As discussed in Chapter 1 and Chapter 2, by the decades following World War II those living in the area comprising the Middle East and North Africa had moved from being ruled by expansive, Islamic empires to being under control of European mandates to, finally, being citizens of independent states. At least in theory, Syrians, Tunisians, and others were to govern themselves, managing their own society’s problems and development. But as we will see in subsequent chapters, in many cases societies have often fallen short from achieving optimal outcomes; societies suffer limited participation (Chapter 4), social inequalities (Chapter 5), sectarian strife (Chapter 6), stalled economic development (Chapter 7), and international and regional interference (Chapter 8). In part, this is because weak state development and a lack of institutions that depersonalize and depoliticize the distribution of goods and services limit societies’ ability to use resources efficiently and grant opportunities to all.

This chapter presents three interrelated ways to understand states and institutions that affect governance in the Middle East and North Africa region (MENA) today. First, the chapter examines the strength of MENA states—their ability to affect the daily lives of citizens, influence the distribution of resources, and implement public policies that improve the living conditions for society as a whole. Most states in the region are weak, making it difficult for governments to respond to citizens’ demands and improve their lives. Second, the chapter considers regime type. Even after the Arab uprisings of 2011, authoritarian regimes remain prevalent in the MENA region, often diverting resources away from social development and toward narrow coalitions of ruling elites. Third, the chapter examines key state institutions, including legislatures, political parties, judiciaries, and the media. In the MENA, these institutions tend to be captured by small circles of elites, leading to suboptimal outcomes. It describes these three factors—weak states, authoritarian regimes, and ineffective institutions—explores why these are found throughout much of the region, and considers possibilities for change. It ends by discussing two questions commonly raised with regard to the region: What explains the endurance of regimes in the face of discontent? And why has liberal democracy been so elusive?

THE STATE

Max Weber conceptualized the state as “a human community that (successfully) claims the monopoly on the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory.” There are three important components of this definition. First, the state has defined territorial boundaries, presumably enjoying control over the entire area within the boundaries. Second, the state has legitimacy—that is, the acceptance of the community’s right to govern, which in the
twentieth century can be enjoyed, and contested, on two levels: within the domestic community (those living within the boundaries of the state) and among actors in the international community (other states within the international system). Finally, the state has the *monopoly* on the use of force. The use of force by the military, police, or other arms of the state is generally viewed as a legitimate means of keeping order, while the use of force by paramilitary groups, vigilantes, or gangs—at times also intended to keep order—is not.

Ideally, the modern state system is constituted of strong nation-states—that is, countries in which nationalism (a socially constructed identity that leads a group of people to see themselves as belonging to a shared community) and state boundaries overlap and states enjoy sovereignty over territory within established borders. Further explained, “coercion-wielding organizations that are distinct from households and kinship groups . . . exercise power over all other organizations within substantial territories.” Strong states are able to extract resources from populations and implement policies that benefit society as a whole rather than subnational populations (e.g., families, tribes, or other distinct subnational groups). A strong sense of nationalism makes it easier for them to do so.

**Weak States in the MENA Region**

States in the MENA have often failed to live up to these ideals on a number of counts. Both international and domestic forces have challenged states’ legitimate right to rule. In many cases, social groups—often ethnic, sectarian, or kin based—captured state institutions, using them to benefit themselves rather than society writ large. This undermined the establishment of an autonomous state that is capable of acting and formulating policies independent of the interests of specific groups or classes. Elsewhere, social groups have found ways to circumvent the state, avoiding the attempts of the state apparatus to govern and maintaining order according to local customs and institutions. At times, groups negotiate the boundaries of state influence with those in power, leaving entire areas out of the reach of state authorities.

These problems are not unique to the MENA region. In a cross-regional study of state building, Joel Migdal pointed out the problems that emerge in the context of “strong societies, weak states.” Ruling elites remain in power without developing the ability to extract resources, maintain order, and affect the daily lives of citizens or promote economic and social development, and he argued that they do so by establishing agreements—tacit or explicit—with local elites that effectively grant them control over spaces. The result is a sort of Swiss-cheese arrangement in which the state has control over some areas but is relatively absent in others.

This is also not to say that state building, and even the attendant development of nation-states (e.g., of shared identity of a community congruent with state boundaries), has been entirely absent in the MENA region. Citizens today appear to identify with the state more than they did when it was established in the twentieth century. During the 1950s, Arabs often took to the streets, calling for the establishment of pan-Arab states and challenging the legitimacy of newly founded states. In the 2011 uprisings, Egyptians, Libyans, Tunisians, and others made claims on state leaders as “nationals,” demanding their rights as citizens. That said, however, the rise of the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), the resurgence of Kurdish movements, and others that draw into question the existing state system show that the state—and particularly the nation-state—remains weak. Conflicts still often center on demands by sectarian, ethnic, regional, and kin-based communities.

Many argue that MENA states are not simply fragile, but they are failed. Failed states often have the trappings of state institutions (e.g., government ministries, legislatures, and
heads of state), but they have lost important aspects of statehood, such as physical control over the territory and legitimate decision-making authority. Failed states receive a great deal of international attention both because they are unable to provide services and security to their people and because they are viewed as a threat to international security. Uncontrolled territory gives transnational terrorist movements room to maneuver, while the lack of development arguably provides a base of potential recruits for such movements.

A large number of MENA states today are seen to be at high risk for state collapse and the emergence of violence, as Map 3.1 shows. The 2018 Fragile States Index (FSI) rated Yemen, Syria, Iraq, and Libya as the third-, fourth-, eleventh-, and twenty-fifth-most fragile states in the world, respectively. All of these countries were in the midst of civil war. The FSI gave countries such as Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey a “warning,” and if the pressures of the crises in neighboring Iraq and Syria continue, they are likely to be destabilized even more. For example, although the influx of Syrian refugees into Lebanon has slowed, after Lebanon began to enforce border control in 2018 it had nearly one million registered refugees in addition to unregistered Syrians fleeing the war. Syrian refugees, making up approximately 25 percent of the population, contribute to economic pressures and inequalities, deteriorating public services, and polarization among domestic factions, thus fostering violence and instability. Only Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, and the UAE were considered stable. Yet more disconcerting is that among those ranking in the lower half are countries with some of the

MAP 3.1 Fragile States Index for Middle Eastern and North African States, 2018

largest populations: Algeria, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Yemen. Millions of people live in states that cannot maintain security and guide socioeconomic development effectively.

Fragile and failed states face common challenges, but there are also important differences among them. For instance, Yemen has long been a classical weak state—unable to control territory, implement social and economic politics, and promote development; in 2010, just before the Arab uprisings, the FSI ranked Yemen the world’s fifteenth-most fragile state. As one analyst explained, “Those in the countryside [are] unconcerned about national government. They have neither contributed to, nor been affected by, central decisions.” Rather than attempting to regulate and control social forces, the Yemeni state adopted “policies of inclusion, accommodation and incorporation toward local strongmen in order to maintain social stability and regulate daily life.” At times, this strategy fails, and the country erupts in violence. This was the case after 2011, when Yemen faced threats from al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), from a secessionist movement (al-Hirak) in the former South Yemen, from the Houthi movement in the north, from armed Yemeni tribes, and finally, from international intervention. The crisis has placed enormous costs on the population: By 2017, an estimated 78.5 percent of the population required humanitarian assistance every day, including more than eleven million children (greater than the population of Switzerland).

Syria represents a second case in which a raging civil war has significantly weakened the state. Before 2011, Syria had a midperforming state, ranking forty-eighth in the world on the Fragile States Index. It provided health, education, and other services and, in fact, had a health system that was highly regarded in the Arab world. Yet years of war destroyed hospitals, schools, and other public infrastructure; spurred the flight of doctors and teachers; and undermined the state’s control over territory. President Bashar al-Asad and those around him attempted to shore up their regime by claiming to be the sole defenders of Syrian sovereignty and attempting to monopolize service provision (reportedly destroying hospitals, schools, and other services in opposition-controlled areas in order to do so). Nevertheless, by July 2015 the state had lost control over large swathes of Syrian territory. Asad gave a surprising admission of this in a public speech before the nation, stating, “Concern for our soldiers forces us to let go of some areas. Every inch of Syria is precious. The problem facing the military is not related to planning but to fatigue. It is normal that an army gets tired, but there’s a difference between fatigue and defeat.” As of this writing, it is impossible to know where or when the conflict may end, but it is clear that the conflict has weakened the Syrian state. Arguably, the Syrian conflict may not have erupted had the state been strong in 2011; nevertheless, the case reminds us that development is not necessarily a unilinear trajectory. States can be weakened as well as built.

A third lesson about state failure can be drawn from the case of Lebanon. As discussed in Box 3.1, Lebanon lacks territorial control, is unable to provide services and frequently has fallen into civil war. Yet in contrast to Yemen, the World Bank designates Lebanon as an upper-middle income country, and the World Economic Forum notes that Lebanon has consistently “punched above its weight” in terms of development and global competitiveness. The influx of Syrian refugees has put health and education systems under pressure, but nevertheless, Lebanon continues to perform well. Such achievements are the result of a vibrant private sector; as the economist Sami Nader put it, in Lebanon the “private education soars, public education sinks.” As Lebanon shows, development can take place in the absence of an effective state.
Before we consider why states remain fragile, it is important to note that some critics object to the concepts of failed and fragile states. They argue that these concepts lack a coherent definition and operationalization and thus fail to extend scientific knowledge. Moreover, they argue, the World Bank, the European Union, G7+, and other organizations use the designation of states as failed or fragile as a justification for intervention. Critics see the designation as an “attempt by state powers to describe reality in accordance with their foreign policy priorities.” Such points are well taken but do not belie the fact that in many cases, the entities that govern do not possess many characteristics of statehood.

**Challenges of State-Building**

Scholars and development specialists have moved from assuming that state-building is a relatively natural process (a belief prevalent in the 1950s and 1960s) to expressing great...
concern over “failed” and “fragile” states. But how do we understand the failure to build strong states? What drives continued weakness?

There are two basic theories of state-building. The first views the state as a social contract between individuals who seek security. The state thus develops to maintain order and grant protection, and the relationship between citizens and the state is one of relative cooperation. The second perspective is that states develop as the outcome of war-making by competing groups that seek to expand their control over territories and extract resources. Victors attempt to establish authority in an effort to extract resources from those within the territories under their control, thus developing taxation; to protect human and material resources and establish order, thus establishing security; and to reduce the costs of ruling by gaining domestic and international legitimacy of their rights to control over this territory.

