



Managed Successions and Stability in the Arab World

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» Arab dictators are about to take their leave. A decade after a wave of monarchical successions, in which young kings such as Abdullah in Jordan and Mohammed VI in Morocco succeeded their deceased fathers on the throne, the region now stands before a wave of engineered republican successions. While developments in the Mashreq are daily news, the outlook of dynastic republicanism in the Maghreb has come along in a much quieter fashion. Due to age or sickness, a whole generation of strongmen leaders have been grooming their sons or close confidantes to replace them in due time to ensure the perpetuation of interests and power structures in the years to come. Among them are many key Western allies the EU and US have so far relied upon. New leaderships in regional hubs such as Egypt could turn the West's plans in the region upside down. A power struggle in one of the so-called bulwarks of stability such as Tunisia would add yet another problem to the region's long list of hotspots. Change will also come to regional Achilles' heels such as Algeria or Yemen, which have been causing the West plenty of headaches due to recent, present or looming conflicts and their troubles in containing terrorism. Who comes after the incumbents, and how prospective new rulers will deal with Western interests, remains an unanswered question.

In the meantime, the West is twiddling its thumbs. The EU and US are largely sitting back and hoping for smooth and uneventful successions. Whether or not power transfers will be democratic has not been a primary Western concern. Continuity, so the common assumption goes, means stability. But even if incumbent Arab rulers manage to engineer smooth successions, it is far from certain that this will lead to a perpetuation of Western strategic interests. New heirs are likely to be less accepted than their incumbent fathers, ruling elites are on high alert as the 'national cake' is up for grabs, and public resistance to dynastic successions is rising. As Western powers are forced finally to reassess their traditional alliances with Arab autocrats in an ever fragile Middle East, the chances for instability, disruption and seismic change – for good or for bad – are great. Yet how likely is it that continuity will bring stability?

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Contrary to a common static interpretation of the term, ‘stability’ is here understood not as the absence of change (continuity), but as a minimum of reliability and dependability. In geopolitical terms, from a Western policy perspective, stability would be given in the absence of violent conflict and other fundamental, immediate threats to key Western interests.

This paper assesses the various scenarios of republican presidential succession in the region and explores the sources of instability these prospective leadership changes may bring about. Which are the mechanisms that engineered successions typically follow? Who are the prospective new leaders, what are their chances of obtaining and sustaining power, and what impact might their rule have on the region’s fragile power balance? And finally: which are the main risk factors for instability deriving from the wave of successions, and how can the West contribute to reducing these risks?

Patterns of managed republican succession

›› Managed presidential succession in a republic is complex and risky for the incumbent to engineer. Unlike in monarchies, there is no formal mechanism in place (such as primogeniture or seniorate) that legitimately determines the leader’s successor on the basis of kinship. As the prospect of succession potentially puts the ‘national cake’ up for grabs after decades of stagnation, the run-up to succession is often characterised by fierce power struggles inside and outside the ruling elites. In order to position their favourites and protect their interests beyond the current strongman’s rule, elites have been using mechanisms and tactics that – the uniqueness and complexity of each country’s individual succession scenario notwithstanding – present a number of common features.

Hale provides a useful model of how successions in a system of ‘patronal presidentialism’ (a formally centralised presidency in which the president also holds considerable informal powers and resources to reward his loyal entourage and punish opponents) are following ‘regime cycles’ of political contestation, rather than a sequence of linear ‘progress’ or ‘transition’.¹ The expectation of an approaching leadership change results in a period of elite defection, which Hale calls the ‘lame duck syndrome’: elites close to the ruler enter a period of inner struggles in which they have to re-calculate their loyalties according to whom they expect to win. Once the successor has been determined, loyalties switch immediately to the new ruler, who is eventually able to punish disloyals and consolidate his rule. The consolidation lasts until the next leadership change looms, be it through term limits, age or sickness, or other factors that may end the incumbent’s rule.

1. Henry E. Hale, ‘Regime Cycles: Democracy, Autocracy and Revolution in Post-Soviet Eurasia’, *World Politics* 58, October 2005, pp.133-165.

Elites' expectation of an approaching succession leads to a cyclic dynamic of contestation and consolidation: a new ruler may allow democratic openings in the direct aftermath of succession in order to consolidate his position with the public and wipe out disloyal elements among the elite. Once he is firmly in power, the regime is likely to close up again and return to classical autocracy.²

In reference to post-Soviet Eurasian republics, Hale argues that 'Colour Revolutions' took place in some of these countries but not in others in large part because 'the two sets of countries were in different phases of a cyclical process of elite contestation and consolidation'.³ In today's Middle East, the cycle of succession-liberalisation-crackdown can be observed, too. The current period of closing of the political space in most of the region could be seen as characteristic of the end of the cyclical regime consolidation phase leading up to succession. Increasing power struggles among elites in the whole region suggest that the 'lame duck syndrome' of shifting loyalties is in full bloom. After succession, new rulers can be expected to embark on a fresh wave of political liberalisation, and eventually close up again to consolidate their power. Past and current experiences of MENA managed successions appear to confirm Hale's suggestions.

Prospective successors, be they a relative, spouse or close confidante of the incumbent, are often young, Western-educated individuals who try to position themselves early on as dynamic reformists and agents of change. Projecting the image of a fresh, modern reformist, aspirants to either throne or presidency inspire trust and the hope for some sort of new awakening, thereby alleviating to some degree the uneasiness, both domestically and abroad, about engineered and/or dynastic succession. At the same time, liberalising reforms under the banner of anti-corruption, rule of law or human rights are a convenient way for the new ruler to purge members of the old guard and root out political challengers to consolidate his own position. When in the late 1990s the Arab world saw five young heirs succeeding their fathers (in Qatar, Morocco, Jordan, Bahrain and Syria) over a period of only a few years, they all started off with a vigorous reformist discourse. The promise of regional economic and political transformation inherent in this seismic power shift also helped the young monarchs to become 'darlings of the US administration after 2001 in part because of their reformist credentials',⁴ and to enjoy the substantial benefits of enhanced trade, development and military cooperation. Once in power, the new rulers' reformist drive fulminated quickly.

Prospective successors need to strike a careful balance between distancing themselves from their predecessors' controversial policies. In doing so, they aim to accommodate the public's concerns on the one hand, and reassure key elites and international allies of continuity, on the other. The careful building up of a thematic niche (e.g. human rights, economic reform) helps them to claim credentials and prove their leadership potential in a popular policy area well ahead of the succession moment.

