authoritarianism in Egypt is based on three parallel processes of repression and control targeting the political opposition, public and private media, and the political elite – notably including members of the military and of the former ruling party.

Then follows an analysis by Eckart Woertz and Hiba Hasan of the transformation of authoritarianism in Saudi Arabia after 2011. Based on interviews with intellectuals, opinion-makers, opposition and civil society activists, public administration officials, inter-governmental officials and private-sector representatives in Beirut and Kuwait and via Skype in various European and Middle Eastern locations, Woertz and Hasan show that authoritarian resilience in the wake of the Arab uprisings in Saudi Arabia has seen a marked shift towards more repression and centralization of power. The

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social contract and the instincts of the rentier state are still intact, as the spending hikes of King Abdullah and King Salman in 2011 and 2015 and the partial reversal of austerity measures in 2017 show. However, there has been a marked increase in political repression coupled with limited social and cultural reforms. The ambitious crown prince Mohammed bin Salman has successively concentrated power in his own hands, disempowering erstwhile allies within the royal family and among business families and the clerical establishment. Misguided foreign policy adventures such as the war in Yemen and the Qatar crisis, and diplomatic spats with Canada and Germany have led to international concerns about the reliability and predictability of the regime. The murder of the Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul in 2018 exacerbated such concerns. For now the Saudi regime remains stable, but the alienation of key constituencies, international consternation and the jailing of Twitterati, liberal activists, conservative clerics and businessmen could lead to legitimacy issues in the middle run should the successes of economic reform not materialize.

Erzsébet N. Rózsa and Luciano Zaccara then examine authoritarian adaptation by the Iranian regime since 2011. Drawing on interviews carried out in Tehran, Doha and at locations outside the MENA region, N. Rózsa and Zaccara demonstrate how the Iranian regime has consolidated its power after the 2009 demonstrations to the extent that it felt confident enough to present its unique *velayat-e faqih* as a model for the Arab countries to follow in 2011. While this effort failed, N. Rózsa and Zaccara reveal that the regime domestically has continued its path of authoritarian adaptation and further evolved its hybrid character. Hence, the "conservative" element of the regime was defeated in the popular vote in the 2017 presidential elections in spite of the fact that public disappointment with the Rouhani government continually runs high. While the US withdrawal from the Iranian nuclear deal further threatens to strengthen the authoritarian strain within the regime, N. Rózsa and Zaccara argue that it remains to be seen the extent to which the regime, whose legitimacy is provided by the Shiite notion of mass support, is ready to bend to public opinion if its survival is at stake.

The report ends with a series of reflections on how European and other external actors could engage the authoritarian regimes in question. As a consequence of the multiplicity of documented ways that authoritarian regimes have managed to ensure their own persistence in the period after 2011, the report does not propose a single, all-encompassing policy conclusion. Instead, it presents a brief series of case-specific suggestions and considerations about how external actors could position themselves vis-à-vis each of the authoritarian regimes under scrutiny.

## 1. RESTORATION OF AUTHORITARIANISM IN EGYPT

Authoritarianism in Egypt dates back to early postcolonial times. From the military coup against King Farouk in 1952 to the ousting of president Hosni Mubarak in February 2011, the specific configurations of Egypt's authoritarianism have, however, changed considerably. While Gamal Abdel Nasser built a populist, Soviet-inspired republican single-party system that monopolized political expression within the Arab Socialist Union party and repressed competition and dissidence with a heavy hand throughout the 1950s and 1960s, Anwar Sadat, who took over at Nasser's death in 1970, introduced multi-party elections for the parliament and capitalist economic reforms, as well as a greater role for liberal and Islamist voices in public life. But Sadat upheld the tight control over

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political decision-making and kept slim the room available for political activists, media outlets and civil society actors. This overall configuration of formal politics continued under Hosni Mubarak. During Mubarak's almost three decades in power (1982–2011) the room for manoeuvre of civil society actors, independent media and the Islamist and liberal political opposition did, however, increase and the regime gradually developed into a more hybrid or liberalizing type (Kienle 2001, Kandil 2014).

The toppling of Mubarak by the military in a bloodless coup in early February 2011 initiated a transition process overseen by the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), the highest authority of the Egyptian military. In June 2012, this led to the election of Mohammed Morsi in postcolonial Egypt's first free and fair multi-candidate presidential elections. Morsi's equally turbulent period in office ended, however, before it became clear whether the president would eventually opt for a democratic path (Rougier and Lacroix 2016). Unable to forge a strong alliance between his cabinet and competing civil political forces (Haenni 2016) and locked in power struggles with key state institutions, including the police, the judiciary, the military secret services and a number of core ministries, Morsi was ousted from power in a military coup on 3 July 2013.

The *coup d'état* occurred on the back of a massive and genuine mobilization of millions of Egyptians against the president and his supporters from the Muslim Brotherhood in a popular campaign known as "Rebel" (*tamarrod*). The coup initially enjoyed support from a host of state institutions. Hence, the interim government that replaced Morsi after the coup was formally presided over by the president of the Supreme Constitutional Court, Adly Mansour, and backed by representatives from the police, youth movements and Egypt's two most important religious institutions, Al-Azhar and the Coptic Church. The executive muscle in the interim government was, however, held by the army itself, represented by the newly appointed Minister of Defence, General Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, who had been a central figure in planning the coup.

Shortly after the coup in July 2013, the interim government announced a plan for establishing a new political system. The so-called roadmap for Egypt's transition stipulated that the country should move forward in three steps. First, elaborating a new constitution; second, setting up a new legislative body through parliamentary elections; third, establishing that new executive body through presidential elections. Having swapped the order of the roadmap and starting out with presidential elections before parliamentary elections, al-Sisi won an overwhelming electoral victory in June 2014. After roughly a year, a new parliament was elected in May 2015. The parliamentary election was carried out under revised electoral law, which gave priority to independent candidates – a disposition that many interpreted as a comparative strengthening of the presidency and as a weakening of the political parties. The construction of new political institutions had, however, stopped short of moving to the local level. Hence, by the time of the editing of the present report, in late 2018, no local political structures have been reintroduced to fill the institutional vacuum created by the 2011 dismantling of local governorates that Mubarak's regime used as dispersed instruments of power.

Most observers and experts agree that the political system that has emerged under al-Sisi is not a reintroduction of the liberalizing autocratic regime that developed in the late Mubarak period. Rather, Egypt seems now to be experiencing what one observer recently called a "hardened"

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autocracy (Brumberg 2018). Indeed, the restoration of authoritarianism in Egypt after July 2013 has been imposed with unprecedentedly high levels of physical and administrative repression of a host of actors emerging both from Egypt's mobilized post-revolutionary society and from within the circles of the regime itself.