One explanation for the weakness of MENA states lies in the challenges of postcolonial state-building. State-building was a much different process in the MENA than it was in the West. In Europe, state-building took place during an extended period of conflict between warring factions, roughly between 1000 and 1800 CE. The conflicts were bloody and destructive, but they arguably also fostered the development of nationalism and strong states. In contrast, in the MENA modern states emerged out of conflict between elites vying for power in a much more compact period, roughly during the last one hundred years. Consequently, state borders were established, but they did not necessarily result in nation-states. Identities did not match the contours of new states but instead tended to be on either larger or smaller territorial units. Rather than seeing themselves as “Syrian,” “Tunisian,” or “Iraqi,” for instance, many saw themselves as “Arabs” or “Muslims” (and were, therefore, attracted to pan-Arab and pan-Islamic movements) or as “Shi’a,” “Kurdish,” or “Aleppan,” members of smaller sectarian, ethnic, or geographic communities. New leaders attempted to develop national identities through flags, anthems, stamps, rallies, and other performances of “nation” in the hope of shoring up their legitimacy, but they also often relied on subnational allegiances for support. The resurfacing of these identities in the face of state collapse that we see, for example, in Iraq, Libya, and Syria demonstrate the limited success of these efforts.

A second difficulty has been the intervention of powerful third parties. External actors—most notably Britain, France, Russia, and the United States, but other states, nonstate actors, and multinational organizations as well—have often stepped in to bolster one side over another or to quash conflict altogether. Invested in maintaining the international state system, they have sought to reinforce territorial boundaries, shoring up central authorities in the face of secessionist movements or working to undermine the establishment of larger, more powerful entities (for example, the United Arab Republic, a greater Saudi Arabia, greater Syria or, more recently, Iraq’s annexation of Kuwait). This is not to say that MENA elites were puppets in the hands of the international forces. Elites vying for power in MENA states often managed to thwart external actors, to play them off against one another, or to use their support for their own purposes. For instance, the ruling Al Thani in Qatar showed savvy in first allying with the British and gaining local authority before strategically joining Saudi Arabia once it seemed more beneficial; they even went so far as converting to Wahhabism to show allegiance. Domestic elites had agency, but powerful external forces invested in maintaining an international state system created opportunities and constraints that shaped their actions.

Importantly, in some countries, states developed more organically, as they had in the West. Iran and Turkey were founded on the centers of the fallen Qajar and Ottoman empires, respectively. The empires had been weakened, and when Reza Shah Pahlavi and Mustafa Kemal Atatürk came to power in the 1920s in Iran and Turkey, respectively, they worked to
establish a new national identity and modern, Western-oriented state systems. At the same time, however, they benefited from the institutional structures that had been established in these seats of empire. Saudi Arabia, too, developed differently, with the Al Saud family establishing control over the territory that gained international recognition as an independent state in 1932. In Iran, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia, ruling elites benefited from an institutional system and historical experience that helped in the development of state-building, although Western support still played an important role in keeping Western-oriented leaders in power.

A third complication in the state-building process has been the ability of incumbent rulers to rely on external rents to remain in power. They are able to obtain the resources necessary to defend their position without extracting resources from the people within their states. The sources of rents vary. Oil provides important sources of income, undermining state-building efforts. Strategic rents—or direct support from members of the international community to incumbents who are situated in particularly strategic locations—can play a similar role. Egypt and Jordan, for example, have both benefited from their strategically important locations as frontline states with Israel, receiving significant aid from the United States. Such rents can allow rulers to maintain their position while providing little space for voice and accountability.

**REGIME TYPES**

Many scholars and policymakers focus on regime type rather than state strength. Some focus on prospects for democracy, which they view as intrinsically better at promoting life and liberty and positively associated with good governance and socioeconomic development. Another set of scholarship focuses on differences within regime types, particularly distinguishing between authoritarian regimes. This section defines regimes and then examines the nature of regimes in the MENA region, the challenges they face, the strategies that incumbents use to maintain the regime, and the possibilities for regime change.

**What Is a Regime?**

Regimes should be understood as the set of formal and informal rules (institutions) that are used to select leaders and policies and, thus, determine the relative power and relationships among different institutions within the governing system as well as how efficiently and for whose benefit resources are used. Regimes are relatively durable. They change, but it takes more than a change in a single rule or actor to alter regimes. Indeed, while it is quite clear that Libya and Tunisia witnessed regime change in 2011, the case of Egypt seemed initially more tenuous, as the military—and many former Mubarak allies—retained significant power. The extent of change was even more ambiguous in Yemen: although former president Ali Abdallah Salih was removed from power after decades in office, the former vice president under Salih, Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi, was elected in an uncontested presidential election that, initially, ushered in little fundamental change.

We need to distinguish between regimes and individuals in power. Many use the term *regime* to denote the leaders in power or, similarly, the period during which certain leaders are in power—that is, they refer to the “Mubarak regime” in Egypt or the “Asad regime” in Syria. Compare this with discussions of US politics, for instance, which focus on the “Bush administration” or the “Obama administration.” The assumption is that in the United States the rules remain the same although those in power to administer the
rules may change, while in Egypt and Syria political rules and institutions are presumably determined—almost embodied—by the leaders themselves.

Yet using *regime* to refer to the individuals in power is misleading. One can find great continuity in a country’s regime even when leaders change. For example, the transition from Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser to Anwar al-Sadat altered the ruling elite in Egypt but was not a significant change in regime. At other times, the underlying rules of the game can change quite significantly while the leader remains in power. Thus, President Ali Abdallah Salih, president of the Yemen Arab Republic since 1978, continued to rule Yemen even after the unification in 1990, when not only the borders but also the rules of the game that governed politics in both the former People’s Democratic Republic of Yemen and the Yemen Arab Republic altered significantly.

**Regimes in the MENA Region**

The MENA region has long been characterized by resilient authoritarianism. When much of the rest of the world experienced what is now called the “third wave” of democratization, the region saw much less change (see Figure 3.1). This remains true even after the Arab uprisings. Attempts at democratization in most countries where regimes fell—Libya, Egypt, and Yemen—have failed. Of these countries, today only Tunisia enjoys relatively stable democratic processes, and even here, in the context of economic decline and instability, talk has turned from optimistic proclamations of an “Arab spring” to gloomy discussions of “Arab winter.” As Table 3.1 demonstrates, authoritarian regimes with long-standing leaders continue to dominate the region.

![Figure 3.1: Democracy Index over Time, by Country](https://www.v-dem.net/en/.

### TABLE 3.1 Longevity of Rulers in Regimes in the Middle East and North Africa, as of June 2019

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Date of ascendance</th>
<th>Current leader (years in office)</th>
<th>Previous leader (years in office)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Authoritarian Republics</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Algeria</td>
<td>April 2, 2019</td>
<td>Acting President Abdelkader Bensalah (2 months)</td>
<td>President Abdelaziz Bouteflika (19 years, 11 months)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Egypt</td>
<td>June 8, 2014</td>
<td>President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi (4 years, 11 months)</td>
<td>Acting President Adly Mansour (11 months)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Syria</td>
<td>July 17, 2000</td>
<td>President Bashar al-Asad (18 years, 10 months)</td>
<td>President Hafiz al-Asad (29 years, 3 months)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Monarchies</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bahrain</td>
<td>March 6, 1999</td>
<td>Shaykh Hamad bin Issa Al Khalifa (20 years, 2 months)</td>
<td>Shaykh Isa bin Salman Al Khalifa (37 years, 6 months)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jordan</td>
<td>February 7, 1999</td>
<td>King Abdallah II (20 years, 3 months)</td>
<td>King Hussein (46 years, 5 months)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kuwait</td>
<td>January 29, 2006</td>
<td>Shaykh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah (13 years, 4 months)</td>
<td>Shaykh Jabir Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah (28 years)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Morocco</td>
<td>July 23, 1999</td>
<td>King Muhammad VI (19 years, 10 months)</td>
<td>King Hassan II (38 years, 4 months)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oman</td>
<td>July 23, 1970</td>
<td>Sultan Qabus bin Said Al Said (48 years, 10 months)</td>
<td>Sultan Said bin Taimur (38 years, 5 months)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qatar</td>
<td>June 25, 2013</td>
<td>Shaykh Tamim bin Hamad al Thani (5 years, 11 months)</td>
<td>Shaykh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani (17 years, 18 months)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saudi Arabia</td>
<td>January 23, 2015</td>
<td>King Salman bin Abdul Aziz Al Saud (4 years, 4 months)</td>
<td>King Abdallah bin Abdul Aziz Al Saud (9 years, 5 months)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United Arab Emirates</td>
<td>November 3, 2004</td>
<td>Shaykh Khalifa bin Zayid Al Nuhayyan (14 years, 7 months)</td>
<td>Shaykh Zayid bin Sultan Al Nuhayyan (32 years, 11 months)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Quasi Democracies</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iraq</td>
<td>October 2, 2018</td>
<td>President Barham Salih (8 months)</td>
<td>President Fuad Masum (4 years, 2 months)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Israel</td>
<td>July 24, 2014</td>
<td>President Reuven Rivlin (4 years, 10 months)</td>
<td>President Shimon Peres (7 years)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>March 31, 2009</td>
<td>Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu (10 years, 2 months)</td>
<td>Prime Minister Ehud Olmert (3 years, 2 months)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Continued)
**TABLE 3.1  (Continued)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Date of ascendance</th>
<th>Current leader (years in office)</th>
<th>Previous leader (years in office)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Quasi Democracies</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lebanon</td>
<td>October 31, 2016</td>
<td>Acting President Michel Aoun (2 years, 7 months)</td>
<td>No direct predecessor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>December 18, 2016</td>
<td>Prime Minister Saad Hariri (2 years, 5 months)</td>
<td>President Tammam Salam (2 years, 5 months)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Libya</td>
<td>March 30, 2014</td>
<td>Prime Minister Fayez al-Sarraj (3 years, 2 months)</td>
<td>Prime Minister Abdallah al-Thani* (2 years, 19 days)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turkey</td>
<td>August 28, 2014</td>
<td>President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan (4 years, 9 months)</td>
<td>President Abdallah Gül (7 years)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Prime Minister position abolished June 2018</td>
<td>Prime Minister Binali Yıldırım (2 years, 1 month)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tunisia</td>
<td>December 31, 2014</td>
<td>President Beji Caid Essebsi (4 years, 5 months)</td>
<td>President Moncef Marzouki (2 years, 1 month)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yemen (united in 1990)</td>
<td>February 27, 2012</td>
<td>President Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi (7 years, 3 months)</td>
<td>President Ali Abdallah Salih (21 years, 9 months; leader of North Yemen 1978–1990) (Former one-party regime)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Islamic Republic</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iran</td>
<td>June 4, 1989</td>
<td>Supreme Leader Ali Hosseini Khamenei (30 years)</td>
<td>Supreme Leader Ruhollah Mousavi Khomeini (9 years, 6 months)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>August 3, 2013</td>
<td>President Hassan Rouhani (5 years, 10 months)</td>
<td>President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (8 years)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Author’s records, December 2018.