When first taking up office, most incumbent MENA presidents were able to draw their legitimacy largely from their personal and historical legacy. Nasser used his revolutionary



2. Hale (2005), *op. cit.*

3. *Ibid.*

4. Michele Dunne and Marina Ottaway, 'Incumbent Regimes and the "King's Dilemma" in the Arab World', Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2007.

credentials, Sadat upgraded his powers after the war against Israel and the peace process, and Mubarak was able to draw on his role as a leader of the air force in the war of 1971. The new heirs, by contrast, cannot usually draw on such historical resources, and need to find new sources of legitimacy. As most republics in the region are liberalised autocracies, heirs apparent try to draw formal legitimacy from an engineered electoral process. As the public is fully aware of the democratic flaws of this process, however, additional sources of legitimacy and back-up are necessary. Decades of incumbent MENA leaders' rule have arguably left little of their initial legitimacy. Personality cult, propaganda and overwhelming security apparatuses, however, have surrounded them with a sense of 'inevitability'. Young heirs lack both this inevitability and the loyalties of their predecessors, and need actively to strike new deals with both the elites and the public in order to justify their rule.

Carrying varying degrees of personal political aspirations, several young heirs have been criticised for their personal weakness and lack of leadership, experience or charisma. Formal and informal structures, however, play just as important a role in determining succession as the characteristics of the individual leader. Typically, dynastic succession is assumed *per se* to reinforce authoritarianism. While this might be true in tendency, however, it has been argued that, depending on both structural conditions and the successor himself, the outlook for sustained political liberalisation may be better in some cases of dynastic succession than in equally undemocratic successions taking place outside of the family.⁵

The degree to which succession represents a threat to regime continuity is heavily influenced by the level of centralisation of power in the presidency. Past successors have been able to consolidate their position very quickly, in large part because of the centralised nature of the system and the strong concentration of authority in the presidential office. For example, while the oligarchic Algerian regime has comparatively little to fear from a succession prospect, in a highly centralised presidential system like Egypt, regime survival is much more closely tied to the choice for one successor or another.

In most cases, the key actors in deciding on the succession are likely to be the informal ruling elites. Democratically illegitimate heirs must therefore carefully avoid endangering key elites' and their clients' entrenched interests. A minimum backing from the security apparatus (military, intelligence, police), the business elites, tribal networks and/or the ruling party apparatus will be crucial for the prospective successor not only to be allowed into power, but also to remain there in the longer term.

Prospective successors also need the backing of the country's major international allies. By formal and informal means, incumbents attempt to involve their sons/favourites early in negotiations with their international partners, gaining the latter's trust and reassuring them that the basic parameters of the alliance, including security and trade arrangements, will not be put at risk. The approval of allies largely depends on the level of cooperation on key interests expected from heirs apparent, and their respective alternatives. Evidence from US and EU relations with the region's incumbent autocrats shows that the perspective of smooth cooperation on key regional security issues substantially reduces concerns over the democratic credentials of the ruler.

5. See Tarek Masoud, 'Is Gamal Mubarak the Best Hope for Egyptian Democracy?', *Foreign Policy online*, 20 September 2010.

An election is a focal point that draws international attention to a domestic succession scenario. This increased attention renders a too obviously engineered succession more difficult, at least if keeping up the façade of democratic republicanism is an aim. For tactical reasons, some leaders therefore prefer to let the succession happen outside of the electoral spotlight. For this purpose, a more low-profile consensual interim leader may win the elections, and eventually pass on power (formally or informally) to the actual heir, thus guaranteeing a smooth transfer of power free from the glare of widespread attention. Tools to prepare for this option include the adoption of constitutional amendments that provide, in the case of the ruler's incapacity or death, for an automatic transfer of power to a designated successor within the state's top governance structures.

A smoothly engineered succession seems to be more likely when the heir apparent can be invested with power while his predecessor still rules the country. Legal and constitutional reforms ahead of the succession that install the prospective heir in an important office, or otherwise aim smoothly to prepare his way to the top within the formal governance structures, may do the trick. Prospective successors typically follow a meteoric career path in the country's elite structures in the run-up to the succession, taking up leading positions in the ruling party, the military or other key domains. This not only raises their profile but also gives them a chance to prove their credentials, and build up loyal constituencies independent from their predecessor's, well ahead of the succession.

A 'dual succession track'⁶ ensures a backup should one succession option not work out. By design or default, incumbent fathers have frequently groomed two or more sons, other relatives or confidantes for succession (for example Hafez al-Assad, Saddam Hussein or Muammar al-Gaddafi). The various prospective heirs' profiles may cover different constituencies, with each of them enjoying a strong backing in the military, the civilian political establishment, or the business elites, respectively. Leaving the succession decision open until the last moment can be tactically wise, as the variety of options keeps different constituencies at bay.

Not only the key elites, but also the public's demands need to be kept in check in the run-up to succession. As rising public demand for democratic participation and greater mobilisation in the Arab world clashes with socio-economic precariousness and stagnating levels of democratic governance, heirs apparent need to contain public demand for accountability ever more forcefully. The degree of public resistance, and hence the likeliness of dynastic succession failing, depends inter alia on the capacity of civil society and the opposition to mobilise for the common cause against dynastic succession, and on the state's capacity to counter these protests. But even where civic capacity is on the rise, MENA regimes are at an advantage thanks to their overpowering security apparatuses. Unfortunately, after decades of practice, the *mukhabarat's* ('intelligence'; state security apparatus) capacity to routinely repress dissent still easily outweighs the weak capacity of civil society even in the few MENA countries where the latter is comparatively dynamic (e.g. Egypt or Morocco). However, the political cost of the sustained use of force against public mobilisation is great, and public dissent cannot be contained indefinitely.⁷ In order to keep the masses at bay through non-violent means, unpopular rulers need to seek alternatives to the legitimacy they lack due to the absence of a democratic electoral process. >>>

6. Larbi Sadiki, 'Like Father, Like Son. Dynastic Republicanism in the Middle East', Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2009.

Syria, ten years on

»» Against the background of these loosely common features, turning to a concrete case of a successfully engineered hereditary republican succession – that of Syrian President Hafez al-Assad’s power transfer to his son Bashar in 2000 – may provide some useful insights. How did the Syrian succession succeed? And more importantly: a decade on, has Bashar fulfilled expectations? What impact has his rule had on domestic reform and regional security?