The first group to be targeted by the repression was the former president's political and social base in the Muslim Brotherhood. Having removed Morsi, the military-controlled interim government would in the following months go to great lengths to push the organization behind him out of politics. Less than a month after the coup, and in the wake of several fruitless dialogue attempts by international mediators, Egyptian military and police moved against pro-Morsi protesters who had camped out at two squares in Cairo (avoiding Tahrir Square in downtown Cairo where pro-Sisi supporters had gathered since the coup). The clearance of Nahda Square in front of Cairo University in Giza and of Rabaa Square in the New Cairo district close to the Presidential Palace turned into one of the single-most bloody events in modern Egyptian history. Human rights observers have documented that more than 900 protesters were indiscriminately killed, either by gunfire or as a result of the military setting the tents and camps in the square ablaze without providing escape routes for the protesters (Human Rights Watch 2014). While it remains disputed whether the mass killings in Rabaa Square and Nahda Square were premeditated or an unintended result of failed crowd control attempts, the event initiated a process in which the entire organization of the Muslim Brotherhood would be dismembered over the following months and years. Having declared it a "terrorist organization", frozen its assets and banned its operation, the authorities set out to indiscriminately repress the organization's supporters and members, forcing them out of politics all over Egypt. Egyptian human rights organizations estimate that the majority of the 60,000 or more people who have been held as political prisoners since 2013 are affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood – a number that is approximately ten times higher than during the final years of Mubarak's government (Stork 2015, Gamal Ziada and Eid 2016).

From early on, it was also clear that the new regime would tolerate less critique from Egyptian and foreign media than the previous transition governments after Mubarak's fall (Youssef 2015). Shortly after the ousting of Morsi, security forces raided the offices of Qatar-based media network Al Jazeera, whose pro-revolutionary coverage of the struggles against Mubarak in 2011 and critique of the military throughout the interim period was seen as a propaganda outlet for the Muslim Brotherhood amongst members of the new regime and its supporters. As part of the campaign against Al Jazeera, several Egyptian and international reporters were sentenced to prison for alleged, but poorly documented, defamation or support of terrorist organizations.[2]More recently, the Egyptian security services have been suspected of being behind the blocking of up to 400 websites prior to the presidential elections in 2018, including the critical news site MadaMasr. In parallel, the Egyptian security services are suspected to have bought major shares in dominant private media outlets, including the private satellite TV channel ON-TV, originally created by Egyptian liberal businessman Naguib Sawiris. The Egyptian security services is also believed to have invested around 4 billion Egyptian pounds in creating its own media network in 2018, the DMC TV Channels. By the time of the editing of this report, the network airs a sports channel, an entertainment channel and a news channel via satellite. Sources from the private

2   See Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) data: Journalists Imprisoned in Egypt in 2018, https://cpj.org/data/imprisoned/2018/?cc_fips[]=EG.

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media landscape interviewed in Cairo in March 2018 could attest to numerous events where they had been approached by people they suspected of acting on behalf of the security apparatus, offering lucrative financial deals in return for providing their services to such new or already co-opted media outlets.[3]

The almost complete control of public and private media production in Egypt was exposed in the run up to the presidential elections held in late March 2018. For weeks, both public and private media were flooded with panegyric praise for the incumbent president as well as allegations and threats against his contenders. While the bulk of the media campaign targeted local audiences through television programmes, political music videos and poster campaigns styling the incumbent president as a national hero and a saviour, initiatives were also taken to control potentially critical foreign reporting about the elections. A case in point was the sudden and unprovoked deportation from Cairo of the British reporter for *The Times*, Bel Trew, who had lived in the city since 2011. Rounded up by plain-clothes police, in an unprecedented turn of events the international reporter was given the choice either to stand before a military trial or accept immediate deportation (Spencer 2018).

The restoration of autocracy under al-Sisi has furthermore occurred on the back of broad repression targeting individuals from a number of social and professional groups and movements, including members of the "ultras" football supporters who had fought fiercely against the police in Cairo, Alexandria and Port Said during the uprising in 2011 and 2012, and activists from the likes of the 6th of April Movement who played an important role in the on- and offline mobilization for the protests in January 2011. Eventually, members of more classical NGOs, notably human rights defenders or gender activists, have found themselves targeted by state repression and facing travel bans, prosecution and possible prison terms (Amnesty International 2016).

Egypt's autocratic restoration has, however, not been limited to actors and circles outside the political elite and the regime itself. In the run up to the re-election of al-Sisi in March 2018, a number of presidential candidates emerged from within the political elite. Most observers showed little interest or trust in candidates from outside the regime circles, for instance pro-revolutionary lawyer Khaled Amr or Islamist politician Abdel Moneim Fotouh. It was another case, however, when it came to candidates with a former career in the ruling political party under Mubarak, the National Democratic Party. When Ahmed Shafiq, a former military officer who had served as a minister under Mubarak and who had been narrowly beaten by Morsi in the presidential elections in 2012, and Sami Annan, a retired Coptic general who had served as chief-of-staff under Mubarak and been a key member of the transition government by SCAF immediately after the toppling of Mubarak, both announced their candidacies in early spring 2018 observers of Egyptian politics began to speculate about possible electoral defeat for al-Sisi. The combination of two candidates who could potentially muster support not only from the electoral pool of liberals, socialists, Copts, patriots and nationalists, but who also might benefit from protest votes of pro-Islamists and former supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood by representing a more reformist and inclusive approach to the political opposition in Egypt than the incumbent president, generated tense hype among the political public. Although less than two weeks later both men had withdrawn their candidacies, allegedly under severe pressure from the security apparatus, the mere fact that

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3    Interview by Boserup with an Egyptian opinion-maker (male, 35-65 years old), Cairo, March 2018.

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two senior personages with long careers and supposed broad support bases within the military and elite circles from the former ruling party under Mubarak had dared challenge the incumbent president fostered speculation about potential fractures within al-Sisi's most crucial support base.

Speculations of this character did not, however, inspire much hope among the interviewees encountered during the fieldwork trip to Cairo in March 2018. Across the line, from activists and politicians opposed to the regime through to employees in the state administration, the prospects of potential intra-regime opposition to al-Sisi generated fear and worry. Some feared that power struggles within the political elite could spill over into society and further increase the repression of actors seen as supporters of the losing regime factions.[4] Other interviewees feared that these internal power struggles exposed real weaknesses within the regime, and that the exposing of this in combination with the decreasing purchasing power of the Egyptian pound and the degradation of public services could trigger yet another mass uprising – this time far more violent than the previous ones.[5] Hence, while many Egyptians in the immediate wake of the toppling of Mubarak in 2011 and throughout 2012 had been anxious about the consequences of state collapse, the interviewees encountered in 2018 generally gave the impression that it was state repression that they feared. Many meetings were conducted in hushed voices, with lowered heads, whispering, with mobile phones turned off or moved to adjacent tables. Questions about sensitive issues – such as the role of the security forces in policymaking – were ignored or only addressed if I lowered my voice while walking in the streets. Several interviewees – including long-term activists who have been active in opposition politics in Egypt for years – also spoke at length about the fear of abduction, the fear of prison terms and the fear of orchestrated assaults by thugs.[6] As one told me in an aside about a night when his girlfriend had stayed over in another city: "I was very afraid of staying alone in the apartment at night. It's better if there's a woman with you. Women make a fuss during arrests – screaming and shouting. So the secret police prefer not to intervene when there are women around."[7] Interviewees closer to the ruling elite did not exhibit such fears. Rather, they pointed to economic initiatives taken by the president and government as indications of potential progress and explain that the security situation depended on the success of the Egyptian army's restoration of peace and order in Sinai with its rooting out of what they referred to as "terrorists".