Note: Bold denotes cases which at the time of coding were engaged in civil war.

*Internationally recognized until March 2016.

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**BOX 3.2**

**CLASSIFYING REGIMES**

There are many different ways to classify regimes. Some focus on the degree of freedom and inclusion of everyday citizens in politics. For instance, Robert Dahl’s classic book, *Polyarchy*, classified regimes according to the degree of contestation and participation, with closed hegemonies at one end of the spectrum and polyarchies at the other. More recent scholarship on hybrid regimes (e.g., regimes that are nondemocratic yet allow for significant freedom and contestation) or advocates of...
ranking systems such as that employed by Freedom House take this approach as well. A second perspective focuses on the sociological basis of rulers and their supporters. Barrington Moore’s seminal study, *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy*, considered how class relations could underpin the development of different regime types. Subsequent scholars distinguish, for instance, peasant-military alliances from urban bourgeoisie or military rule and consider this as a basis for distinguishing regimes. A third approach emphasizes the nature of executive power, focusing on patrimonialist or sultanistic regimes (e.g., regimes in which all power flows directly from the leader). A fourth view emphasizes institutional arrangements. This focus on institutional arrangements to distinguish regime dates back to Aristotle, who distinguished among regimes with one, few, and many rulers. The emphasis on institutions may be particularly appealing because rules of the game may be more malleable than factors such as resource endowments or the sociological basis of ruling coalitions.

Scholars (including Aristotle) combine institutional arrangements with other factors. Two recent and influential coding schemes demonstrate this. Barbara Geddes and her colleagues created a typology that combines institutional structures and a focus on actors who emphasize “control over access to power and influence,” thus distinguishing among military, personalist, and single-party regimes. Focusing more on the institutional rules of the regime, Jose Cheibub, Jennifer Gandhi, and James Vreeland set forth a typology that distinguishes among parliamentary, semipresidential, and presidential democracies and monarchic, military, and civilian dictatorships.

It is worth noting that the distinction between civilian and military dictatorships may not be as significant in explaining outcomes as the typology suggests. For instance, Bjørnskov and Rode (building from Cheibub, Gandhi, and Vreeland) consider Algeria to be a civilian dictatorship while they viewed Egypt, even before 2011, as a military dictatorship. However, as Lahouari Addi explains in Chapter 9, the military plays a significant role in Algeria, while in Egypt the military played a key role in overthrowing President Mubarak in 2011, despite the fact that Mubarak hailed from the military himself. Yet more importantly, there is quite a bit of disagreement over the classification of regimes. In the previous example in 2010, while Cheibub, Gandhi, and Vreeland classified Algeria as a civilian and Egypt as a military dictatorship, respectively, Geddes, Wright, and Frantz characterized Algeria as a military regime and Egypt as a party-personal-military hybrid. Similar contradictions are seen in Table 3.2. For example, Bjørnskov and Rode code Lebanon as a civilian dictatorship, Magaloni et al. code it as a multiparty autocracy, Freedom House sees the regime as partly free, and Varieties of Democracy calls it an electoral autocracy. As a result of such disagreements, regimes that are apparently similar in one coding scheme are viewed as distinct in another. For instance, Bjørnskov and Rode and Magaloni et al. view Lebanon and Libya as similar regimes, while Varieties of Democracy see them as very distinct. It is important for students of politics to keep this in mind when using these indicators and to employ robustness checks across different datasets when undertaking research.

6. A democracy is presidential if the government is not responsible to the legislative assembly, and it is parliamentary if it is. It is semipresidential if it is responsible to the legislative assembly, but there is an elected head of state with a fixed term in office.
Despite the tendency of MENA regimes to be authoritarian, there is important variation in regimes of the region. It is wrong to presume, as is often done, that the entire MENA region is nondemocratic (and destined to remain so). It is also problematic to think that the only important distinction between regimes is that which separates democracies from autocracies. Institutional arrangements that distinguish autocracies from each other and those that do similarly in democracies are also consequential. There are many ways to characterize regimes, as described in Table 3.2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Classifying authorities</th>
<th>Freedom House (end of 2012)</th>
<th>Varieties of Democracy, Regimes of the World (RoW) 2017</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Algeria</td>
<td>Civilian dictatorship Multiparty autocracy</td>
<td>Not free</td>
<td>Electoral autocracy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bahrain</td>
<td>Royal dictatorship Monarchy Not free</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Egypt</td>
<td>Military dictatorship (Military dictatorship) Multiparty autocracy Not free</td>
<td>Electoral autocracy</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iran</td>
<td>Civilian dictatorship Single-party autocracy Not free</td>
<td>Electoral autocracy</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iraq</td>
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### Classifying authorities

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<th>Type of Autocracy</th>
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**Sources:**

   - Regime category coding follows Cheibub, Gandhi, and Vreeland (2010): parliamentary democracies, mixed democracies (with weak presidents), presidential democracies, civilian autocracies, military dictatorships, and royal dictatorships.

   - Coding: monarchy, military, single-party autocracy, multiparty autocracy, democracy

   - Coding, according to Freedom House: “Each country and territory is assigned between 0 and 4 points on a series of 25 indicators, for an aggregate score of up to 100. These scores are used to determine two numerical ratings, with 1 representing the most free conditions and 7 the least free. A country or territory’s political rights and civil liberties ratings then determine whether it has an overall status of free, partly free, or not free.”

   - Coding: This indicator is aimed to answer this question: How can the political regime overall be classified, considering the competitiveness of access to power (polyarchy) as well as liberal principles? Classifications include closed autocracy, electoral autocracy, electoral democracy, liberal democracy.

In this section, we take an institutional approach. We examine variations in regime type, considering commonalities among regimes of the same type as well as their differences. We focus on the historical evolution of MENA regimes, their bases of support, strategy of rule, and sources of threat to incumbent elites.

**Monarchies**

The contemporary MENA hosts more monarchies than any other region and the majority of the world’s absolute monarchies. Monarchies are distinguished by the fact that hereditary rule is the legitimate form of transfer for executive power, and they thus rely on family networks to determine succession. It is not always the oldest male family member who assumes power (in other words, primogeniture is not a universal rule), but when succession is
not determined by birth order, potential ascendants must be a member of the family and vetted by other family members in order to take the throne. The throne comes with enormous power. Unlike the constitutional monarchies found in much of Europe today—where law, constitutions, and democratically elected parliaments constrain kings and queens—in the absolute monarchies of the MENA region, rulers enjoy relatively unconstrained sovereignty.

Emergence of Monarchies

As Lisa Anderson has argued, MENA monarchies are not relics of an ancient past or an extension of historical caliphates, but instead are nineteenth- and twentieth-century institutions much more suited for and resilient to the strains of contemporary rule than one may first expect. As states obtained independence in the twentieth-century MENA, the vast majority of them came to be ruled by hereditary monarchs. In many cases, kings—backed by Western powers—inherited the state at independence. In Egypt, for instance, the ruling family was of direct descent from Mehmet Ali (in Arabic, Muhammad Ali), who had been given control over Egypt in return for withdrawing his threat to the Ottoman sultan during the 1840 pacification of the Levant (see Chapter 1). By the early twentieth century, Egypt had fallen into debt and was increasingly dependent on the British, for whom the Egyptian ruling family provided a convenient, loyal ally. Similar arrangements existed in Iraq and Jordan, where Hashemite kingdoms were established in the wake of World War I as a “consolation prize” for Sharif Hussein, whose ambitions to gain a greater Arab kingdom the Europeans curtailed. In Morocco, Tunisia, Libya, and small Gulf states, ruling families emerged from families who had worked closely with their French, Italian, and British protectors, respectively. Even in Saudi Arabia and Iran, where emerging leaders mobilized somewhat more independently, the establishment of the ruling families gained British and, later, US support.

Bases of Support

Monarchs derive power from several sources. They enjoy formal institutional guarantees of immunity vis-à-vis their subjects. For example, Article 54 of Kuwait’s constitution states that the “Emir is the Head of the State. His person is immune and inviolable.” Monarchs hold similarly expansive powers in Morocco and Jordan, despite constitutional reforms taken in the wake of the Arab uprisings. Morocco’s 2011 constitution defines the king as “commander of the faithful” and head of state (Article 41), assures that the “person of the king inviolable, and respect is due to him” and provides him immunity (Article 46). Similarly, Article 30 of the Jordanian constitution dictates that “the King is the Head of the State and is immune from any liability and responsibility.”

Monarchs sit above parliaments, where they exist. Parliamentarians take an oath of allegiance not only to the state but also to the king. Kings can dismiss cabinets, parliaments, and ministers swiftly and without legal recourse, discussion, debate, or deliberation; and, when necessary, they can pass legislation by decree. Moreover, the elected representatives’ subordinate position is clearly demonstrated through the members’ oaths. For instance, in the Jordanian constitution, Article 80 specifies the member’s oath as, “I swear by Almighty God to be loyal to the King and to the country, uphold the Constitution, serve the Nation and conscientiously perform the duties entrusted to me.”

They also derive power from historical, hereditary, religious, and procedural legitimacy. Legitimacy is difficult to see or measure, but it is potentially powerful. Think of it as the “discount
rate” of rule achieved when people believe that the rulers have the right to govern. Monarchs tend to emphasize legitimacy of the royal family, often in terms of historical legitimacy or a unique relationship with God (for example, the commander of the faithful in Morocco, the custodian of the two holy mosques in Saudi Arabia, and the descendant of the Prophet Muhammad in Jordan). We should not overestimate the role of legitimacy in maintaining rule, and one can question whether it is legitimacy or other factors, such as oil rents or repression, which keep rulers in power. Yet an example from Morocco helps to illustrate how religious legitimacy can help strengthen monarchies. On July 10, 1971, the Moroccan military reacted to the growing national unrest by mounting a coup attempt during a party at the king’s palace in Skhirat. The king, invoking his role as commander of the faithful, asked the dissident troops to join him in prayer. The troops—apparently reminded of the king’s special status—abandoned their cause.30

Importantly, a popular mandate is not a source of legitimacy in monarchies, and palace politics are thus isolated from participatory politics. In Jordan and Morocco, members of the royal family do not run for parliamentary seats; and in Kuwait, the al-Sabahs can neither vote nor run for seats in the National Assembly.31 In short, monarchs in the contemporary MENA enjoy a status more akin to the divine right of rulers in medieval Europe than to contemporary European royalty.