Stepping in upon his brother Basil’s sudden death, Bashar al-Assad came to be groomed for the presidency almost accidentally. A London-based ophthalmologist with no political aspirations or experience, Bashar was abruptly recalled to Syria following Basil’s death in 1994 and went through a rushed military career before succeeding his father upon the latter’s demise in 2000. During the six years he was groomed for power, he remained an enigma to the public. This may have helped to position him as a relatively uncontroversial consensus candidate. Hafez al-Assad also refrained from appointing Bashar officially as his successor, thereby avoiding threatening or alarming anyone. Criticised right from the start for his lack of charisma, experience and political backing, Bashar has been seen by some as having been groomed for succession by default, in the absence of any suitable alternative. Others claim his choice ‘resulted from a deliberate decision by Syria’s real powerbrokers to avoid a choice on the matter of succession ... [and] defer a decision to some point in the future [...], initiating what they saw as a transitional period between the Assad dynasty and a different era’.⁸ According to the latter reading, Bashar was deliberately chosen as the candidate representing short-term, inoffensive continuity. Despite initially lacking loyal constituencies of his own, after a few years in office Bashar succeeded in replacing his father’s old guard with his own loyal entourage.⁹

Bashar’s 2000 takeover spurred considerable debates in the Egyptian media over the likeliness of a similar hereditary succession in Egypt. Indeed, a number of similarities can be detected between both countries’ succession scenarios. Both Egypt and Syria have key regional roles, hence their successions attract substantial international attention. Both successions took place in a highly centralised presidential system. In both cases, the key actors in deciding on the succession were (or are likely to be, in the case of Egypt) the informal ruling elite of the state security apparatus. The fathers’ ability to contend with these elites and draw on the loyalty of the country’s top ranks was (or will be) crucial for a successful hereditary succession. Both heirs apparent pursued professions distant from state affairs and were initially said to entertain few personal political aspirations. Both heirs enjoyed a fast and largely effortless rise in the ranks of the establishment (Gamal in the NDP, Bashar in the military and the Baath Party). Both have been initially unpopular, described as uncharismatic and not up to the job. Both tried – at least initially – to position themselves as modern agents of change, collecting

7. Hale (2005), op.cit.

8. Eyal Zisser, ‘Does Bashar al-Assad Rule Syria?’, *The Middle East Quarterly*, Winter 2003, pp. 15-23.

9. See Dunne and Ottaway (2007), op.cit.

credit for new initiatives in political and economic reform. Both appeared to enjoy tacit but unenthusiastic support from at least some of the national power brokers. The idea of having them as interim candidates until somebody better was found was often raised. In both cases, there were several other unofficial candidates much more experienced, better liked and trusted (e.g. Hafez' brother Rif'at in Syria; intelligence chief Omar Suleyman in Egypt). Widespread doubts over the sustainability of Bashar's rule persisted well after his coming to power, and are likely to continue in the case of Gamal, should he become president.¹⁰

One of the most notable differences between both cases is that the reformist image that helped Bashar to gain acceptance is not likely to work in today's Egypt. Experiences of the past decade, including in Syria, have largely discredited the model of the 'reformist heir'. Egypt's opposition is far more vibrant, organised and free; its expectations are higher; and there has been an explicit anti-dynastic-succession movement.

Ten years after succeeding his father, contrary to widespread predictions, Bashar al-Assad is still in office and has been able to consolidate his personal power. Bashar's domestic human rights and political reform record has been disastrous. His initial pledges for political reform in the wake of the brief 'Damascus Spring' faded out quickly. Economic reform has been weak as industries remain heavily state-controlled and an estimated half of the population is government-employed. A weak leader with low domestic and international legitimacy and a lack of clear vision is, the Syrian experience seems to suggest, likely to enhance instability, especially if the country plays a key role in regional security arrangements. The inoffensiveness that paved Bashar's way to the presidency eventually prevented him from meaningfully continuing any reform policy that the ruling establishment perceived as a threat.

Bashar's initially weak position also left a negative footprint on his foreign policy, with his first years witnessing a deterioration in Damascus' relationship with the US and the majority of its Arab allies, including Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Jordan.¹¹ Syria under Bashar's rule continues to be known to support militant Islamist and anti-Israeli groups. Syria's involvement in the assassination of anti-Syrian Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri in 2005 led to a major regional crisis which triggered the Cedar Revolution in Lebanon. Syria's ongoing attempts to control Lebanon continue to present a regional factor of insecurity. While Bashar was forced to withdraw troops from Lebanon, his alliance with Iran and his lack of progress in approaching peace with Israel are sources of permanent concern in the West. After a decade of Bashar's rule, the volatility of Damascus' foreign policy in almost all matters of Western interest makes Syria a difficult player to deal with. Even after several years of 'engagement', EU and US policy communities are still wondering which path Syria will choose.¹²

For the West, the main lesson to be learned from Syria's engineered succession appears to be that regime continuity does not necessarily lead to more stability. Both Bashar's personal profile and the formal and informal structures that he was faced with have contributed to the fact that a decade on, Syria has consolidated itself domestically as one of the harshest and most repressive regimes in the Arab world, and internationally as a volatile regional player that adds to the region's fragility.

10. Zisser (2003), op cit.

11. Ibid.

12. See also 'Reshuffling the cards: Syria's evolving strategy', International Crisis Group, December 2009.

Looming change in the MENA

EGYPT: Mubarak's final curtain call

»» The most imminent of the MENA successions, and perhaps the most significant one, is the possible end of the Hosni Mubarak era in Egypt with the September 2011 presidential elections. The outlook of real change has held the country in a tense stalemate for the last couple of years. In the Middle East's most populous country, most people have not known any president other than Mubarak, who is 82 and in visibly ailing health. Multiple hospital stays and other public signs of physical weakness (including fainting in front of the parliament) in recent years have underlined the urgency of the succession issue. Mubarak's son Gamal (47) has long been regarded as the sure heir. His coming to power is by no means certain, however, as public resistance to dynastic succession, and a deep rift within the ruling National Democratic Party (NDP) establishment, make a smooth, easy power transfer from father to son increasingly unlikely.

Systematic preparations over the last few years to position Mubarak junior as a modern, active statesman have left no doubts over his father's preferences. Gamal has enjoyed a meteoric rise in the NDP, now heading the influential policy committee and holding the post of vice secretary general. Constitutional amendments in 2005 and 2007 introduced very restrictive conditions for presidential candidates, thereby effectively limiting the circle of eligible candidates to Hosni and Gamal Mubarak and a handful of NDP stalwarts. On regular occasions, Hosni Mubarak has taken his son to high-level international meetings. In 2010, Gamal even sat – despite having no formal capacity to do so – around the table during the Arab-Israeli peace talks in Washington. Not only has such high-profile international activity been seen as preparing the ground for Gamal's takeover internationally; it also suggested to the Egyptian public that Gamal enjoys US endorsement.¹³

Mubarak's efforts to groom his son for the presidency have been met with considerable resistance. Gamal is neither a favourite with the public nor with the security establishment. The National Association for Change (NAC), a coalition of opposition forces led by Nobel Peace Prize laureate Mohamed ElBaradei, has been rallying to prevent an engineered succession. In spite of initially notable cooperation with the Muslim Brotherhood, however, the NAC ultimately failed both to unite the opposition and to mobilise the masses for the common cause. The ruling establishment is also far from being united behind Gamal. Many in Egypt's entrenched military elite will not easily agree to surrender control to a civilian president with no credentials to lead country and army. As a banker and advocate of economic reform, Gamal's ascension to power would be welcomed by those who expect from it further im-

13. See Caroline Sevier, 'The Costs of Relying on Ageing Dictators', *The Middle East Quarterly*, Summer 2008, pp. 13-22.

provements to Egypt's business environment. But far-reaching economic reforms would also bring him into conflict with the military establishment, which currently enjoys tax-exempt status and other advantages distorting competition to its favour. Competing pro-Gamal and pro-Suleyman poster campaigns, contradictory statements by senior NDP members, and the NDP's reluctance to announce its official presidential candidate, all provide further evidence that none of the possible candidates will receive the presidency on a silver platter.