There are currently no indications that the regime in Cairo will introduce substantial democratization. Collectively, the interviews conducted in the city in March 2018 gave a clear impression that no one believed that the Egyptian regime would embrace democracy. On this basis, three possible scenarios present themselves for the immediate future development of authoritarianism in Egypt.

The first scenario is that autocracy will further harden during al-Sisi's second presidential term (2018–2022). Such a scenario would mean that the executive branch and the security services further tighten their control and domination over decision-making and political institutions in Egypt during the second mandate of al-Sisi. This scenario would be likely to entail further purges aimed at removing coalitions of competitors and challengers within the military establishment, the

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4    Ibid.

5    Ibid.

6    Interview by Boserup with an Egyptian CSO member (female, 35-65 years old), Cairo, March 2018.

7    Interview by Boserup with an Egyptian opinion-maker (male, 35-65 years old), Cairo, March 2018.

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civil political elite and the security apparatus. It would also mean continued and even increased repression of contenders from outside the regime, including civil society activists, insurgents, disobedient or illegal political movements and political parties. It would further include an increased control and co-optation of civil and political institutions such as courts, ministries, media outlets and foreign donor institutions. And it would most likely involve the continuation of the populism and nationalism that has been stoked by the regime since al-Sisi came to power.

The second scenario is that a more liberalizing form of autocracy will emerge during al-Sisi's second term. In such a scenario the Muslim Brotherhood would still not be allowed any room in formal politics. Rather, this would entail a liberalization and reform process emerging through some sort of increased inclusion of the public in the regime's political institutions. One likely step in this direction would be the re-establishment of local political institutions. Another component could be the gradual limitation of the role and influence of the intelligence apparatuses within the presidency. A third could be the re-empowering of civil-political mediation through a strengthening of Egypt's weakened political parties.

A third and equally plausible scenario is that the current form of authoritarian government remains in place in the foreseeable future. In other words, that al-Sisi's second term in office will manifest itself as a consolidation of the authoritarian regime form that has emerged during his first five years of power. While the regime may wish to continue along this third track, its actual implementation will eventually depend on how a number of domestic factors unfold – including, in particular, the repression of the insurgency in Sinai and the performance of the Egyptian economy and job market as well as the potential spill over of instability in Libya.

As we shall return to in the last part of this report, these scenarios leave only limited leverage for European and other external actors seeking to influence domestic political development in Egypt without intervening strongly.

## 2. TRANSFORMATION OF AUTHORITARIANISM IN SAUDI ARABIA

The timid reform efforts that have occurred in Saudi Arabia since the turn of the millennium hardly qualify as a paradigm shift away from authoritarianism. As such, one might better speak of development and transformation within an overall framework of autocratic rule – a process that has generated a type of autocracy in Saudi Arabia today that differs considerably from the one known just a few years ago.

For a long time, high oil rents per capita made the regime in Saudi Arabia relatively autonomous vis-à-vis wider society and allowed it to offer a social contract of "no taxation and no representation". Citizens received public-sector jobs, subsidies and transfer payments and in return refrained from demands for political participation (Beblawi and Luciani 1987, Hertog 2010). This social contract survived the lean years of low oil prices in the 1980s and 1990s, when states had to cut back investments, but were anxious to maintain public-sector payments and transfers to maintain legitimacy. During the oil boom of the 2000s there was even some timid liberalization from above, including carefully controlled municipal elections and a more prominent role of the *Majlis al-Shura* advisory body (Ehteshami 2003, Teitelbaum 2009).

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In the wake of the Arab uprisings in 2011, the social contract was on full display when then King Abdullah launched a public spending programme of 130 billion US dollars to pre-empt any spill over in the kingdom. It included social security, housing loans, healthcare, religious institutions and new recruits into the Ministry of the Interior. However, subsequently the government has become increasingly authoritarian and has been using mixed tactics of sticks and carrots.[8] Protests have been quelled, dissidents incarcerated and the social media sphere policed. At the same time, the government has been keen to keep up its part of the social pact by maintaining the welfare system. With the oil price decline since 2014, this has become increasingly difficult and Saudi Arabia, as with several other Gulf countries, is implementing austerity measures and raising finances by taking out loans or issuing bonds.

When protests occurred in a number of Arab countries in spring 2011 the Saudi Arabian government cracked down hard on opposition movements in its eastern province, which has a large Shiite minority comprising about a third of the population there. The Shiite cleric Nimr Baqir al-Nimr was executed in 2016 for terrorism charges. In his hometown of Al Awamiyya armed protests erupted. It was under military siege in 2017, during which several people were killed.

Beside the security services, the National Guard has been prominently involved in internal security operations. Its command structures are tribal and separate from the Ministry of Defence. As an institution, it has served to tie the tribes to the ruling family and defend it against internal enemies. In contrast, the army is more engaged internationally, such as with the Saudi-led intervention in the Yemini Civil War that has been going on since 2015. The ambitious young crown prince Mohammed bin Salman (MbS), son of the king, has brought all three core coercive institutions under his control. The army, when he became defence minister in 2015, the Ministry of the Interior when he forced his cousin Mohammed bin Nayef to abdicate his posts as minister of the interior and crown prince in 2017, and the National Guard when he temporarily arrested its minister, Prince Mutaib, the son of former king Abdullah in 2017. His arrest was part of a government shakedown of wealthy royals and businesspeople that ostensibly figured as an anti-corruption drive. They were arrested in the Ritz Carlton in Riyadh and only released after signing over large parts of their assets. Sequestered assets of about 100 billion US dollars helped to shore up the finances of the state, whose foreign reserves decreased from 737 billion US dollars in August 2014 to 486 billion in November 2017. While the alleged anti-corruption drive could count on some sympathy among youth and ordinary Saudis, the arrest of Prince Mutaib has ruffled feathers of many people in the Najd, the conservative Saudi heartland, according to our interviews.[9]

Forensic accounting and the interrogations in the Ritz Carlton were undertaken by English-speaking persons, indicating the enlistment of foreign expertise (Filkins 2018). According to one of our interviewees, Erik Prince's Academi (formerly Blackwater) security company conglomerate was involved in these procedures.[10] Prince resides in Abu Dhabi and is close to its de facto ruler, Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed (MbZ) who in turn has had a formative influence on and established

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8   Phone interview by Hasan with a MENA pro-opposition politician in Canada (male, 35-65 years old), April 2018.