Strategies of Rule

Monarchs have also devised a set of strategies of rule by which they attempt to contain potential opposition. These include the rules governing the distribution of key positions within the system, as well as divide-and-rule strategies and controlled liberalization. We find considerable variation in the rules governing the distribution of power, but rather similar attempts to divide-and-rule and undertake political liberalization when necessary.

Some monarchies have devised dynastic systems that help stabilize their regime. In dynastic monarchies, the top government positions, including cabinet portfolios, the military, and other leading posts, are reserved for members of the ruling family, while in nondynastic monarchies, members outside the ruling families hold the key portfolios. As Michael Herb points out, this creates very different incentives for members of the ruling family and inner circles of government to remain loyal to the ruler.32 In dynasties, members of the royal family are heavily invested in maintaining the regime. They may disagree over the direction of foreign policy, succession, or other key issues, but they ultimately find ways to compromise and maintain their family rule rather than risk losing control.33 Family members benefit in nondynasties as well, but they are less likely to see their personal success as fundamentally tied to maintaining the dynasty. Moreover, those who hold these key positions can often imagine doing well in another regime because their position is not dependent on their bloodline. In short, it is easier to buy the loyalty of members of the ruling family—who believe their options are limited if the family loses power—than it is to buy the loyalty of powerful elites who are not closely tied to the regime.

Monarchs also employ a divide-and-rule strategy to overcome threats. They benefit from emphasizing political competition and division rather than popular unity and thus foster social and ideological divisions. By doing so, they establish themselves as a crucial “moderator” among competing forces. As Alan Richards and John Waterbury explain,

What the monarchs want is a plethora of interests, tribal, ethnic, professional, class based, and partisan, whose competition for public patronage they can arbitrate.
None of these elements can be allowed to become too powerful or wealthy, and the monarch will police and repress or entice and divide.\textsuperscript{34}

Thus, monarchies tend to exacerbate divisions among various groups in the population, such as those between citizens and noncitizens in Kuwait, citizens of East Bank and Palestinian origin in Jordan,\textsuperscript{35} or Amazighs and Arabs in Morocco. They also promote divisions in and among parties in order to keep them weak and divided.

Monarchs can employ controlled liberalization in the hope of depressing opposition, and they can do so in a manner that promotes their importance in the political system. By bringing the various parties together to form national pacts, as seen in the Jordanian National Charter (Mithaq al-Watani), the Moroccan constitutional reforms of 1972, and the Jiddah Compact, monarchs both appear to grant concessions and reinforce their role as supreme arbitrator. Rex Brynen, Bahgat Korany, and Paul Noble conclude: “What is interesting about the monarchies is that they appear to be in a position to establish many of these rules and to thereby act simultaneously as both interested players and far-from-impartial umpires in the political reform process.”\textsuperscript{36}

One-Party Regimes: Single-Party and Dominant-Party Types

One-party regimes are also prevalent in the MENA, and we find them in two types: single-party and dominant-party regimes. Single-party regimes have a “vanguard party” that officially dominates political power. Smaller parties sometimes are allowed to participate in politics if they accept the ruling party’s role and rules, but they have little power. Dominant-party regimes allow for the participation of multiple parties and theoretically permit alternation in power; however, the dominant party monopolizes power. It makes the rules of the game, determines who is permitted to compete, and enjoys disproportionate control over resources. Thus, single- and dominant-party regimes have much in common.

Pathways to One-Party Regimes

By the end of the twentieth century, one-party regimes had emerged across much of the region. They came to power via three historical pathways: emergence through revolution, military coups, and transitions between dominant- and single-party regimes. Exploring these paths illuminates distinctions between these regimes and also suggests that the civilian-military distinction may not be particularly helpful, at least not in the contemporary MENA. In other regions, such as Latin America, militaries that came to power often ruled collectively through military juntas. In the MENA, military rulers gradually established one-party regimes.

The first set of one-party regimes emerged from struggles for independence. In a study of 169 countries covering the period from 1950 through 2006, Beatriz Magaloni and Ruth Kricheli found that 28.36 percent of one-party regimes were established after periods of anarchy, including independence wars.\textsuperscript{37} Forty years earlier, Samuel Huntington examined the emergence of one-party regimes from independence movements, arguing that “the more intense and prolonged the struggle and the deeper its ideological commitment, the greater the political stability of the one-party system.”\textsuperscript{38} In the MENA, such regimes emerged in Tunisia and Algeria, following the independence struggles against the French which helped establish the national movements that emerged into ruling parties: the Destour (Constitutional) Party.
in Tunisia (which later became the Neo-Destour Party) and the National Liberation Front (FLN) in Algeria. In these cases, party structures were established before independence.

The second pathway to one-party regimes was emergence through military coups, sometimes in partnership with political parties. Again, this is fairly common; Magaloni and Kricheli found that military dictatorships led to the founding of 33.33 percent of dominant-party regimes and 23.33 percent of single-party regimes. In Iraq and Syria, for instance, military leaders who were the major force behind the regime transformations were loosely allied with the leaders of the Ba'ath Party. The regimes transformed into Ba'athist regimes, and party structures came to play an important role in politics. In other cases, most notably Egypt, the military took power and sought to establish a dominant party as a means of control. Doing so was not necessarily easy. Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser struggled to establish a ruling party. He first established the Egyptian National Union in 1957 (five years after the Free Officers revolution) and then renamed it the Arab Socialist Union in 1962 in one of many efforts to revitalize the party system.

The third means of transition in MENA one-party states has been the shift from single-party to dominant-party regimes, and vice versa. When ruling elites found themselves under attack, they sometimes chose to open space for opposition parties, allowing them greater freedom of participation; when they became more secure, they constricted the political space once again. Globally, 63.33 percent of dominant-party regimes from 1950 through 2006 transitioned to single-party regimes, and 25.33 percent of single-party regimes transitioned to dominant-party regimes.39

Egypt illustrates the transition from a single-party to dominant-party regime. Following the assassination of President Anwar al-Sadat in 1981, the newly inaugurated president, Hosni Mubarak, allowed multiparty elections for the national legislature while he simultaneously clamped down on Islamist opposition. In 2005, facing regional instability, opposition, and concerns about regime succession, he called the first multiparty elections for the presidency. The Egyptian system went from one in which there was a vanguard party to one in which several parties compete, but until the fall of Mubarak in 2011, the governing National Democratic Party enjoyed clear dominance.

**Bases of Support**

Ruling elites in one-party systems may seem to have unlimited power, but their legitimacy is closely tied to maintaining the appearance of popular support. Unlike monarchs, who sit above the fray of participatory politics, presidents’ legitimacy is based largely on their ability to represent the people. They thus often promote state-led development or a nationalist or anti-imperial project to shore up their regime. It is important that the ruling party be seen as embodying the will of the people.

Institutional structures reflect this. Presidents are generally not granted the special privileges and isolation from popular politics that monarchs enjoy. For example, Tunisia’s constitution under President Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali mentioned neither executive immunity nor scrutiny. Members of parliament took oaths of allegiance to the state, but not to the head of state.40 Legislatures also generally have more formal authority than their counterparts in the monarchies.41 In reality, however, presidents often gain extraconstitutional powers by declaring a state of emergency and their monopoly over resources to ensure that legislatures are packed with supporters.
Strategies of Rule

One-party regimes take a different approach than monarchies to shore up their regime. Building ruling parties and legislatures is itself a strategy of rule and one that scholars have consistently found makes regimes more durable. In addition, when necessary, ruling elites turn to political liberalization in an attempt to strengthen their regime in times of crisis. As we shall see, however, the logic of one-party regimes makes such liberalization a more difficult tactic than it is in monarchies.

Three points should be kept in mind as we discuss the role of ruling parties. First, one must remember that many of the efforts to establish ruling parties were made between the 1950s and the 1970s, when the Soviet Union was a major power and socialist-oriented, state-led development was a widely accepted strategy for newly independent states. In many ways, the enthusiasm for one-party regimes mirrored that for democracies in the 1990s. The function of political parties was to mobilize resources and channel activities in solving the twin problems of governance and development that plagued the new states; it was not to provide an arena for political competition. Second, not all governing elites have invested equally in developing the ruling party, and nowhere in the MENA did ruling parties achieve the organizational strength that they did in communist China and the USSR. Third, and relatedly, politics became increasingly personalized in these regimes. The Baathist revolution in Syria, for example, evolved toward the personalistic regime of Saddam Hussein in Iraq, and of Hafiz al-Asad, and subsequently his son Bashar, in Syria. In Tunisia, Bourguiba and then Ben Ali dominated the ruling party, called first the Neo-Destour and then the Constitutional Democratic Assembly (RCD). The personal leadership of the president and the president’s closest associates became far more important in determining the distribution of resources within society than the organizational structures and internal politics of the ruling party.

Nevertheless, the establishment of party organizations may help sustain authoritarian regimes. Parties do this first by helping to alleviate internal conflict among elites. The party can also provide a source of recruitment and socialization for emerging elites, giving them space within the existing regime. Ruling parties, and the legislatures associated with them, also provide an arena for the distribution of patronage and the co-optation of elites. Furthermore, they can be a mechanism through which demands are voiced—within boundaries—and limited policy concessions can be made. Finally, they can provide a mechanism through which mass support can be mobilized. This can help to tie citizens (particularly in the rural areas) to the regime, and the party also provides a base of support that can be mobilized in the face of potential threats to the regime.

Political parties—and the accompanying legislatures and elections—serve to reduce the pressures on ruling elites, but they also tie presidents to participatory institutions, which may make attempts at controlled liberalization more difficult. In contrast to the monarchs who direct political liberalization from above the fray, presidents must compete in popular politics. Thus, during liberalization, presidents must compete in elections (albeit as participants who hold the reins of power) and risk the chance of being overthrown. Consequently, there is reason to believe that liberalization is more difficult for presidents and that it calls for different tactics. Instead of creating a political system in which competing forces will emerge, presidents need to develop a system that strengthens their own party and weakens opponents.
Military Regimes

The MENA region also hosts military regimes, in which military officers take power and rule. The prevalence of military regimes depends, in part, on how one defines these regimes. As Geddes, Wright, and Frantz argue, there are three usages of the term military regime. The most inclusive simply refers to an autocracy led by a military officer. As Magaloni puts it, “The key distinctive trait of military regimes is that the armed forces control access to the principal positions of power,” and even if political parties exist, “the dictator and his critical ruling coalition share power through the institution of the armed forces rather than the party.” In this view, Egypt under Mubarak and Tunisia under Ben Ali were military regimes. A second perspective focuses on the role of the military as an institution; military regimes are those in which a military junta, or organization, rules. For instance, Egypt under General Neguib, following the Free Officers revolution, was a military regime but Mubarak’s Egypt was not. A third type, which they call the “military strongman,” exists when power is held in the hands of a single military officer. Syria under Asad or Egypt under Nasser or Sisi are examples of such regimes.