Options for the Egyptian succession are likely to remain open until the very last minute. Often mentioned as an alternative to Gamal, intelligence chief Omar Suleyman is more of a consensus figure, and as Mubarak's chief negotiator for the Israel-Palestine dossier, he enjoys considerable experience and standing in one of the most important foreign affairs dossiers. He is often mentioned as a possible interim option to bridge Gamal's path to power should Hosni suddenly die. Whether he would finally stick to such a deal is less certain. Mohamed ElBaradei, having made his candidacy conditional upon fair constitutional amendments, is out of the race before even having entered. A military coup is rather unlikely, as the army is loyal to Mubarak and keen to keep current arrangements in place. This may change, however, if the prospective succession outcome were to endanger the military elite's considerable rents and prerogatives. For this reason, among others, a withdrawal of US military aid to Egypt is currently unlikely.¹⁴ A real and increasingly voiced option is that of Hosni Mubarak standing for yet another term. Given Mubarak's age and precarious health, however, this last resort for the NDP could only be a short-term interim solution to engineer a *de facto* transfer of power away from the electoral spotlight.

Among Mubarak's international allies, the prospect of Gamal succeeding his father is being met with mixed feelings. If Gamal were able to achieve and sustain power in Egypt, this would be expected to mean continuity in terms of both domestic authoritarian structures and Egypt's role as a regional mediator and power broker. The current ruling establishment, and especially the military, benefit from the status quo and would hardly risk losing the annual 1.6 billion dollars in financial and military aid that Egypt receives from the US for maintaining its alliance with Israel (or, as cynics say, for being 'America's Arab poodle').

The West's main concern is that a destabilisation of Egypt following Hosni Mubarak's death could bring a regime to the helm that is less favourable or even hostile to Egypt's traditional alliances, as would be expected of an Islamist-led government. In any case, the whirlwind whipped up over a potential Islamist takeover in Egypt is largely redundant: the Muslim Brotherhood's presence in the parliament is due to be significantly reduced in the coming session, and the regime's managed repression skills reduce their chances of attaining a parliamentary majority – let alone any government posts – to zero.

The outlook of a so obviously engineered dynastic transfer of power, however, sits uncomfortably with European pledges for its Southern neighbours' gradual democratic transformation. The largely passive posture the EU and US have been taking towards the succession will most likely lead them towards a tacit acceptance of Gamal or whomever is chosen as the regime's final candidate.



14. See Masoud (2010), op. cit.

2011 is likely to see an upgrade of EU-Egyptian relations under the so-called ‘advanced status’, entailing a symbolic diplomatic recognition next to substantial additional aid and trade advantages. Contrary to the pledges and principles President Obama outlined in his Cairo speech, US policies toward Egypt under his lead have been decidedly supportive and indulgent of the Mubarak government.¹⁵ More recently, the lack of progress in the peace process seems to have led the Obama administration to consider a stronger line on Egypt ahead of the 2010 parliamentary and 2011 presidential elections. The laudability of such measures notwithstanding, it remains to be seen if they will be isolated measures principally aiming to prop up the Obama administration’s damaged image in the region, or whether they herald deeper insights into the need for a broader reassessment of US-Egyptian relations. Free-riding on its regional role, the Mubarak regime has little to fear in terms of protest from the outside if it manages to engineer a dynastic succession. Western allies, it seems, see their safest option in relying on the devil they know.

TUNISIA: family business

Slightly younger than his Egyptian counterpart but reportedly in an equally fragile state of health, Tunisia’s President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali has been in office for 24 years. With Tunisia’s public space heavily controlled, the increasingly vivid debates on a post-Ben Ali era have been taking place largely through the grapevine. The president’s exact state of health is unclear, with some observers close to the Carthage Palace predicting that the vacancy of power is ‘imminent’.¹⁶ As Ben Ali has been maintaining tight personal control over Tunisian governance and has refrained from openly endorsing any favourites for his succession, the possibility of a sudden power vacuum following Ben Ali’s death is looming large. Maybe more than in any other MENA country, the political power at play in the Tunisian succession is largely a means for a handful of clans to secure substantial economic assets for themselves and their kin. An increasingly fierce power struggle between the clans linked to the president, each eager to feather their nest before the gates close, is underway.

The president’s second wife, Leila Trabelsi Ben Ali, has in recent years become notorious for her increasingly open attempts to position herself and her clan members in central positions of power. Indeed, the first lady and her family’s increasing involvement in central state affairs not only suggest a strong aspiration to power, but also a determination to secure the family’s share of Tunisia’s mafia-like business environment. In a 2009 book which was banned in Tunisia, two French journalists revealed the scope of Trabelsi’s involvement in Tunisia’s corrupt businesses, and suggested that a power-hungry Leila, not her husband, was calling the shots in the Palace of Carthage.¹⁷ Ben Ali’s son-in-law Sakhr El Materi’s position as another hopeful for Tunisia’s republican throne has been evolving over the last few years too. Having ‘arrived last at the national cous-cous’¹⁸ to share with the Ben Alis, the Trabelsis and a few other clans, the El Materi family has been remarkably efficient in spreading its tentacles across the Tunisian political and economic sphere in just a few years.

15. For a detailed overview of Western democracy support to Egypt, see Kristina Kausch, ‘Assessing International Democracy Assistance to Egypt’, FRIDE/World Movement for Democracy, May 2010.

16. ‘Ben Ali dirige-t-il encore la Tunisie?’, *Bakshish*, 2 December 2009.

17. Nicolas Beau and Catherine Graciet, ‘La régente de Carthage, main basse sur la Tunisie’, *La Découverte*, Paris 2009.

18. ‘Tunisie: Un pamphlet met en garde Ben ali contre sa succession programmée en profit de Sakhr Materi’, *Nawaat*, 14 June 2009.