9   Interview by Hasan with a pro-opposition politician from the Gulf (male, 35-65 years old), Beirut, April 2018.

10  Interview by Woertz with a Lebanese private sector representative (male, 35-65 years old), Paris, April 2018.

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a close working relationship with MbS, speaking on the telephone with him daily (Filkins 2018). The enlistment of foreign security personnel could also be observed in the police force of Bahrain, which consists largely of Sunnis from other countries such as Pakistan (Strobl 2011). In 2017, MbS also centralized Saudi security forces with a series of decrees by his father, the king. They created a presidency of state security, which includes units for special forces, counterterrorism and anti-terror financing. The new agency is linked to the office of the prime minister, a position currently held by the king.

The repressive tactics aimed to ensure the regime's endurance have not been confined to the Shiite minority and its political protagonists. In the wake of the rise of ISIS, the kingdom has struggled with a number of terrorist incidents, among them bomb attacks on Shiite mosques in 2015 and 2016. This raised the spectre of the mid-2000s, when there was a campaign by jihadist groups within the country (Hegghammer 2010). The recourse to sectarian language that the regime deemed helpful in its suppression of the Shiite minority has obviously come with side effects. It has emboldened Islamist voices that consider Saudi Arabia's austere Wahhabi interpretation of Islam to be not conservative enough. Beside the violent groups there has also been peaceful protest by Islamists critical of the government, such as the Al-Sahwa movement. This emerged in the 1990s and argued against western cultural influence and the presence of US troops in the country (Lacroix 2011). In 2017 the Saudi government arrested prominent clerics such as Salman al-Awadah, Awad al-Qarni and Ali al-Omary, who were all outsiders from the state-backed religious establishment, but had large online followings.

The power of official clerics has, however, also been cut back recently in a bid to further consolidate the power base of the regime. In particular, the prerogatives of the Muttawa, the religious police, have been curtailed. They now patrol shopping malls and public spaces less intrusively. MbS has publicly questioned the role of Wahhabism as hitherto practised, which had formed a bedrock of Saudi legitimacy since the first Saudi state in the 18th century. He has argued that the conservative turn in Saudi Arabia after the siege of the Mecca mosque in 1979 was a mistake. The influence of conservative clerics in the education sector and their international proselytization efforts have been cut back. The Saudi-backed Muslim World League has been restructured and has given up control of some major assets abroad such as the Great Mosque in Brussels in 2018.

The social media sphere, which used to allow for a degree of openness during the "reform from above" era of the 2000s, has increasingly been policed since 2011. Several of the interviewed persons encountered by the authors stressed that technical support from western companies and security services has been enlisted to this end.[11] Twitterati and bloggers have been jailed when uttering criticism of the government, such as prominent liberal dissident Raif Badawi who was arrested in 2008 under charges of "apostasy" and again in 2012 for apostasy and "insulting Islam through electronic channels".[12] Female activists for ending the driving ban for women were

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11  Interview by Hasan of an IGO's official (female, 18-35 years old), Beirut, April 2018. Interview by Hasan of an intellectual (male, 35-65 years old), London, April 2018. Interview by Woertz with a Lebanese private sector representative (male, 35-65 years old), Paris, April 2018.

12  See the US Congress Defending Freedoms Project (DFP) website: Prisoners by Country: Saudi Arabia: Raif Badawi, https://humanrightscommission.house.gov/defending-freedom-project/prisoners-by-country/Saudi%20Arabia/Raif%20Badawi.

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arrested as well, albeit that this ban has now been lifted, underlining the regime's resolve to suppress any independent organization of civil society. Establishment figures in the media also faced pressures. Well-known journalist Jamal Khashoggi, who used to work for the media empire of Prince Alwaleed and advised the former head of Saudi security services, Prince Turki al-Faisal, went into exile to the USA in 2017, where he became a frequent critic of the Saudi regime via his columns in the *Washington Post*. In 2018 Saudi security people murdered him in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul, marking an unprecedented escalation of repression and persecution. The murder caused international outrage and calls for an international investigation. It was widely believed that close associates of the crown prince could not have committed the murder without his direct orders. As a result, the international standing of Saudi Arabia and its crown prince, already weakened because of the Yemini war, the Qatari standoff and diplomatic rows with Canada and Germany, weakened further.

While political suppression of liberal Saudis and its foreign policy adventurism has earned the regime some opprobrium in the West, the same circles have applauded the social and cultural opening that MbS has engineered. Women have finally been allowed to drive and attend concerts and sports events in mixed-gender settings. Many western business circles have also received MbS' strategy of economic diversification positively. The Saudis have successfully wooed the Trump administration, which has given them carte blanche for foreign policy adventures in Yemen and Qatar and for the domestic repression and reform efforts in return for arms and business deals, joint opposition against Iran and a mellowed stance towards Israel – albeit King Salman occasionally reins his son in, such as when postponing a possible Aramco IPO and insisting on certain parameters for a possible solution of the Palestinian question. MbS and President Trump's son-in-law Jared Kushner have a close working relationship, amidst persistent rumours that this might include private business interests related to real estate financing.

In spite of attempts to liberalize certain sectors of the country's social and cultural life and to cultivate considerable support in the West, the Saudi regime increasingly relies on political repression to assert itself. It has alienated factions that used to be major pillars of the regime: royals of the larger "dynastic monarchy" (Herb 1999) as well as associated business families that grew rich in subcontracting and the religious Wahhabi establishment. As a part of this process, power has been concentrated in the hands of one person in a hitherto unseen fashion and the consensus-based decision-making of the past within the royal family has given way to a more centralized and personalized power structure. One would need to go back to the Saudi founding king Abdulaziz to find a similar personalization of power. Although not yet crowned king and occasionally brought to heel by his father, MbS is largely in command and could stay so for many decades, if he remains unharmed. Indeed, several interviewees were concerned that the enemies he has created in a short period could motivate assassination attempts, as with a purported drone attack on his palace in Riyadh.[13]

A comparative analysis of tactics used by the Saudi regime to control its population under the late King Abdullah on the one hand and under King Salman and his son MbS on the other thus paints

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13  Interviews by Woertz with a Lebanese private sector representative (male, 35-65 years old), Paris, April 2018; with an European intellectual (male, 35-65 years old), Seville, July 2018; and with a Kuwaiti private-sector representative (male, 35-65 years old), Paris, December 2017.