Strategies of Rule: The Emergence and Evolution of Military Regimes

It may seem relatively easy to identify the emergence of a military regime, but the ways by which they come into power and evolve can make them much more difficult to detect than one might expect. Military regimes emerge when officers take power. These are often dramatic events, such as military tanks rolling through the streets of the capital city or officers taking over means of communication. It could also be a military declaration to “restore order,” particularly after people have taken to the streets in protest. Such was the case on July 3, 2013, when General Sisi, flanked by Egyptian notables across the political spectrum, declared President Morsi’s removal. The debate then ensued over whether or not this was a military coup.

Similar ambiguities arise as military regimes evolve. Military officers may choose to build a ruling party, as Nasser did in Egypt, or to establish a multiparty system, as Ataturk did in Turkey. They may also consolidate personal power, as Hafez al-Asad did in Syria. It is not entirely clear under which conditions they can wrest control from other military leaders or the extent to which establishing these institutions limits the military control. Indeed, these are interesting questions to be studied. It is clear, however, that these institutional changes make it much more difficult to identify military regimes than one may expect.

Challenges and Implications

Military regimes appear brittle. In her classic 1999 study, Geddes found that military regimes were the least durable, although they were more likely to extricate themselves from rule through elections or other “uncoerced” means. It appeared that military leaders were less able to withstand the challenges of collective rule and more likely to return to the barracks. Although it was not the focus of her study, it was also possible that those leaders who succeeded in overcoming these challenges did so by transitioning to personalistic or party rule. These were no longer “military regimes” in her early classification, but the leaders had nevertheless remained in power—that is, there were two ways for military juntas to overcome their challenges, either by relinquishing power or by consolidating it through a personalist or party regime.

Distinguishing military regimes that rule collectively from those in which the military officer concentrates power in his own hands sheds important light on the nature of military
rule. A regime that rules through a military collective, which Geddes and her colleagues call a “military regime,” is likely to be short-lived, extricate itself from rule without conflict, and have a better chance at establishing democracy. A regime that is ruled through a military strongman, on the other hand, is likely to be ousted through uprisings or invasions and to usher in another era of autocracy.46

This has important lessons for understanding the trajectories of regimes in the MENA. Mubarak’s Egypt, as well as Asad’s Syria, could be understood as military strongmen. In this view, it was unsurprising that these leaders’ tenure resulted in uprising. The current Sisi regime is in the process of consolidating power. If Sisi continues to consolidate a personalistic regime, the likelihood of the military choosing to withdraw from power peacefully is low and the prospects for democracy dim. If he fails in this effort, the prospects for withdrawal and democracy improve.

Islamic Republic

The Islamic Republic of Iran is a unique regime in the region, incorporating elements of monarchical and republican rule. Iran’s institutional arrangements were intended to shape revolutionary change after the 1979 overthrow of Western-oriented Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi. The regime is best known as the world’s only Shiite theocracy. It has been an explicit, revolutionary attempt to create a regime based on Islam.

Institutionally, the Islamic Republic of Iran has a dual-government structure: One side includes the popularly elected executive and legislative branches, while the second includes unelected bodies aimed at guarding the Islamic nature of the regime. In Chapter 11, Mehrzad Boroujerdi discusses the regime in more detail, but what is critical to note is that the unelected leadership is more powerful than the elected bodies—that is, the supreme leader is more powerful than the president; the Guardian Council and the Expediency Council play more important roles than the parliament. This is well illustrated by the simple fact that candidates for the parliament and presidency must be first vetted by the Guardian Council. No one who would violate what is deemed as legitimate for an Islamic republic can run for office, let alone win.

Within these limits, however, there has generally been a great deal of competition, transparency, and accountability. The mechanisms that we often associate with good governance in democracies are not entirely absent in Iran, nor are they fully assured. The elections of the summer of 2009, in which there was significant contestation over the extent to which the balloting was free and fair and the subsequent electoral results were legitimate, clearly illustrate the limitations of the regime. The contestation curtailed daily progress and development, bringing the regime to deal with upheaval long after the polls had closed.

Importantly, while the ruling elites in Iran purposefully attempted to fashion a distinct regime, the Iranian regime has some elements of monarchical rule. Like monarchies, the clerical rule is based on religious legitimacy. Moreover, the clerics stand above the fray of participatory politics and thus can manage a more open arena of political competition. Moreover, although it is based on an Islamic model, the details of the model and the mechanisms of rule are themselves often contested. The regime is thus less unique than it may initially appear.

Quasi Democracies

The MENA is also home to regimes that, either currently or recently, fit the procedural or minimalist view of democracy. Each falls short of liberal democracy in important ways, and as shown in Table 3.2, analysts may disagree about applying the label democracy to the regime.
Nevertheless, Israel, Lebanon, Tunisia, and Turkey (until around 2015) may be described as quasi democracies.

Before examining the nature of democracies in the region, it is useful to note that these cases illustrate the distinction between regime type, state strength, and political stability. Democracies, like strong states and political stability, are believed to enhance governance. Many thus mistakenly conclude that these three factors go hand in hand. Yet the countries discussed here have very different levels of state strength and political stability. Israel is a relatively strong, stable state; Lebanon is weak and unstable; and Tunisia, with a relatively new regime, faces continued challenges. In short, it is important to keep in mind that regime type, state strength, and stability are separate factors.

Emergence of Quasi Democracies

As Dankwart Rustow reminded us long ago, democracy can be born out of hotly contested “family feuds,” wherein the bargain of democracy is preferred to the near uncertainty of political conflict. For him, it was primarily a domestic conflict that mattered. When individuals see themselves as part of the same community (e.g., nationalism is developed) but have divergent preferences, they can create democratic institutions that allow them to resolve differences in the short run and maintain the chance to win in the future.47 Yet in much of the MENA region, international forces have played an important role in shaping institutions.

In some cases, the international influences have been primarily through demonstration effects, wherein ideals of successful arrangements in the West encouraged the adoption of democratic institutions. For instance, Israel was a settler state, with many of its founding leaders coming from democratic states in Western Europe. Often considered the only liberal democratic regime in the region, it strove to be a “Jewish, democratic state” since its establishment in 1948, developing a vibrant party system, civil society, and freedom of speech, press, and association, as well as an active and influential parliament. The formation of the Turkish Republic in 1923 was formed in part out of emulation of the West. Mustafa Kemal, a military officer known as Atatürk (Father of the Turks), was determined to establish a modern, secular, Western-oriented regime in the seat of the former Ottoman Empire. In the twentieth century, Turkey evolved toward democracy, albeit with a series of interruptions. The 1924 constitution (and more than twenty subsequent versions) established Turkey as a parliamentary system, with an elected president, parliament, prime minister, and an independent judiciary. The extent of competition steadily increased in Turkey, with an initial period of single-party dominance followed by a multiparty period after World War II. More recently, Turkey has witnessed a remarkable centralization of power in the hands of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, drawing into question whether Turkey is accurately described as a “democracy” (see Chapter 24).

Exposure to the West also played a role in the establishment of a democratic system in Lebanon. Lebanon developed a confessional, semipresidential democracy. It is confessional because it is a system that is established to guarantee representation to various groups in society (an arrangement called consociationalism, which is sometimes seen as a solution for social tensions in deeply divided societies) and one in which the divisions and representational guarantees are based on religious sect. It is semipresidential because it holds elections for a president, as well as parliament with a prime minister.

Both confessionalism and semipresidentialism are often critiqued as systems that are highly volatile and fragile, but at the time, it also seemed a reasonable solution to the conflict between Lebanese sectarian groups over the nature and boundaries of the Lebanese
state. Christian Maronites strongly preferred that Lebanon remain an independent entity with French support, while Sunni Muslims advocated Lebanese unification with Syria. The result was a compromise solution embodied in the National Pact: Lebanon was to be an independent country (not unified with Syria) with an Arab (not French) orientation, but the institutional arrangements would guarantee protection of both Muslim and Christian interests. The president would be a Maronite Christian, the prime minister a Sunni Muslim, the speaker of the house a Shiite, and the distribution of parliamentary seats would be in a ratio of six to five between Christians and Muslims. The ratio reflected the population distribution shown in the 1934 census, the last to be taken in Lebanon.

**Strategies of Rule**

The strategies of rule in democracies have received less attention than those of autocracies. In part, this may be because there is an implicit assumption that democracies rule by the will of the people, which removes strategies of rule somewhat from consideration. Yet elites in democracies make efforts to maintain democratic regimes in the face of challenges.

One strategy is institutional reform. For instance, in Iraq the 2005 Constitution recognized an Iraqi Kurdistan as an autonomous region, thus alleviating tensions between Kurds and Arabs. Similarly, federalism has been proposed in Libya as a solution to regional tensions, although it failed to be instituted. As already discussed, Lebanon designed a confessional system to assure competing communal groups representation, and it established a dual legal system with both civil and religious courts in order to guarantee individuals the right to adjudicate personal matters in accordance with their religion. These institutions facilitated the installation of democracy, although division of political power along sectarian lines also exacerbated tensions between them.

Even where democratic institutions are established, they are often fragile. Israel and Lebanon face instability and the threat of heightened conflict, and each fails to guarantee free competition and equal participation in decision-making. Turkey has recognized a new constitution that strengthens the role of the presidency, has withdrawn freedoms and liberties, and is considered by most to be no longer democratic. Even Tunisia, the “success story” of the Arab uprisings, faces instability and the threat of autocracy.

**KEY INSTITUTIONS**

A third strand of scholarship on the region focuses on key institutions within regimes, particularly those associated with democracy: legislatures and political parties, judiciaries, and the media. In this section, we give a brief overview of the role that these institutions are expected to play and the variation in their performance in the MENA region.

Before turning to these institutions, it is important to consider whether they are even meaningful in authoritarian regimes. Many argue they are not, and certainly, it is true that these institutions do not fully determine the outcomes of struggles over resources. In the MENA, as elsewhere, one must look at players and political practices outside the formal political sphere in order to understand politics. However, even in authoritarian regimes, elites both in and out of power debate constitutional amendments that shape executive-legislative relations, argue over electoral rules, critique laws governing the press and publication, and push back against restrictions on political parties. They do so because these institutions matter.48
Legislatures

Ideally, legislatures perform four core functions. They provide a mechanism through which the demands of different constituencies within societies are represented and competing ideas contested. They shape public policy through crafting, vetting, and passing legislation. Legislatures oversee the executive branch, ideally to ensure both vertical accountability of rulers to the ruled and horizontal accountability of other government agencies to the legislature. And finally, throughout the world, legislators provide constituency service. Yet strong legislatures are potentially important tools for establishing effective governance.