Table: Looming successions in the Middle East and North Africa

COUNTRY	FORMAL SYSTEM OF GOVERNMENT	INCUMBENT RULER (AGE IN 2010)	IN POWER SINCE	PROSPECTIVE	OTHER CANDIDATES	SUCCESSION HORIZON	KEY ELITES
<i>Egypt</i>	Republic	President Hosni Mubarak (82)	1981	Gamal Mubarak; Hosni Mubarak	Omar Suleyman; Mohamed ElBaradei	Presidential elections in 2011 or president's death	State security apparatus; NDP
<i>Tunisia</i>	Republic	President Zine Al-Abidine Ben Ali (74)	1987	Sakhr El-Materi; Leila Ben Ali	Zine Al-Abidine Ben Ali; Kamel Marjouni; Trabelsi brothers	Presidential elections in 2014 or president's death	Ben Ali, Trabelsi, El-Materi families
<i>Saudi Arabia</i>	Islamic absolute monarchy	King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz Al Saud (86)	2005	Crown Prince Sultan bin Abdul Aziz Al Saud	Saudi succession line (agnatic seniority)	King's death	Al Saud family; Ulema
<i>Algeria</i>	Republic	President Abdelaziz Bouteflika (73)	1999	Said Bouteflika	Ahmed Ouyahia; Abdelaziz Ziari	Presidential elections in 2014 or president's death	Military
<i>Yemen</i>	Republic	President Ali Abdullah Saleh (64)	1978 (-1990, North Yemen); 1999	Ahmed al-Saleh	Hashed tribe	Presidential elections in 2013; state failure / secession	Hashed tribe; military
<i>Oman</i>	Sultanate (Islamic absolute monarchy)	Sultan Qaboos bin Said al Said (69)	1970	To be chosen (upon Qaboos' sealed recommendation) by Ruling Family Council upon sultan's death	n/a	Sultan's death	Sa'id family
<i>Libya</i>	'Socialist Arab Jamahiriya'	'Brotherly Leader and Guide of the Revolution' Muammar al-Gaddafi (68)	1969	Saif el-Islam Gaddafi; Mu'atassim Gaddafi	Gaddafi family	Unclear	Gaddafi family; tribes

Preparations to pave the way for succession have been abundant. Leila Trabelsi has been busy installing family and close confidantes in positions of power, thereby strategically ensuring the necessary backing in the event of a sudden power vacuum. Some observers deem it likely that Ben Ali is about to create the position of vice president by constitutional amendment specifically for Leila, in order to facilitate her access to power. Whether or not Leila actually aspires to succeed her husband personally or seeks to place one of her eleven brothers in the role remains a matter of speculation.

Following his wedding to Ben Ali's daughter Nesrine in 2004, Sakhr El Materi has taken root in both Tunisian business and politics at the speed of light. El Materi's company Princess Holdings with shares in the media, banking, automobile, shipping, real estate and agricultural sectors, has become one of the largest companies in Tunisia in only five years. Sakhr's political career has been just as speedy: in 2008 he became a member of the ruling *Rassemblement Constitutionnel Démocratique's* (RCD) Central Committee, and, in 2009, at the age of 29, a member of parliament. He has been collecting political credentials, notably aiding the regime's attempts to 'reclaim Islam' from Islamist influence by setting up a number of 'Islamic' enterprises, such as a broadly successful Islamic radio station, a national Islamic TV channel and an Islamic Bank, among others, all under the label 'Zeytouna' ('olive', after Tunis' famous mosque). These activities have widely been interpreted as Sakhr's contribution to the regime's efforts to exploit the messages of popular Islam for its own PR purposes. Others take El Materi's devout efforts at face value and see in them an indicator that an El Materi presidency would be pro-Islamist. A controversial figure nicknamed 'the brat' (*le gamin; le gosse*) by Tunisians, some see in El Materi the future presidential heir. Others doubt his chances and instead ascribe to him the role of Leila Trabelsi's 'fundraiser'.¹⁹

Any of Tunis' many presidential hopefuls will have to negotiate considerable material trade-offs with the competing factions to become the heir apparent. At the co-initiative of El Materi, a public call ('Appeal of 1000') was recently issued to Ben Ali to run for another term in the 2014 presidential elections. For this to happen, the Constitution would have to be amended to raise the maximum age for the president to 75. Obviously an initiative concerted with Ben Ali himself, the aim of this appeal is both to legitimise a possible forthcoming constitutional amendment and to keep debate in check by leaving Tunisians in no doubt that Ben Ali still has the reins in his hands. If his health allows it, the fierce clan competition may even induce him actually to run once again in order eventually to ensure a smooth takeover by one of his more mature family members.²⁰ In the meantime, Ben Ali has carefully made sure that nobody in his close entourage is able to consolidate too high a profile, for example by frequently shuffling cabinet positions and punishing anyone who dares openly to raise questions about a post-Ben Ali era. Like his homologues, the Tunisian president is likely to delay succession as long as he can, possibly until incapacity or death. By the next presidential election in 2014, the landscape of prospective contenders and 'favourites' may have changed all over again. Should Ben Ali die tomorrow, any outcome would be possible.

Tunisia's international allies have been following the battle for the country's spoils quite passively. In fact, many European companies benefit from the Tunis elite's easy access to

19. 'Le parcours fulgurant de Sakhr El-Materi, gendre du président tunisien Ben Ali', *Le Monde*, 24 October 2009.

20. Larbi Sadiki, 'Bin Ali Baba Tunisia's Last Bey?', *Al Jazeera*, 27 September 2010.

credits and contracts. Since Tunisia's regional leadership is limited, EU and US interest has been concentrating on investment, modernisation and counter-terrorism cooperation. Given the huge gap between Tunisia's economic and political reform performances, the European Union is having trouble in finding a suitable formula to deal with the country, but has chosen to focus on the former. Like Egypt, the Tunisian government has been particularly keen to secure an upgrade of bilateral relations with the EU. In spite of a move by the Tunisian authorities in the midst of negotiations effectively to ban contacts between Tunisian human rights activists and European institutions, the EU is likely to go ahead with the upgrade. Considered a 'bulwark of stability', no news from Tunisia is good news. That said, the obscure and exclusionary nature of Ben Ali's succession planning, apparently based on a strategy of sitting it out until the very last moment, raises concerns about possible outcomes in the case of the president's sudden death. While a fierce battle among the clans of Tunis can be taken for granted, the repressive grip of the state security apparatus, which fiercely oppresses secular opposition and Islamists alike, would make major destabilisation unlikely. Whoever manages to get on top at the end of the battle will have to ensure loyalties through a comprehensive deal.

ALGERIA: past the oil peak

Having always been more of an oligarchy rather than an autocracy, Algeria's current regime is less threatened by the prospect of presidential succession than may be the case in other countries assessed here. Observers have been talking about an imminent presidential vacancy ever since the incumbent Abdelaziz Bouteflika (73) underwent medical treatment in a clinic in Paris in 2005 and 2006. Yet five years on he is still going strong, and in April 2009 he was 're-elected' for a third mandate with over 90 per cent of the votes. Bouteflika, who has been ruling the country since 1999, has had the benefit of bringing stability and lasting peace to the conflict-ridden country. Although Bouteflika's presidency finally managed to put formal power back into civilian hands, the military remains the strongest player, and the latter's ultimate behaviour will certainly constitute the biggest question mark at the moment of succession.

A 'bunker state par excellence',²¹ Algeria's state oil monopoly Sonatrach is the state's sanctum, employing 120,000 and providing 98 per cent of Algeria's exports and 60 per cent of its budget revenues. Algeria alone provides nearly 30 per cent of total EU natural gas imports, and the Bouteflika government has been living easily on its large revenue cushion. However, more recently, with falling hydrocarbon prices, Bouteflika has faced increasing difficulty in buying public approval. The question mark of succession, nurtured by Bouteflika's ill health, looms over social unrest fuelled by corruption and the lack of public services.