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a picture of increasing use of repressive tactics. In 2011, the importance of the social contract was thrown into sharp relief when King Abdullah launched a 130 billion US dollar public spending spree immediately after the eruption of the Arab uprising protests in Tunisia and Egypt. The spending was used to bump up public-sector salaries, hire new people in the security services and launch an affordable housing programme for 500,000 units. In contrast to the current push back against official and unofficial religious figures, about 200 million US dollars was allocated to conservative clerics and their organizations, who celebrated this as a victory over liberal voices in the kingdom (MacFarquhar 2011). Repression was also part of the mix, as the arrests of Raif Badawi and others have shown; but in comparison to today, carrots were still dominating over sticks. Populist policies were also at work when King Salman announced two months of free public salaries on the occasion of his ascending to the throne in 2015 (Hubbard 2015). However, under the weight of falling oil prices, austerity measures were soon implemented. MbS cut subsidies in an unprecedented way and departed from the political bargain of the rentier state. In 2017 the Saudi state made a partial about turn when benefits for civil servants and military personnel were reinstated, revealing limits to the economic reform drive of MbS (Carey et al. 2017). The amassing of private fortunes by MbS himself, including a yacht for half a billion dollars and a French château that he purchased while implementing austerity measures, has been a topic in the international press and could compromise the credibility of his ostentatious anti-corruption drive (Mulholland 2017). The economic diversification drive of the Saudi Vision 2030 has been widely publicized, but its lofty goals need to be taken with a pinch of salt. Any success will only show within decades rather than years, while the aspirations of Saudi Arabia's burgeoning youth population has shorter time horizons. Hence, its patience might wear thin, although there is considerable endorsement among this demographic for the social and cultural opening of the regime.[14]

While autocracy is set to prevail in Saudi Arabia in the near future, it remains unclear whether sticks or carrots will dominate. Given the controversial nature of MbS's power consolidation and his alienation of key constituencies, suppression is likely to persist. At the same time, the ability of the state to calm the waves with carrots continues to be compromised by relatively low oil prices. Any success in diversification efforts will only materialize in a matter of decades rather than years and would involve an empowerment of private-sector actors that could develop interests independent of the state. On the other hand, the social and cultural opening up enjoys considerable popularity among the youth. The incarceration and partial expropriation of big businessmen has been hailed by many Saudis who have been aware of widespread corruption in state-led subcontracting and land deals. Much of the job creation in the private sector is low-wage jobs that go to foreign workers rather than Saudi nationals, who continue to have a strong preference for public-sector employment; so, there is little reason for economic gratitude to the bourgeoisie from the general population. Hence, the bourgeoisie is politically weak and continues to depend on subcontracting from the state economically. It is unlikely that it could become an independent power centre in the future or develop ambitions in this regard. Liberal intellectuals are few and far between and do not have a meaningful social base. This leaves Islamist forces of different varieties and levels of radicalization as the only likely alterative to the rule of the House of Saud – an alternative that international actors abhor, and thus they will be inclined to continue to lend tacit support to the Saudi ruler.

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14  Interview by Hasan with a MENA pro-opposition politician (male, 35-65 years), Beirut, April 2018.

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The social and cultural opening up spearheaded by the new de facto ruler of Saudi Arabia deserves credit. Yet, while his political suppression might have some justification in the case of terrorist groups, more often than not it targets critical civil society discourse in general and seeks to prevent the political change needed to complement social and cultural opening up in the long run. If MbS is looking for role models he probably has China's enlightened and modernizing authoritarianism in mind, rather than the EU.

The room to manoeuvre for civil society actors has been greatly reduced with repression, incarcerations and exile. Any attempt at political debate, not to mention political action, comes with grave risks. To make matters worse, it can only count on limited international solidarity and support. Western politicians tend to prioritize the economic interest of business deals and arms exports, fear the threat of Islamist alternatives to the House of Saud – if the latter should fall – and are aware that competing international powers such as China, India and Russia also want the attention of Gulf countries without the conditions of their cooperation on human rights considerations. As Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries have considerable foreign assets and revenue streams, international donors have limited economic leverage over them.

## 3. AUTHORITARIAN ADAPTATION IN IRAN

Authoritarianism in Iran has had a long history and has shown an "exceptional ability to adjust itself to socioeconomic transformations [… and an] infinite capability to articulate new principles of ideological legitimization for its replication and preservation". (Kia 2014: 57–8) According to Mehrdad Kia, recent Iranian history had three transformational periods (1906–25, 1941–53, and 1979–80), and each was followed by phases of an authoritarian rule.

Iranian authoritarianism has laid the foundation for, and lent legitimacy to, a variety of political systems and movements, including the traditional monarchical absolutism of the Qajar dynasty, the modernizing autocratic regimes of the two Pahlavi shahs, and the revolutionary Islamic government that emerged after the overthrow of the monarchy in 1979. (Kia 2014: 58)

His conclusion is that all actors of the political scene, be they part of the ruling elites or of the opposition, used authoritarian concepts and models to legitimize their rule. The present model of hybrid authoritarianism, while based upon notions of Shiite theology, also draws on the former brands: it has maintained the constitutional form of government, advocates technical modernization and reaches back to the "new fusion of Islam and socialism […] and propose[s] the creation of what they believed to be a more just and egalitarian social order" (Kia 2014: 58). The revolutionary authoritarianism of the Islamic Revolution also shared many characteristics with other great revolutions of human history, such as the French or the Soviet. Ali M. Ansari argues that the Islamic Republic has been characterized by this mixed political heritage, where ideas of republicanism and radical new innovations in Islamic political thought are both present (Ansari 2014: 225).

The political space is determined within Shiite Islamic thought: since there can be no opposition to God, any kind of political debate takes place within the framework of the regime. Therefore, it could be said that the opposition is institutionalized within the system. Legally this is formalized

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by Article 26 of the Constitution:

> The political parties, associations and trade unions, Islamic associations, or associations of the recognized religious minorities are free to exist on the condition that they do not negate the principles of independence, freedom, national unity, Islamic criterion and the foundation of the Islamic Republic. (Papan-Matin 2014: 170)

The electoral processes, besides giving way to the expression of some public sentiment and will, in fact serve also as mechanisms of elite recruitment, and thus help to solve the discrepancies among the factions of the political establishment within the institutional framework. In the Islamic Republic there are no official political parties, but different political groupings or platforms within the framework of the system play this role. It should be noted, however, that there are several invisible power centres within the system of the Islamic Republic, which are not mentioned in the constitution as such, yet they have a share in the political decision-making, with the Supreme Leader not only having the last word, but also playing a balancing role among them.

Armed forces have a specific place in the political decision-making, economy and society all over the Middle East, with the potential to contribute to the political elites as the military is practically the only channel of (upward) social mobility. Due to the Islamic Revolution, though, the armed forces in Iran have had a part in maintaining the revolutionary character as well. The regular army (*artesh*) has never regained its pre-revolution position; with its "classical" portfolio, it is the parallel Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (*pasdaran*) – and to a certain extent the Mobilization Resistance Force units (*basij*) – that have proved to be the field of revolutionary elite training.

Though the Arab uprisings have considerably changed Iran's wider neighbourhood, they have left the Islamic Republic itself unimpressed, in spite of the fact that some of the underlying causes (demography, urbanization, unemployment, economic grievances, corruption etc.) were symptoms of similar social problems within the Islamic Republic. It would be easy to say that, due to their being Arab, the Arab uprisings have no relevance and cannot be an example for the Iranian public – whatever the common concerns may be. But in fact this was true the other way around.