Yet legislatures in much of the region are weak or absent. In one-party regimes, the legislature is closely tied to the regime’s legitimacy; eliminating legislatures is thus politically costly for the ruling party, but incumbents use electoral rules and political manipulation to ensure that the legislature is comprised primarily of members from the ruling party. In monarchies, legitimacy is not closely tied to the performance of a ruling party, so it is less politically costly to rule without functioning legislatures. Both Jordan and Morocco have experienced long stretches of time when the parliament was disbanded; Qatar elected its first parliament only in 2013; and as of 2018, Saudi Arabia still did not have an elected legislature. One might expect that quasi-democracies would have strong, functioning legislatures, but even here, we find weaknesses. Lebanon, for instance, postponed legislative elections from 2009 to 2018, leading many to argue during that time that the sitting parliament lacked legitimacy.

Where legislatures do exist, they are often highly constrained. Many have no significant input into the formation of government. This is true even in nominally parliamentary monarchies, where members of parliament (MPs) should, technically, influence the choice of prime minister and the government. For example, in Jordan the king appoints the prime minister, who then appoints the government. In Morocco, since 2011, the king must choose the prime minister from the party holding the most parliamentary seats, and the parliament can give a vote of no confidence on the government. However, the fact that kings can dissolve the government and parliament at any time puts parliament in a subordinate position. Similarly, in one-party regimes parliaments can and have been restricted by declaring emergency powers. Moreover, in some cases the legislature can only debate those laws that have been presented to it. In other cases, the lower house may propose legislation, but an appointed upper house holds veto power.

MENA legislators are often poorly equipped to meet the tasks of legislation. Many legislatures have low incumbency rates due in part to weak and fragmented party systems, discussed later in this chapter. Legislators often have little or no policymaking experience and lack competent staff, efficient technology, and organizational structures that allow them to form committees, draft legislation, or provide oversight of the executive. At the same time, legislators often benefit directly from their positions, making them less willing to challenge the system. Holding office brings prestige and personal benefits such as cars, drivers, direct access to the government bureaucracy that doles out public contracts, and often immunity from prosecution. These perks can be enormously lucrative. For instance, a businessman may use his connections with the ministries to bypass import duties, to obtain preferential treatment, or to win bids for public contracts worth huge sums of money.

Citizens also tend to reward legislators who focus on constituency service rather than lawmaking and executive oversight. Where there is little bureaucratic transparency, accomplishing seemingly simple bureaucratic tasks—obtaining licenses or building permits, for example—requires not simply finding the right government office, filling out forms, and paying a fee, but often finding the right person to exert personal influence on one’s behalf, helping
to “walk” the issue through the office. Given legislators’ contacts with government, their ability to (threaten to) use the floor of the legislature, and their access to media to call into question officials’ performance if they don’t respond, legislators are particularly well placed to perform these tasks. Consequently, some refer to the legislators as na’ib khidma (service deputies), charged with providing services rather than legislating or overseeing the executive.

In short, for many, parliament is a service organization, not a legislative body, and elections are a competition over access to a pool of state resources, not struggles over policymaking or the rules of the game. Voters want legislators who can deliver the goods and services. Legislators, recognizing that their success is tied to meeting such needs and benefiting from their positions, have little incentive to push for reforms that would expand the legislative powers and enhance accountability.

**Political Parties and Party Systems**

Political parties and party systems can also be key institutions. Strong political parties are characterized by programmatic platforms that reflect relative agreement of members over policy bundles; close ties and communication with the citizens; avenues for democratic leadership, decision-making, and mobility within the party; financial resources; and a fair degree of party stability and longevity. Strong party systems are characterized by moderate fragmentation (neither too many nor too few parties), low polarization (parties not spread too widely across the political spectrum), and high institutionalization (stable, depersonalized, and embedded within the system).

Yet many MENA countries contain weak political parties. In monarchies such as Jordan and Morocco, this may not be surprising. The monarch does not rely on a strong political party to legitimize his rule. That political parties are weak in democracies is somewhat more surprising since elections and political parties are intimately tied to determining the highest political offices. Here too, however, the political-party system suffers from personalization, as in Lebanon. Perhaps most surprising is the fact that the one-party states often suffer from weak parties. This is true not only of opposition parties but also of the ruling party. Those who want to succeed professionally or to obtain political perks are virtually required to be party members in countries like Syria. However, these parties are more intent on mobilizing support for the regime than on providing venues for transmitting preferences, facilitating turnover of political elites, and influencing policy. In the decades after these regimes were established, the ideological and programmatic bases of the parties were undermined, and the core organizational structures withered. Parties functioned mainly as a mechanism for elite control. Thus even in transitioning regimes, the vast majority of parties (with the notable exception of Islamist parties that were closely linked to service-providing organizations) had difficulty providing a conduit of information between elites and masses and failed to mobilize the masses effectively.

Political-party systems are also weak in much of the MENA. Existing parties fragment into new parties, parties disappear, or ruling elites ban parties from politics and encourage others to take their place. This party system fluidity may at first seem to reflect a vibrant political system, but it really demonstrates the system’s fragility. It also makes it difficult for citizens to recognize and trust the parties. In fact, in the MENA, citizens often recognize political parties by their leaders and cliques rather than by their platforms and policy positions.

There are several reasons for this. In authoritarian regimes, elites intent on crushing the opposition thwart party development. Incumbents often shape and implement...
political-party laws in a manner that excludes or weakens potential contenders, at times using rules to drive a wedge between political parties that are given legal status (and thus have an opportunity to access state resources) and those that are not. Where political parties are uniformly permitted or excluded from the political system, the parties are more likely to cooperate, demand greater political reforms, and experience somewhat more stable systems. Where some are included but others excluded, such cooperation between political parties is much less likely. Finally, the weak role that parliaments play also undermines political parties and the party system. Party labels signal policy preferences, which are important when policymaking is at stake. However, where parliaments play a limited role in policymaking, voters pay little attention to political parties and party platforms, and party leaders have no incentive to develop them. Parties and party systems remain underdeveloped.

**Judiciary**

An independent judiciary and strong rule of law may play an important role in ensuring human rights, securing property rights, and providing responsive governance. Thomas Carothers defined rule of law as “a system in which the laws are public knowledge, are clear in meaning, and apply equally to everyone” and argued that establishing strong rule of law is “a way of pushing patronage-ridden government institutions to better performance, reigning in elected but still only haphazardly law-abiding politicians, and curbing the continued violation of human rights that has characterized many new democracies.” Similarly, one Egyptian activist argued, “We cannot aspire to have reform without an independent judiciary... It is the first and most important block in the reform process.”

The MENA region has a great deal of variation in the Rule of Law and in the locus of rights. Countries such as Algeria, Iran, Lebanon, and the Palestinian Authority have judiciaries that are often closely tied to and dependent on the ruling elite. Elsewhere, as in Iraq, Libya, Syria, and Yemen, where the reach of the state is limited, nonstate forces often mete out justice. Finally, in a case such as the UAE, the country scores high in rule of law, but rights are extended fully only to those who are UAE citizens—approximately 10 percent of those living in the territory.

Judicial independence can vary over time, shaped by political forces. In Egypt, for instance, courts became notably more independent during the three decades preceding Mubarak’s fall. The Supreme Constitutional Court increased the number of rulings it issued from one ruling in 1980, when it upheld the government position, to more than thirty rulings in 2000, two-thirds of which found government decrees unconstitutional. Tamir Moustafa argues that extending judicial independence, at least initially, served President Mubarak’s needs. The ruling elite, seeking to provide for credible protection of property rights in an era of economic liberalization and to rein in the corruption and indiscipline of an increasingly unwieldy bureaucracy, could benefit from shifting potentially difficult and polarizing decisions into the courts that were seen as independent. As Tarek Masoud explains in Chapter 10, the post-Mubarak period saw a marked decline in the judiciary’s reputation and, ultimately, its independence. President Morsi limited the judiciary’s oversight abilities through constitutional amendments, and President Sisi has continued to control its purview. Similar rollbacks in judicial independence have been witnessed in Turkey as well. Strengthening rule of law is important, but even where advances are made, they can be reversed.
Media

A well-functioning, independent media can play an important role in providing transparency and constraining ruling elites. Often called the “fourth pillar of democracy,” the media can be the watchdog over the checks-and-balances system among executives, judiciaries, and legislatures. It can sound the alarm in response to abuses of power and ultimately help reduce the possibilities and prevalence of corruption.

Media in much of the MENA became considerably more vibrant in the two decades preceding 2011, owing in part to technological changes. The increased use of satellite television, radio, and the Internet provided important channels of alternative information that were not previously available and helped to create a new public sphere.64 It gave voice to opposition forces and, in the eyes of some, played an instrumental role in mobilizing the uprisings. Yet uprisings occurred earliest and with the most force in the MENA countries where Internet usage was least widespread.65 It was long-standing grievances—not new media—that brought citizens into the streets to demand change.66

The media in much of the region remains restricted. Press and publication laws often set the boundaries within which journalists must act—not writing slanderous or treasonous material, for instance; they do not specify what kinds of material are deemed to cross the red lines. These interpretations are left to the authorities, who are closely tied to the ruling elites. It is also difficult for journalists to demand reforms. Laws governing association and state control over the media as well as press associations limit journalists’ abilities to act collectively. The situation is complicated by the fact that some journalists working within the country are rewarded handsomely for their close association with and support for the ruling elite, while the same closeness between the regime and journalism undermines linkages with external associations.

UNDERSTANDING REGIME BREAKDOWN AND REFORM

Let us conclude by considering two important, interrelated questions: First, why and when do regimes break down? And second, what explains the nature of the regimes that arise in their place, or as it is more frequently put, why is the region so resistant to (liberal) democracy?

What Explains Regime Breakdown?

Explanations for why increased discontent leads to conflict and regime breakdown in some countries and not others center on four factors: economic factors, regime type, Islam, and external factors. As we turn to each of these, it is important to remember that these are not necessarily mutually exclusive. The breakdown in any country may be a combination of economic factors and the regime, for instance. Moreover, when we consider regime breakdown, we should be aware that we are examining a probabilistic event. There is a great deal of uncertainty and chance affecting when protesters take to the streets, military coups succeed, and regimes are overturned. The questions we ask regard what makes regime breakdown more or less likely, and the explanations we examine are probabilistic, not deterministic.