The 2008 constitutional amendments that raised the term limits of presidential office provide evidence of the president's intention to become, like his neighbours, a president-for-life. Alternative options from Bouteflika's close civilian entourage in- >>>

21. Clement M. Henry, 'Algeria's agonies. Oil rent effects in a bunker state', *The Journal of North African Studies*, Vol. 9, Issue 2, Summer 2004, pp. 68–81.

clude, among others, the president's brother Said Bouteflika, Prime Minister Ahmed Ouyahia, and (in an interim caretaker role) Speaker of Parliament Abdelaziz Ziari. While Said Bouteflika has long been an adviser to the president, he has not been appointed to any formal position in the power structure. Lately, mentions of him in the Algerian press have become more infrequent, suggesting that the Bouteflika family's efforts to promote him have been limited. Besides, the prominence of apparent front runners may be obscuring other shadow candidates whose chances have not been spotted yet. An ongoing power struggle among the key elite factions – military and civilian – is getting fiercer, with several mysterious murders among the high ranks of the establishment.²² With Bouteflika having fallen from grace of late, thanks to corruption and economic reforms of a sensitive nature, it is far from clear whether the security apparatus will support him, or any of his civilian favourites, in the 2014 presidential elections, or instead place a successor more favourable to its interests.

EU and US interests in Algeria are largely focused on two issues: energy and peace. Regarding the former, Western governments would be unlikely to assist any reform process that would endanger the political management of the hydrocarbons sector. With respect to the latter, Algeria is typically held up by Western policy-makers as the exemplification of democratisation leading to unpredictable destabilisation and violence. Such fears transcend national debates about Algerian succession, influencing the democracy-stability dilemma in the whole region.

The argument that a free vote led to a civil war, however, is highly flawed. Algeria's attempted democratic transition initially emerged from a severe economic crisis. This crisis had been triggered by longstanding structural deficits, combined with a fall in world oil prices and price rises for basic goods, which eventually led to the outbreak of public riots in October 1988. Similar to today, Algeria's *Front de Libération Nationale* (FLN) government saw its position increasingly weakened as its reliance on high oil prices started to backfire. As a result of the riots, it shifted course in an effort to stabilise the country and secure its own rule. When the Islamist *Front Islamique du Salut* (FIS) was able to secure a majority in the country's first free and fair elections, a military junta ousted President Chadli Benjedid as a pretext to revoke election results and re-establish authoritarian control, precipitating an outbreak of violence. So at a closer look, it was not the attempted democratisation in itself that triggered the Algerian civil war, but the military's January 1992 intervention to re-establish authoritarianism, paired with weak reform legitimacy, social polarisation, the weakness of the opposition and the confrontational relationship between the regime and the Islamists, the sum of which prepared the ground for the coup.²³ Rather than a lesson in the dangers inherent to democratisation per se, it could thus be argued that Algeria is a prime example of the dangers of liberalised autocracy.

LIBYA: the last Arab dictator

After more than four decades as *de facto* ruler, Muammar al-Gaddafi is currently the longest-serving of all non-monarchical leaders in the world. While not officially a republic,

²². See 'Trouble in Algeria: the president and the police', *The Economist*, 4 March 2010.

²³. See also Kristina Kausch and Richard Youngs, 'Algeria: failure of democratic transition foretold', CDDRL Working Paper N°84, Center on Democracy, Development, and The Rule of Law, Stanford University, August 2008.

the ‘Great Socialist People’s Libyan Arab Jamahiriya’ matches most formal definitions of a republic (and is hence included here). Although Gaddafi (born 1942) is still relatively young, speculation over his succession has been rampant over the last few years. The last of the region’s fully-fledged ‘dictators’, Muammar Gaddafi remains the personified state and near-absolute ruler of the country. Having only recently re-emerged on the world stage after decades of isolation, Gaddafi’s Libya does not even bother to feign aspirations for democratic reform. Propped up by vast energy reserves and its position as a major transit country for immigrants heading towards the EU from all over Africa, Western leverage vis-à-vis the last standing old-style dictatorship is close to zero.

Unlike other cases discussed here, Libya’s closed and highly repressive system is likely to facilitate a smooth transfer to one of Gaddafi’s sons or whomever the colonel chooses without major disturbance, thereby reducing the significance of factional splits, elite negotiations and trade-offs that are so fundamental in other succession scenarios (with tribal rivalries presenting the only possibly meaningful domestic obstacle for the time being). In this sense, Libya’s re-emergence from international isolation in recent years has also been a wise move by Gaddafi to prevent unwanted external intervention at the moment of succession.

Two of Gaddafi’s seven sons are currently seen as the main possible contenders to succeed their father. Urbane, pro-Western Saif el-Islam Gaddafi has become the darling of the international community over the last few years. Mu’atassim Billah Gaddafi, a former lieutenant colonel who serves as Libya’s national security advisor overseeing the National Security Council, is considered the military counterbalance and alternative heir apparent to Saif el-Islam. With Saif and Mu’atassim, Gaddafi senior has a double military-civilian succession option at hand. Saif, a Western-educated liberal, holds (like his father) no official state position but has been able successfully to position himself as the voice of liberal reformism. He also frequently acts as his father’s international envoy. His at times blunt advocacy in favour of political reform has on several occasions raised concerns in neighbouring countries and led to discrepancies with his father, who might be inclined to pick somebody more cautious and conservative. Saif, aware that he depends on Colonel Gaddafi’s benevolence and may not cross certain lines, has therefore moderated his tone and demands as of late and temporarily taken a step back from public appearances. In the absence of civil society or political parties in Libya, one expert notes, Saif provides the function of the ‘loyal opposition’.²⁴ Observers differ, however, over the degree to which Saif’s liberalism is more tactical or genuine.

Unlike most of his North African neighbours, Gaddafi is in the comfortable position of being able to prop up his rule with subsidies financed by oil revenues. Financially, external powers have practically no leverage over Libya. However, the oil-focused Libyan economy provides few alternative sources of income and fails to create jobs. Subsidies have replaced urgently needed structural economic reform, and dissent has been kept at bay by means of Libya’s highly repressive security apparatus. As in Algeria, a prolonged fall in oil prices in the future may start bringing structural deficiencies to the fore, and possibly lead to a rift among pragmatists and conservatives in the Gaddafi family itself.²⁵

24. Sadiki (2009), op cit.

25. Alessandro Bruno, ‘Political Succession in Arab Africa’, *Geopolitics*, 19 April 2010.

US and EU interests in Libya focus on security cooperation, hydrocarbons and (in the case of the EU) migration. The West is aware that its leverage over Gaddafi is very low, and has no illusions with regard to exerting any meaningful influence on Libya's internal reforms, or a future transition to a post-Muammar Gaddafi era. Gaddafi's 2009 row with Switzerland over Hannibal Gaddafi's arrest was only the latest in a number of Libyan-Western spats that provide abundant evidence of the volatility of Gaddafi's foreign policy-making. While the colonel is still going strong, international complacency regarding Libya's domestic situation prevails. Libya is typically held up in the West as a prime example of how external leverage can work wonders in turning a 'rogue' into a cooperative partner, in particular with regard to nuclear de-proliferation and counter-terrorism cooperation. This view, however, neglects the fact that Gaddafi's decision to reintegrate Libya into the international system was a result of pragmatism rather than indulgence, and that his approach to handling Libya's external relations remains entirely arbitrary.