Both the 1979 revolution and the 2009 demonstrations were widely cited in Iranian political rhetoric during the Arab uprisings. The leadership of the Islamic Republic seemed to find a parallel in the Arab uprising events, and interpreted them as an Islamic awakening, with the overt aim of gaining new allies and to become an inspiration for new regimes. This would have been an important step forward for the regime after the – still officially unacknowledged – failure of the "export of the revolution" and the obstacles in the way of "constructing new international norms that reflect the practices, worldview, and aspirations of the ruling authorities in Tehran" (Vatanka 2015: 61). On the contrary, the failed Green Movement recognized a similar dissatisfaction with the system, political participation and so on, as well as similar concerns to those that were manifest in the 2009 Iranian demonstrations. Both sides thought that their own example could serve as a model for the Arab developments, especially since both observed the events not through a national but an overarching, ideological lens: revolutionary Islam or liberal(izing) democracy. However, for the Arab publics the Islamic Republic has been too Iranian (Persian) and too Shiite, with the state model of the *velayat-e faqih* not resonating much even within the wider Shiite community.

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Following Lisa Anderson's framework of analysis (Anderson 2014: 46-9) – state, regime, government – we could say that the Iranian state in the post-revolution period was challenged just once, by the Iraq–Iran war of 1980–8. All other external challenges aimed at the regime established by the Islamic Revolution. The USA's (and Israel's) plans at initiating regime change in Iran are especially relevant. Consequently, regime security/survival is at the core of Iranian strategic thinking. Internal challenges and public discontent (student protests, the 2017 December unrest) were usually addressed to the government, and not the regime itself, except for the 2009 demonstrations over the elections, where anti-regime rhetoric also appeared.

Nevertheless, the model of (Shiite) Islamic government and the regime has withstood not only the initial phases of post-revolution restructuring – including the disorganization of the armed forces and the state administration, and the eight-year war with Iraq – but also containment efforts by the USA and the international sanctions regime.

Regime resilience can be explained by several factors: the ideological-religious basis, the institutional framework and the authoritarian practices. The feeling of victimization has fitted well into the Shiite worldview, and the mass mobilization capacity of the Shiite personalities (and centres) has proved an important asset. Yet, there is also an element of legitimacy, and therefore (enduring) mass protests could be an extra threat: they would undermine not only regime stability, but also question its legitimacy. Consequently, the mood of the masses is closely followed and in each election the turnout is of crucial importance. All the segments of government and political factions stress the importance of engaging in the electoral processes and Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei calls for participation.

Even though Hassan Rouhani's victories in the 2013 and 2017 presidential elections cannot be considered as liberal in political terms, as when President Mohammad Khatami was elected in 2001, an acquiescing to public sentiment could definitely be detected and it can be argued that after the Green Movement demonstrations, and witness of the Arab uprising experience, the Iranian system managed to co-opt popular demands by allowing Rouhani to run and win, with the support of pro-green and reformist circles. The same can be said of the decision to negotiate the nuclear deal – there were public opinion polls showing that a great majority of the Iranian public was eager to open up towards the USA – in spite of the fact that Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei frequently expressed his distrust in the USA. With President Donald Trump in office, this distrust may come to be justified, which may lead to unpredictable consequences.

The 2009 demonstrations, while could not change the regime (nor did they want to as the opposition forces themselves were within the system), were thus more challenging to the government than the regime – in spite of the fact that there was some anti-regime rhetoric as well. In a clear case of "adaptive authoritarianism" (Heydemann and Leenders 2011), this led to the partial co-optation of some of the legal opposition, and to the limited repression of others considered to be acting against the Islamic Republic. In the aftermath, however, new cadres were included in both the reformist and conservative camps. Still, especially following Rouhani's election, a "centralization" of the Iranian political spectrum can be observed. Namely, the two extremes have increasingly been side-lined, and factions from both sides have moved closer to the centre. Thus, instead

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of the reformers, the pragmatists; and instead of the conservatives, the so-called moderate conservatives, have come to influence the mainstream of politics. While it can be argued that Khamenei is the centre of the right/conservatives himself, the fact that despite all the caution as to giving names of possible candidates for the eventual post-Khamenei era no hard-line conservative person has been mentioned (up to President Trump's announcement of the withdrawal from the Iranian nuclear deal and the restoration of US sanctions), may be an indication of Iranian society's turning away from hard-line policies. It remains to be seen what impact Trump's policies will have on these developments. Many analysts fear that a turn back towards the more conservative ways of decision-making can be expected and, as has already been noted, public opinion has taken a much more reserved stance towards the USA.

Therefore, the regime is bending to a certain extent to (mass) public opinion on the one hand, while co-opting and keeping the opposition within on the other. Can co-opting the opposition, therefore, be perceived as a new flexibility? Or is it part of the natural flexibility that the Iranian system has always performed?

The December 2017 protests posed challenges to the government again – in spite of some sporadic anti-regime rhetoric. On the one hand, they seemed to be cases of spontaneous mass mobilization, which sporadically are still going on. (According to information provided in closed discussions, between December 2017 and October 2018, some 80,000 protesters took part in unrelated demonstrations in some 80 different places around the country.) Though they broke out over economic grievances (unemployment, corruption, the insufficient economic benefits of the nuclear deal) and not political ones, by exposing the government's inability to satisfy economic concerns they had a political relevance as well. The second Rouhani government was challenged both over the lack of economic gains expected from the nuclear deal, and over the insufficient jobs available, especially for the youth and educated. The main topic of the presidential election campaign was unemployment, and in the inauguration of Rouhani in August 2017, Khamenei focused on the need to prioritize the living conditions of the Iranian population, which undoubtedly was a clear indication to Rouhani that little (or not enough) had been done to improve domestic issues since the signing of the nuclear deal in 2015.

On the other hand, the December protests were used by the conservatives, among them Ebrahim Raisi, the opponent candidate for the presidency, to directly attack the Rouhani government for its incompetence and failure to make good on its election campaign promises – implying, at the same time, that the latter's liberal economic policies could not bring about the desired economic results. (Raisi was supposed to be the favourite of Ayatollah Khamenei, and, being the head of the Emam Reza Foundation in Meshhed, where the demonstrations started, many thought that he would have been behind the demonstrations by using the charity network of the foundation.) The protests were thus widely considered as an open effort by one power centre to embarrass (or even bring down) the government. However, although they tried to capitalize on the demonstrations, it soon became clear that by pushing too hard the protests may get out of control, which would produce a deeper crisis within the system, and would threaten regime stability and survival. Even this way, many presumed that the regime was on the brink of collapse – yet it again proved resilient.