Economic Factors

Economic factors are generally understood to affect the breakdown of authoritarianism in three ways. First, economic development, including industrialization, urbanization, and rising
standards of living, can spur demands for reform.67 Second, economic crises can increase discontent in society, making it easier for members of a political opposition to challenge incumbent authoritarian regimes.68 Third, economic resources, and particularly rents obtained from oil, strategic aid, or other resources, can strengthen incumbent elites. They can avoid the need to extract taxes, thus diminishing demands for taxation; can distribute goods and services to society; and can develop a strong security apparatus to repress potential opposition.69

This third explanation is often singled out as the most important factor explaining which regimes were destabilized during the 2011 uprisings. Jason Brownlee, Tarek Masoud, and Andrew Reynolds70 argue that oil was one of two necessary factors that stabilized some regimes during the uprisings (the other factor, dynastic rule, will be discussed shortly). Determined to keep their populations from joining in the spreading demands for political reform, Gulf monarchs handed out fistfuls of funds. At least in the short run, they succeeded everywhere but in Bahrain, where economic coffers were less endowed and the Shia-Sunni divide is politicized.

**Regime Type**

Another set of explanations for regime durability or breakdown is situated in the nature of the authoritarian regime. Barbara Geddes turned scholars’ attention to the importance of regime type in 1999 when she found that single-party regimes are more stable than military regimes or personalistic dictatorships.71 The mechanism at work is a matter of debate. Some point to the ability of ruling parties to solve intra-elite conflict,72 while others argue that parliaments (often associated with one-party states) provided a mechanism of co-optation and “controlled bargaining” with potential oppositions.73 More recently, scholars have argued that it is revolutionary regimes, which come into power through “conflicts triggered by efforts to carry out radical social change” and subsequently build highly cohesive coalitions, that are extremely durable.74 A similar argument about the cohesion of ruling elites is heard with regard to monarchies.75

There does appear to be a relationship between regime type and the ability of regimes to survive the Arab uprisings. As shown in Table 3.3, one-party regimes proved brittle in 2011. This stands in contrast to prevailing wisdom that one-party regimes are resilient. It may be explained by the weak political parties and tendency toward personalism in the aging regimes.76 A contradiction emerged between these leaders’ impulse to ensure the succession of power to their sons, a process referred to as “dynastic republicanism,” and the logic of a regime whose legitimacy was based on participatory institutions.77 Egypt’s president Hosni Mubarak, Yemen’s president Ali Abdallah Salih, and Libya’s Qadhafi were intent on ensuring that their sons—Gamal Mubarak, Ahmad Salih, and Saif, respectively—replace them. Many military and other long-standing regime supporters saw the leaders’ political maneuvering, aimed at achieving these goals, as simply unacceptable. Because legitimacy is closely tied to ruling parties and electoral institutions in these regimes, the personalization of power undermined the very institutions on which the regime relied.78

In contrast, most monarchies saw little mobilization during the Arab uprisings of 2011, and where more substantial uprisings took place—in Oman and Bahrain—they were ended without regime change.79 Some scholars argue that the reason for this lies in the fact that the ruling coalition, particularly in dynastic monarchies, depends on the regime’s survival and is thus more likely to remain cohesive.80 Others call attention to the fact that monarchs can promote democracy while remaining in power; this strengthens reformers, who seek democratization under the king, over radicals, who would seek to overthrow the king, and it divides
A third explanation turns our attention to the role that cultural norms, and the legitimacy of monarchs, can play in depressing mobilization. A final one, in line with the argument advanced earlier, is that there was no discord between shoring up personal power and strengthening a regime based on hereditary legitimacy.

Not all scholars agree that these factors explain the stability of monarchies. Greg Gause and Sean Yom argue that three “strategic decisions” explain their resistance: the ability of resource-rich monarchs to offer their populations incentives to remain quiescent; the regime’s ability to draw domestic support from long-cultivated, cross-cutting coalitions of support; and external support from international actors committed to the regime’s stability. At least two of these factors were present in all MENA monarchies. Certainly, these factors make change less likely, but they do not make monarchies immune to pressures. In fact, Bahrain experienced serious challenges that may have led to very different outcomes in the absence of foreign intervention.

Quasi democracies were also notably resilient during the 2011 uprisings. Palestinians took to the streets to express frustration over the Hamas-Fatah division; hundreds of thousands of Israelis mobilized to demand better economic and social conditions; Turkey saw demonstrations aimed at protecting democratic liberties as well as increased Kurdish unrest in the southwest; and the Lebanese, too, saw sectarian mobilization, fueled in part by the growing instability in Syria. Yet demands were primarily focused on the need for changes in policies and maintaining liberties, not on the downfall of the regime. Even imperfect democracies seemed more capable of staving off more fundamental ruptures than one-party regimes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 3.3</th>
<th>Regime Type, Mobilization, and Resilience during the Arab Uprisings, 2011–2012</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Little mobilization</strong></td>
<td><strong>Partial mobilization</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monarchy</td>
<td>Qatar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saudi Arabia</td>
<td>UK</td>
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<tr>
<td>UAE</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One-party (republican)</td>
<td>Algeria</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Revolutionary experiment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competitive</td>
<td>Lebanon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iraq</td>
<td>Palestine</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Author’s records.*

*Note: Bold denotes cases in which the incumbent was removed from power.*
Finally, some scholars argue that we need to pay attention to other characteristics of regimes to understand authoritarian endurance. For instance, one can focus on the level of institutionalization of the military or nature of social ties underpinning the regime. As Eva Bellin points out, when the military is professionalized, as it was in Tunisia and to a lesser extent Egypt, it is less likely to shoot on protesters to repress unrest. In contrast, Bellin notes that when the military is

organized along patrimonial lines, where military leaders are linked to regime elites through bonds of blood or sect or ethnicity, where career advancement is governed by cronyism and political loyalty rather than merit, where the distinction between public and private is blurred and, consequently, where economic corruption, cronyism, and predation is pervasive [the military is much more likely to repress protesters brutally].84

As the civil war in Syria demonstrates, such conditions do not entirely eliminate the possibility of protest or even regime breakdown. They may, however, make it less likely.

Islam

Many see the predominance of Islam in the MENA region as the reason for so little regime change in the region. The argument is often set forth with an emphasis on the prospects for democracy, as discussed below. Yet, Islam can also be seen as a factor that reinforces existing regimes.

One explanation focuses on the relationship between Islam and a patriarchal society, arguing that Islam fosters a culture that represses citizens’ participation. As we will see in Chapter 4, neither civil society organizations nor mobilization is a new phenomenon in the region,85 and the 2011 uprisings demonstrated that mobilization was possible, even in highly religious, patriarchal societies such as that found in Libya.

A more nuanced explanation suggests that Islam provides authoritarian rulers with a particularly compelling, symbolic repertoire by which to legitimize their rule. This is particularly true in monarchies where the king’s legitimacy is based in part on religious authority. Thus, for instance, Madawi Al-Rasheed argues that the Saudi monarchy was able to conflate obedience to the state with the notion of being a good Muslim, helping to reinforce its rule.86 Certainly, regimes that are most explicitly based on religious legitimacy were less likely to break down, but it is not clear whether they survived because they could invoke religious legitimacy or due to other reasons previously discussed. Moreover, incumbent rulers are not the only ones who can use Islam to reinforce their claims on political authority; opposition forces can do so as well.

A third explanation focuses on the relationship between opposition and ruling elites and the relative power between them. Scholars have long paid particular attention to the relationships between elites engaged in competition over the rules of the game87 and to changes in the political conditions that alter the ability of leaders on both sides to create networks, mobilize support, and frame their concerns as they engage in this struggle.88 Where radical forces are too strong, reforms are often stalled.89 Moderate forces in the ruling elite are reluctant to form coalitions with the radical opposition, fearing the consequences of change. Indeed, when it appears that radicals may be able to claim the playing field if the status quo changes, even moderate opposition forces are unwilling to side with radicals. Importantly, the decisions of these actors are driven by the perception of the
different actors’ goals and relative strengths. The belief that radical opponents are strong
and unyielding undermines the possibility of change, whether or not such beliefs are
empirically correct.

Applying this logic to the MENA suggests that the belief that the MENA contains
strong, radical, antidemocratic, Islamist forces can undermine pressures for change. It
is not Islam as a set of beliefs that affects the likelihood of change, but rather the belief
about the nature and strength of Islamist political movements that matters. If democrati-
cally oriented, secularist forces and their international sympathizers fear the ascendency
of Islamists, they can prefer the authoritarian regime in power over the possibility of an
Islamist alternative. In the period leading up to the 2011 Arab uprisings, the decline
of the radical jihadi movement, incorporation of some Islamists into the formal politi-
cal system, and cooperation between Islamist and secularist opposition over such issues
as the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and the US intervention in Iraq led to the diminishing
of fear between secularists and Islamists. The resurgence of radical jihadi forces in the
form of ISIS, Ansar al-Sharia, and other groups, combined with the experience of Muslim
Brotherhood rule in Egypt, may have the opposite effect, making non-Islamist opposition
less willing to challenge their regimes.

Regional and International Forces

External forces also influence the possibility of regime change. Two sets of arguments
are put forth to explain the stability of regimes in the region: first, the strategic importance
of many countries in the region, which explains why external actors are often reticent to
see regime change in the region; and second, the neighborhood effects, wherein changes in
neighboring states provide more or less of an impetus for actors to rally for regime change.
It has long been recognized that the geopolitics of the region, and particularly on
the presence of Israel, affect the MENA region. Some argue that authoritarian leaders
used the protracted Arab-Israeli conflict to justify building a large military apparatus,
maintaining martial law, and repressing the people. Yet while ruling elites have used the
language of the conflict to justify the strong militaries and emergency rule, it is not clear
that their people are always—or even usually—convinced by their arguments. Indeed,
even in regimes that lie far from the conflict (and where the military conflict with Israel
provides little justification for maintaining repressive regimes), one finds long-standing
authoritarian regimes.

Others argue that external actors support authoritarian regimes in order to protect their
own interests. Rather colorfully, Shaykh Fadlallah claims that the United States has
pressed Arab rulers into service as watchdogs for their policies and interests in
the Islamic world. Consequently, Muslims are repressed by other Muslims. The
Egyptians are being beaten by the Egyptian regime, and the Algerians are beaten
by the Algerian regime, so the United States does not have to dirty its hands.

As Janine Clark shows in Chapter 5, citizens in the region are highly skeptical that the
United States acts to promote democracy in the region.