YEMEN: falling apart?

On the brink of collapse due to conflicts, poor management and economic precariousness, Yemen has more than just a serious governance problem. Fighting several internal wars, pressing water shortages and economic mismanagement are only the most urgent among Yemen's many problems. Taken together, they make the country a textbook breeding ground for the terrorism it has started to export in its own, homemade brand.

Although still relatively distant, Yemen's presidential succession is also expected to be hereditary. President Ali Abdullah Saleh (64) is said to be grooming his son Ahmed, another young, Western-educated hopeful with a military background. Like in Libya, the outcome of the presidential succession in Yemen will be strongly influenced by tribal elites. The new president will most likely come from the president's Hashed tribe and will need the military's nod of approval. A Sandhurst graduate heading the country's 'Republican Guard', Ahmed Saleh has collected abundant military and leadership credentials. His ultimate appointment as prospective heir, however, is far from taken for granted, as there is no shortage of Hashed tribe members with military and intelligence credentials.²⁶

His incumbent father largely draws his legitimacy from his 'integrative' capacity between north and south. It has been argued that Abdullah al-Saleh's ability to juggle 'different "hats", skills and roles' in order to rule over 'Yemen and its plural, and in parts of the country "unruly", civil bodies and identities' has turned him into an integration figure, with strong personal standing.²⁷ More recently, however, President Saleh's popularity has been decreasing and his relation with key allies, including Islamist leaders and some of the most powerful tribal families, has become increasingly fragile. Especially in the south, where the president has effectively stopped 'juggling' and instead started oppressing the opposition with little delicacy, his popularity is hitting rock bottom.²⁸ The Saleh family's future in leading Yemen is hence by no means guaranteed. With the country's fragile security outlook, however, Yemen's future, and the forecast for any future leadership, remain in the dark.

26. Larbi Sadiki, 'Wither Arab "Republicanism"? The Rise of Family Rule and the "End of Democratization" in Egypt, Libya and Yemen', *Mediterranean Politics*, Vol. 15, No. 1, 99–107, March 2010.

27. Ibid.

28. See Edward Burke, "'One Blood and One Destiny'?: Yemen's relations with the Gulf Cooperation Council and implications for the EU', FRIDE / Gulf Research Center, forthcoming.

Having woken up to Yemen's terror problem only recently, the international community's concern with the country is focusing rather narrowly on frenetic hard security efforts at countering terrorism. This focus neglects, however, the fact that the substantial terrorist threat emanating from the country is largely the result of Yemen's abundant internal structural and security problems. Recent recruitment efforts by al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) focus not on global jihad but on poor management by the Yemeni government. A hard security approach that fails to address Yemen's internal governance problems will not weaken but rather strengthen AQAP, which 'thrives on Yemen's internal disarray' and is now considered 'the greatest single terrorist threat to the security of the US'.²⁹

Successions, stability and Western choices

»» The process and outcome of managed republican successions in the Middle East matter to Western policy-making in two main ways: they will be decisive for the outlook of democratic reform in the region, and they will determine the reliable, cooperative political stability that is considered seminal to key Western interests. Both legitimate interests – democracy and stability – have often been portrayed as either competing or mutually reinforcing.³⁰

On the one hand, most obviously, the outlook of managed dynastic succession in several formally republican states is a slap in the face of these countries' citizens as they see the prospects of their legitimate aspirations of choosing their own rulers disappear over the horizon. As Sadiki points out, the upcoming generational change in the region's presidential offices will be a 'litmus test for Arab republicanism', and for what remains of Western aspirations to support democracy in the region.³¹ The establishment of dynastic republicanism as the new norm in the Arab world adds a new institutional dimension to the 'upgraded authoritarianism'³² in Arab republics. In this sense, the engineered successions are but a logical consequence and perpetuation of the system of 'liberalised authoritarianism' that has effectively replaced the people's aspirations for democratic representation in the Middle East. Should incumbent presidents now prove successful in passing on the torch to their anointed successors, this would effectively represent an institutionalisation of liberalised autocracy.

While current EU and US official rhetoric tends to support the assumption that security and democratic participation go hand in hand, evidence shows how Western governments are having trouble in turning these commitments into meaningful practice. Disappoint-

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29. Christopher Boucek, 'Yemen needs more than our military support', *Financial Times*, 31 October 2010.

30. For a recent update on the security-democracy debate, see Richard Youngs, 'Security through democracy. Between aspiration and pretence', FRIDE Working Paper N° 103, October 2010.

31. Sadiki (2009), op. cit.

32. Steven Heydemann, 'Upgrading Authoritarianism in the Arab World', Analysis Paper N° 13, Saban Center, Brookings Institution, October 2007.

ment stemming from exaggerated expectations of democracy support as an all-purpose elixir in the post-9/11 period, and the firm move away from the controversial ‘regime change’ formula, now appear to be leading Western policy-makers to the opposite extreme of entirely dismissing the importance of democracy for long-term security. As one expert notes, EU commitment to supporting democracy is ‘passively aspirational rather than operationally constitutive’ of EU security policies.³³

It has been argued that the Obama administration’s strategy of prioritising the Arab-Israeli peace process while supporting tactical, top-down liberalisation in the MENA undermines rather than strengthens the long-term stability of major US allies. The cycles of political opening and crackdown described by Hale not only keep the authoritarian status quo in place but are likely to erode stability over time, by making the countries ‘vulnerable to domestic social conflicts, internal succession struggles, and regional disputes’.³⁴ By indirectly supporting these processes, according to a group of US Middle East experts, the Obama administration risks ‘repeating the mistake that Cold War-era administrations made when they supported right-wing dictatorships – right up until the point when they were toppled by radical forces’.³⁵

Listing all the risk factors for stability in a region as fragile and complex as the Middle East would go far beyond the scope of this paper. Having looked at the forthcoming generational change in the leaderships of several Arab republics, along with its dilemmas, patterns and varying scenarios, we can identify a number of factors that appear to be decisive (among many others) in determining the risk of destabilisation likely to derive from managed successions.