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In spite of the power struggles within the system, the capabilities of state institutions have not been seen to decrease. Nevertheless, there is growing discussion of who/what follows after Ayatollah Khamenei: a new supreme leader (if so, who?) or, in accordance with the constitution, a leadership council. There is even a theological debate about the role of the *velayat-e faqih* within the *hawzas* or religious seminaries in Qom, but so far this has not become a political debate in Tehran. In spite of the social challenges to the system, as reflected by the December 2017 protests targeting the incapacity of the government to deliver the main promises of the Islamic revolution – social justice, reduction of social inequities, redistribution of oil wealth – the regime has proved resilient. Although the authorities complain about external powers inciting disquiet among the minorities, government officials as well as some in academia (in the course of interviews conducted in Tehran)[15] have dismissed the idea that any meaningful ethnic resistance could arise. ("Even the Supreme Leader is Azeri" was said in reference to this by one interlocutor.)[16] Yet, the fact that ethnic differences may eventually become a security concern was manifest when one speaker was hushed by another when the relationship between Azeris and Kurds was brought up, the latter claiming that it was a non-issue.[17]

Drug dealers' influence on the eastern borders, the eventual lack of control on the Iraq–Iran border, especially in the Kurdistan provinces, as well as the recent terrorist attacks in Tehran (June 2017) and Ahvaz (September 2018), are considered more in the domestic context and prove that the Iranian state is firmly in control of its territorial integrity. (However, as one interviewee said in October 2018, should such attacks follow, this could undermine the stability of the Iranian state.)

This is due to several different factors. First, statehood goes back to ancient times, with its specific Iranian and/or Persian cultural heritage, and a renewed awareness of it today. "Iranianness" constitutes an integral part of the regional power status, as well as Islam. Shiite Islam, however, which is a distinctive characteristic of the Iranian society both inside and outside the country, rather limits Iranian room for manoeuvre. No wonder that Ayatollah Khomeini emphasized the "Islamic" revolution. The Iranian and the Islamic characters are influenced by the sense of modernity, both in the political and technical sense – thus providing an important third element of national pride and identity. The regime successfully uses all three elements in its rhetoric, both domestically to strengthen regime stability and externally when building alliances and asserting its influence.

Second, the Iranian state has no armed non-state actor to challenge its authority within the country. The *Mojahedin-e Khalq* (MEK), an organization considered to be terrorist by all segments of Iranian society, and on the list of terrorist organizations of the European Union but which has recently been removed from the US list of terrorist organizations, has been operating outside Iran. (The Iranian society and public stand united in their absolute rejection, and even abhorrence of the MEK; therefore, if Trump is building part of his Iranian regime-change policy on them, he is doomed to fail from the beginning.) So far, the regime has also been successful in involving the almost 50 per cent of ethnic minorities within the system.

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15  Interviews were conducted in Tehran with a 18-35 year old female intellectual, three 35-65 year old male intellectuals, and two 35-65 year old pro-government politicians (officials).

16  Interview with a 35-65 year old male intellectual.

17  Interviews with a 18-35 year old female intellectual and a 35-65 year old male intellectual.

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Third, when regime survival is at stake – especially following Trump's announcement of the US withdrawal from the Iranian nuclear deal and the consequent international uncertainties over how to proceed – the resilience of the *velayat-e faqih* proves itself and, against most expectations, under such outside pressure the Iranian political elites are closing ranks and putting internal debates aside. And in spite of any misgivings that some layers of the Iranian society may have against the regime, the public, which has become increasingly sceptical about the USA, follows in kind.

The second phase of the restoration of the secondary US sanctions targeting the Iranian banking system, oil exports and shipping was introduced at the beginning of November 2018, with a six-month grace period for the main US ally purchasers of Iranian oil (e.g. Japan, South Korea, Italy and Turkey). The scenario proposed by the Trump administration foresees the total collapse of the Iranian economy and the absolute capitulation of the Islamic Republic, including regime change. This, however, is not likely in the short to medium term.

In the other scenario, while the Iranian economy and population will be severely affected – probably even more than by the UN Security Council sanctions from before 2015 – the disagreement of the other global powers with the US decision will give some room for manoeuvre to Iran to increasingly interconnect with the international system. Key actors will be China and India, as the biggest importers from Iran (bringing money in), and the EU, which still tries to provide a balance to the USA (a western counterbalance). In comparison, Russia will be of secondary importance as it is mostly an exporter to Iran (taking money out). In the Iranian calculus, referred to by several interviewees both in Tehran and among Iranian intellectuals abroad, adaptation to these new sanctions is already underway and Iran will be able to withstand them. In spite of the disappointment with the government, the relatively young Iranian society (with approximately 40 per cent of the population under 25)[18] is not expected to take a harsh turn back to the conservative revolutionarism of the Islamic Revolution. Carefully easing limitations on social freedom and increasing interconnections to the world will help ensure the survival of the *velayat-e faqih* into the fifth decade of the Islamic Republic.

## CONCLUSIONS

This report has shown how authoritarianism has persisted in three major countries in the contemporary Middle East and North Africa since 2011. The trajectories of the authoritarian regimes in these three countries differ significantly, suggesting that there is not just a single form of autocratic governance in the MENA region today but that authoritarianism persists in multiple ways. In Egypt, the military has dominated political decision-making since independence, and has remained the single-most important institution in the authoritarian restoration that the country has witnessed since 2011. In Saudi Arabia, the royal family has retained control of all political decision-making since the creation of the state in the early 20th century, and remains the key actor in the most recent transformations of the authoritarian regime. However, the increased power concentration in the person of the crown prince has come at the expense of the wider royal family and important clients such as the clerical establishment and prominent business

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18  See Index Mundi website: *Iran Demographics Profile 2018*, https://shar.es/aaVhRv.

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families. In Iran, the political elite that constitutes the core of the regime has been drawn from the religiously inspired revolutionaries, with the supreme leader of the Islamic Revolution – a religious personality with the acknowledged capability to interpret divine law – at the centre. (Shiite) Islam and secular revolutionarism have been the underlying ideological elements of the Islamic Republic in its current reconfiguration, in which Allah is still presented as the main legislator, but popular will is expressed in direct elections. This dual model of the *velayat-e faqih* has proved surprisingly resilient to a wide range of challenges and flexible enough to ensure its further survival.

The level of repression and the forms of exclusion, co-optation and coercion employed by the three authoritarian regimes have also differed since 2011. In Egypt, repression and exclusion have increased significantly in the wake of the coup in 2013. In his analysis, Boserup concludes that Egypt today experiences a hardened form of authoritarianism which, in spite of recurrent elections, in its actual forms of repression, exclusion and control surpasses the type of liberalizing autocracy that developed in the final years of Hosni Mubarak's rule prior to 2011. In Saudi Arabia, the direct repression and exclusion practices exercised by the regime through the state agencies have increased sharply since 2011. Hence, Woertz and Hasan conclude that a new and increasingly personalized regime has emerged with the rise of the new crown prince Mohammed Bin Salman, which has enacted some cultural and social reform, while crushing the limited spaces of expression with relentless authoritarianism. In Iran the picture is different. Here repression seems to have decreased since mass repression was unleashed against political protestors in 2009. The increasingly free election campaigns in 2016 to the *Majles-e Showra-ye Eslami* and in 2017 for the president, reveal for N. Rózsa and Zaccara a disposition towards a further "democratization" of the regime even if keeping the basic model in place.