Groomed successors will need to seek alternative sources of legitimacy what are likely to reduce their dependability. Unlike their veteran predecessors, most of whom came to power drawing legitimacy from their roles in the independence struggle, the new generation of ‘heirs’ has no obvious source of legitimacy. With regard to post-Soviet Eurasian republics, Hale shows how, among a whole set of factors, the one that most distinguished successful from unsuccessful successions in these countries was public opinion. In ‘Colour Revolution’ countries, a split in the elites ahead of succession created a major opening for mass input in countries that had been considered as hopelessly autocratic just a few years before.³⁶ While in today’s MENA, many factors limit the impact of public opinion, in several countries of the region, increasing anti-hereditary-succession campaigns and the use of the internet to voice dissent nonetheless suggest that managed succession without legitimacy is not likely to work anymore. The ‘Arab Spring’ and democratisation debates have left their footprint, and the new generation of activists has greater demands and better resources.

Presidential successors that cannot draw their legitimacy from a free and fair electoral process must therefore resort to other sources to justify their rule. Possible alternative sources may be found in Arab nationalism, Islamism, anti-Americanism/anti-Western feelings, war, or, in the best of cases, tangible achievements in political and/or economic development. Except for the latter, all of these options bear substantial risks for Western interests.

33. Youngs (2010), op cit.

34. Daniel Brumberg et al, ‘In Pursuit of Democracy and Security in the Greater Middle East’, USIP Study Group Report, United States Institute for Peace, 2010.

35. Michele Dunne and Robert Kagan, ‘Obama needs to support Egyptians as well as Mubarak’, *The Washington Post*, 4 June 2010. See also Larbi Sadiki, ‘Wither Arab “Republicanism”? The Rise of Family Rule and the “End of Democratization” in Egypt, Libya and Yemen’, *Mediterranean Politics*, Vol. 15, No. 1, 99–107, March 2010.

36. Hale (2005), op. cit.

A ruler who bases his power on any of them will be less likely to develop constructive, reliable cooperation with the West. Instead, supporting prospective new rulers in gaining democratic legitimacy via a courageous attempt at genuinely transformative diplomacy would be likely to serve the West's long-term interests – and the region's citizens – far better than any of the aforementioned options.

Illegitimate successions may lead to popular upheaval, unrest and violence. Frustration, especially among the youth in some parts of the region, has reached a singular psychological threshold. If rigged elections and managed republican successions are able to become institutionalised as the new norm, public resistance is likely to manifest itself through more radical and possibly violent forms of protest. The upcoming generational change in MENA leaderships is seen by many as a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to lift their country into a new era – a hope which successful hereditary succession would shatter. The consequences of disappointing these hopes over a prolonged period of time are unpredictable. A sustained fall in hydrocarbon prices and a rise in wheat prices, respectively, would further enhance the risk of public unrest in many countries in the region. Overdue economic and political reforms and societal polarisation have already triggered one bloody civil war in the region, and may well lead to another if static, corrupt and unaccountable governance sanctioned by sham elections is established as the new norm. It is doubtful whether regimes' containment efforts would still suffice to silence dissent, and whether ruling elites would be able to bear the high political cost of the return to open violence that would be likely to be required to keep protesters at bay. Egypt will be a decisive test case in this sense.

The exclusion of Islamists from genuine political competition is likely to prove counter-productive, leading to withdrawal and re-radicalisation. So far, authoritarian Arab regimes have been largely successful in containing opposition, civil society and Islamist competition through divide-and-rule strategies, backed by their overpowering security apparatuses. The West has readily accepted this on the assumption that a theocratic revolution would be the only alternative. It is known that the appeal of radical forms of Islamism rises in an environment in which clear popular demand for democratic representation is constantly and violently suppressed. To the degree that moderate Islamist movements see their aspirations for political participation through the electoral process frustrated, it is becoming increasingly difficult for their leaders to convince their base of the sense of participating in the political process at all. Processes of re-radicalisation have begun.

Analysts have repeatedly stressed that the best way of countering the Islamist appeal would be to test them in government. Current MENA regimes have no interest in this experiment, as it would deprive them of one of their most powerful means of indulgence vis-à-vis the West: the 'Islamist = extremist' formula. Europe and the United States, if indeed keen on reducing the risks of a new theocratic revolution, would serve their interests best by doing what is in their power to maintain political Islam within the boundaries of political contestation. Political Islam is here to stay as a major political current in the Middle East. Some form of broader Islamist participation in MENA governments in the future will be unavoidable. The development of the relationship between Islamist groups and governments in the years to come will be decisive in determining what kind of rule this will be.

A perpetuation of the cycle of liberalisation and crackdown is likely to keep the region in a permanent state of fragility. The cycles of opening and closing of public space are not simply producing some sort of random 'instability', but generate reasonably predictable

phases of fragility created by the very system of ‘patronal presidentialism’.³⁷ Paired with economic precariousness and enhanced expectations, unaccountable governance will widen the gap between ruling elites and society. This will boost the appeal of radical elements, thereby increasing the risk that the system will implode at some point, be it via revolution, terrorism or civil war. In this sense, the case of Algeria, which is so often wrongly held up as a prime argument against genuine democratic participation in the Middle East, quite on the contrary provides a prime argument for breaking these cycles via sustained inclusive participation and far-reaching political reform *before* the system is about to implode.

Conclusion

»» Ahead of the wave of managed republican successions, the risk of instability deriving from these four (and other) factors can still be reduced. The key for this lies in the region, not in the West. Moreover, as new players powerfully emerge on the global and regional stage, the EU and US are being forced to watch their relative influence in the Middle East rapidly decline and their ability meaningfully to steer trends in the region evaporate. Within the boundaries of its reduced leverage, however, the West can still try to help tip the scales.

Supporting free choice in a region as fragile as the Middle East looks to many like a risky undertaking. Indeed, there are no political shifts without uncertainty. The transition from one era to another requires a political leadership able to take some risks when the time is right. In the face of an inevitable generational shift in MENA presidential offices, US and EU governments must make a fundamental choice as to what their long-term vision for the Middle East is. Do they want to see a perpetuation of the current state of ever-looming instability, or do they envisage long-term sustainable security?

Lessons from past and current successions suggest that leadership continuity does not equal stability. A perpetuation of cycles of liberalising and de-liberalising autocracy generates, rather than contains, instability. Precisely because uncontrolled processes of transformation are most at risk of producing unpredictable outcomes, Western policies should support a gradual but systematic, in-depth process of democratic transformation that aims to keep key elites’ costs of reform as low as possible. Current Western policies in the region rely on a static model of stability through containment that has already failed to produce the desired security east of Europe, and is not going to produce it in the south. Relying on the mistaken assumption that MENA regimes’ political openings form part of a process of sustained ‘transition’ to democracy, the EU and the US have been allowing themselves to be fooled by the tactics of experienced autocratic elites. Continued Western tacit support for Cold War patterns of cycles of top-down reform, static governance and containment is likely to steer the region into significant turmoil in the near future.

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