Seen from a European policy perspective, it is tempting to consider the current persistence of authoritarianism in a number of states as a convenient bulwark against a potential spill over of terrorism and migration created by the current turmoil in the region. MENA countries, in which the authoritarian regimes have survived, endured or adapted as in Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Iran, though for different reasons, have generally proven an obstacle in the way of mass migration out of the region. Though each of them has been exposed to at least some terrorist attacks, on the whole they have, across the decades, succeeded in repressing or containing jihadists and other armed groups operating on their territories. In the long term, however, it is less evident that authoritarianism works in favour of European policy interests.

On the one hand, the stability provided by authoritarian regimes seems at best to be temporal. Upheld through repression, co-optation, exclusion and manipulation, history has proven time and again that the authoritarian regimes in the MENA region are fundamentally unstable and liable to generate the preconditions that spark new uprisings, armed insurgencies and emigration.

On the other hand, it is not clear either that Europe will actually benefit from a continuation of authoritarianism in its southern neighbourhood. While democracies have historically been fully capable of collaborating closely with authoritarian regimes on important policy areas, including security and economy, authoritarian regimes perceive threats differently than democracies and are in the long run likely to act differently on these points as well (Diamond et al. 2016, Burrows and Stephan 2015). The recent examples of assassinations of dissidents exiled in Europe and the

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US are the most spectacular parts of this divergence in policy matters.

So what can the EU and its partners do? Rather than suggesting precise policy suggestions, we shall in the last paragraphs of this report point out a few possible country-specific avenues of thinking and reflection.

In Egypt's restored and hardening autocracy, the EU should continue to support and, to whatever extent possible, shelter actors for reform, rights defenders and critical voices from civil society. It is also important that the wider international society continues to insist on the need for the Egyptian government to attempt to negotiate a more viable compromise with its imprisoned political opposition groups – ranging from the repressed and outlawed Muslim Brotherhood to secular activists and critical journalists and defenders of civil and human rights.

In doing so, international actors must, however, accept that Egypt is unlikely to see liberal democracy emerging anytime soon. Until that situation possibly changes, the best way forward seems to be to encourage and assist the regime to choose a path that leads to the above-described scenario of expanding the freedoms and rights within the current regime, allowing a gradual increase of freedoms and rights to emerge under a liberalizing or reforming authoritarian system. To point out one crucial element for such a development, international society could seek ways to foster a new political culture in Egypt. As a prerequisite for any reform to take place, the regime must change its military-inspired perception of politics itself. It must replace its current idea of conflict, opposition, plurality of opinions and fracturing of the body politic as intrinsically harmful, with a perception of politics in which such differences are understood as necessary elements in the construction of stable political order and a social contract in which diverging views, interests and orientations are welcomed.

Even if successful, such a step will of course not bring about liberal democracy in Egypt anytime soon. But it may provide a stepping stone for the regime to embark on a path towards reform rather than further hardening.

In Saudi Arabia, the EU faces different challenges. The EU does not figure prominently in the strategic thinking of the Gulf (and vice versa). It is not perceived as a unified actor, apart from in trade politics. Statements such as "the EU cannot deliver" or "the Europeans y are not unified" were frequent in our interviews.[19] At the same time, there was hope that Europe would actually play a more prominent role, as it is perceived as a moderating voice in global affairs.[20] However, hard security remains the prerogative of nation-states, yet even large European states such as the UK, France and Germany struggle to carry enough weight in a world in which emerging powers have gained in influence and the importance of the sole remaining superpower, the USA, remains paramount in an unstable region. Attempts to formulate unified European foreign policy stances and coordinate them accordingly are urgently needed if Europe wants to play a more prominent role in the region. This will be challenging, as the European country with the most longstanding ties to the Gulf, the UK, will soon leave the EU and the Gulf perceives the European stance on the

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19  Interview by Hasan with a Gulf pro-government politician (male, 18-35 years), London, April 2018.

20  Interview by Hasan with a Lebanese IGO's official (female, 18-35 years old), Beirut, April 2018.

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Iranian nuclear question as too soft – and, for at least some Gulf Arab countries, entirely against their security interests.

In Iran, the EU faces the same challenge as when confronting other great powers in the Middle East and North Africa: lack of credibility or capability for being a unified global actor. By firmly standing by the Iranian nuclear deal in spite of the US posture, leading officials of the EU have remained unified, but European business circles have adopted a more ambiguous and in some cases negative posture. The hybrid authoritarian regime in Iran has on its side moved away from the extremes towards the centre, and although the framework of the regime – the *velayat-e faqih* – has not been meaningfully challenged, political pluralism and relative freedom of expression in everyday life have increased to some extent within the existing framework. In contrast to the above-noted absence of the EU in Gulf Arab strategic thinking, the EU remains a focus of attention for Iranian foreign policy thinking. Should the EU be able to find ways to keep the nuclear deal alive and help Iran survive the re-imposition of sanctions by the USA, it would not only contribute to global nuclear non-proliferation norms, but would also assist domestic political trends in Iran to continue their reform-oriented pathways.

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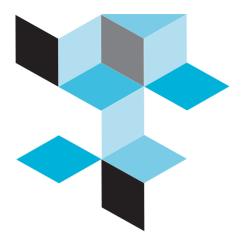
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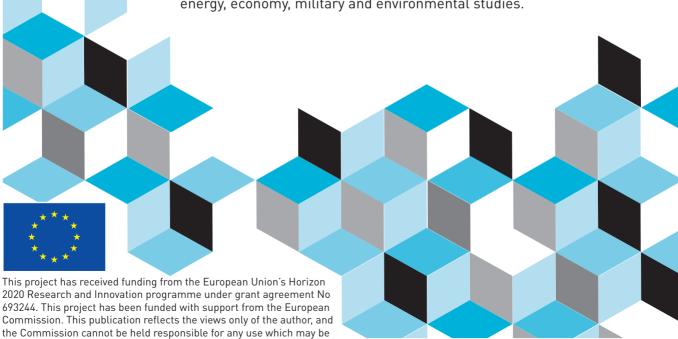
**Middle East and North Africa Regional Architecture: Mapping geopolitical shifts, regional order and domestic transformations (MENARA)** is a research project that aims to shed light on domestic dynamics and bottom-up perspectives in the Middle East and North Africa amid increasingly volatile and uncertain times.

**MENARA** maps the driving variables and forces behind these dynamics and poses a single all-encompassing research question: Will the geopolitical future of the region be marked by either centrifugal or centripetal dynamics or a combination of both? In answering this question, the project is articulated around three levels of analysis (domestic, regional and global) and outlines future scenarios for 2025 and 2050. Its final objective is to provide EU Member States policy makers with valuable insights.

**MENARA** is carried out by a consortium of leading research institutions in the field of international relations, identity and religion politics, history, political sociology, demography, energy, economy, military and environmental studies.