The belief that powerful international players were not necessarily interested in democ-
Racy promotion may quash mobilization from below as well. Amaney Jamal, for instance,
argued that citizens support authoritarian regimes because they fear that an alternative,
likely Islamist, regime would lose US support and endanger state security.93 Turning attention from citizens to democracy promoters, Sarah Bush argued that in an effort to maintain their ability to operate within authoritarian regimes and facing little alternative pressure from donors, democracy promoters turned to “tamer” forms of aid that ultimately shored up—or at least failed to undermine—authoritarian regimes.94

The 2011 uprisings demonstrated that foreign influence does not fully explain the persistence of authoritarianism. Perhaps the most important evidence in this regard was the fall of the Mubarak regime. The United States would have preferred that the region’s largest aid recipient, most influential regional partner, and neighbor to Israel would have remained under control of Mubarak, and when the uprisings began, the United States worked hard to portray Mubarak as a reformer and stabilize the regime. Yet the United States has never controlled political change in the region as completely as proponents of this perspective suggest. The failure to support the shah of Iran and to maintain a quiescent alliance with Saddam Hussein also shows that the United States does not fully determine the region’s politics. In short, even if the United States had not promoted democratization in the MENA region as enthusiastically and consistently as it does elsewhere, it also cannot ensure its allies’ stability.

Regional actors may also affect the likelihood of regime change. The spread of unrest across the region since 2011 could be understood as the result of four effects: first, the demonstration effect, by which citizens in other countries “learn” that change is possible, and second, the diffusion effect, by which transnational networks facilitate the conscious dissemination of frames and tactics. This is more likely to occur when citizens identify strongly across countries; thus, shared Arab language and culture (reinforced by satellite and Internet media) facilitated the spread of unrest across the region.95 Third is the result of direct intervention, particularly by regional players (e.g., states, the Gulf Cooperation Council [GCC], and other regional organizations) that choose to intervene in the domestic politics of their neighbors, partly in an effort to assure stability at home (see Marc Lynch’s Chapter 8 for further discussion). Fourth is the spillover effect from changes in the neighboring states, most notably through the deterioration of border control as neighboring regimes’ grip on the state weakens and in the influx of refugees from neighboring conflicts, such as that seen in Libya, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen after 2011.

Importantly, international and regional forces can act either to promote or prevent regime change. For instance, intervention in the uprising in Bahrain promoted regime stability, while it promoted regime overthrow in Libya and prolonged conflict in Syria. So, too, the uprising in Tunisia, Egypt, and Syria initially encouraged Jordanians to take to the streets in 2011, yet by 2018, the increasing authoritarianism in Egypt and violent conflict in Syria convinced them to stay home. It is important to look closely at these factors on a case-by-case basis.

In short, the 2011 uprisings tested arguments about the persistence of authoritarian regimes in the Arab world and also provided new evidence and insights into the scholarship on regime breakdown. The nearly unthinkable became reality when first Ben Ali, then Mubarak, Qadhafi, and Salih were pushed from power. They exited in different ways in each case and with different results, but they shook the belief that the Arab world was destined to endure aging authoritarian regimes. Oil, Islam, and Israel may influence the likelihood that individual authoritarian regimes endure, but none of these factors make MENA regimes entirely immune from breakdown.
PROSPECTS FOR DEMOCRACY?

Scholars have long sought to understand why the region appeared so resistant to liberal democracy. Before 2011, scholars of the Arab world, in particular, focused on understanding “enduring authoritarianism.” Why, they asked, did authoritarian regimes in the region persist, despite escalating social and economic crises, while those in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, sub-Saharan Africa, and Latin America underwent democratization? After a brief moment of optimism following the uprisings, the question once again rose to the surface. In a global context of democratic backsliding and instability, the region may not appear as anomalous today as it did during the third wave of democratization, but many still ask, Why does democracy remain so elusive?

Before we answer this question, two points are in order. First, the region lacks a stable, liberal democracy in a well-functioning state, but contrary to conventional wisdom, it does contain electoral democracies—even Arab ones. Second, while it is important to consider the prospects for democracy in the region, this is not the only significant question to ask regarding regimes in the region. There are interesting questions about the politics of authoritarian regimes and how these regimes transition from one form of authoritarianism to another that deserve study, even if a goal is to foster democracy.

Economic Factors

There are two ways in which economic conditions may affect the establishment or consolidation of democracy. The first focuses on the relationship between economic development and democracy. As discussed earlier, modernization theorists such as Seymour Martin Lipset argued that economic growth would create demands for inclusion, ultimately fostering democracy. More recent scholars nuanced this argument, most notably with Adam Przeworski and his colleagues arguing that development made democratic consolidation, not democratization, likely. While it is important to recognize this argument, it is unlikely to explain the lack of democracy in the MENA region. In general, the region consists of middle-income countries, far more developed than their counterparts in sub-Saharan Africa. If democracy is possible in poor countries of Africa, it should be possible in the MENA region.

A second way that economic factors may affect democracy is found in the nature of assets and income distribution. Scholars argue that when assets are immobile and income unequal, it is difficult to establish a stable democracy; the obstacles may be particularly high in oil-based economies, where stakes are high. Importantly, the impact of oil in sustaining authoritarianism is a matter of debate, and even proponents of the argument recognize that it does not fully explain regime stability and the lack of democracy in the MENA region. Conflict over oil rents and the ability of incumbent elites to use oil wealth to buy support can undermine nascent democratic institutions. And in the MENA region, this appears to be the case. The conflicts in Libya and Iraq, for instance, are closely linked to the struggles over oil. Indeed, fighting often takes place around and over oil fields, and the destruction of oil pipelines in Libya, which in 2015 had reduced the country’s oil exports from an average 1.6 million barrels per day (bpd) to around 350,000 bpd and devastated the economy, becomes a strategy of war.

Religion and Democracy

Another set of explanations for the failure to develop strong, stable democracies centers on the relationship between religion and the state. Some believe that Islam and
democracy are simply incompatible. Focusing on both the doctrine and organization of Islam, Huntington famously argued that democracy and Islam are incompatible because “no distinction exists between religion and politics or between the spiritual and the secular, and political participation was historically an alien concept.”102 There are several problems with this argument. First, it assumes that all Muslims identify, first and foremost, as Muslims (rather than with ethnic groups, regions, and economic classes, for instance), an assumption that is rarely made of Christians in the West. This perspective also suggests that there is a single, monolithic interpretation of Islam, ignoring various strains within Islam and the competition among them. Finally, the argument that for Muslims “political participation was historically an alien concept”103 is also incorrect both historically and currently. The first caliph, Abu Bakr, reportedly told the people in the seventh century that they had the power to remove him if he failed to act according to God’s laws,104 which is strikingly democratic. Today as well, Islamic parties in such countries as Malaysia and Indonesia take an active role in democratic governance. Moreover, there is considerable support for democracy among Muslims in the Arab world.105

A second way to understand the impact of Islam on democracy focuses on polarization. The polarization between Islamist and non-Islamist forces may explain not only the unwillingness of regime opponents to take to the streets (as discussed earlier) but also the failure of these forces to make the compromises necessary for democracy. Alfred Stepan has postulated that democracy requires “twin tolerations,” wherein, first, religious individuals agree to act in accordance with man-made laws and, second, officials allow individuals to express their values and practice their beliefs freely, as long as they do so in a manner that respects other citizens’ rights and the law.106 He credits Tunisia’s successful transition to date with its ability to practice these twin tolerations. In contrast, Egypt’s failed attempt to establish democracy after the fall of Mubarak may be understood, at least in part, as the outcome of stark differences over views regarding the role of religion in the state107 (see Chapter 10 by Tarek Masoud).

Even in more long-standing democracies in the region, the tension between religion and the state challenges democracy. The struggle between secularists and Islamists long undermined democracy in Turkey. In the early period of the republic, Atatürk’s secularist vision took the upper hand, repressing rights of more religious Muslims to express their views and practice religion freely. This gradually changed, such that today the struggle between secularism and Islamism continues, with Islamists having the upper hand. In each case, rights and liberties are curtailed for opponents out of fear of the other, arguably contributing to democracy’s demise.

The issue of religion and the state undermines democracy in Israel as well. The tension between Israel as a Jewish state and Israel as a democratic state is arguably the greatest challenge to its democracy. Arabs, who make up about 20 percent of the population inside what is known as the Green Line, are given Israeli citizenship and voting rights and have even formed political parties and sat in the Knesset. Yet their citizenship is curtailed, perhaps most notably in their inability to serve in the military, which is a major source of social mobility in Israel, their loyalty is sometimes drawn into question, and they find themselves the target of discussions over the “Arab problem” in Israel. That is, even Jewish Israelis recognize that Israel cannot, in the long run, simultaneously safeguard Israel’s identity as a Jewish state and be fully democratic. There is a fundamental contradiction between the definition of democracy in a multireligious society and the maintenance of a Jewish state. The tension not only divides Israeli Arabs from Israeli Jews but also creates fissures among Jews as well.
International and Regional Actors

Regional and international actors can undermine democracy as well. Given their own strategic goals, external actors can challenge democracies by aiding domestic contenders in sometimes-violent struggles or by engaging directly in internal affairs. It is always difficult to know what would have been in the absence of interventions, but arguably, they have at times undermined MENA countries’ prospects for democracy. These include actions aimed at overthrowing democratically elected leaders, such as Iran’s Prime Minister Mossadeq or the Palestinian Hamas, or those in support of authoritarian leaders, outlined earlier.

The prospects for democracy appear particularly bleak for countries surrounded by authoritarian regimes. Some argue that there is a “neighborhood effect” for democracies, wherein countries surrounded by autocracies are less likely to democratize. This seemed at work after the Arab uprisings, as oil-rich monarchies in particular sought to stave off regime change and democratization in the region. Given this, strong liberal democracies may be difficult to establish in the MENA today.

Longue-Duree Arguments

A final set of arguments for why democracy is absent in the MENA focuses on historical factors, not contemporary conditions. In many ways, the foundation of these arguments is the same factors outlined previously: economic factors, religion, and international forces. The difference, however, is that all are based on the notion that divergent paths taken centuries ago explain contemporary outcomes.

Some focus on the role of financing and state-building. For instance, Blaydes and Cheney argue that the nature of military establishments in sixteenth-century Europe and the Muslim world explains the divergence in regime types today. European rulers relied on land grants to support their military, thereby establishing a feudal society, while Muslim leaders had a military force raised from slaves. Consequently, European leaders enjoyed a loyal military but found themselves constrained by a rising feudal nobility, while the Muslim rulers were put at risk of undisciplined militaries but remained unconstrained—that is, feudalism promoted democracy in Europe but not the Muslim world.109 For Rothstein and Broms, it is “temple financing” that explains the divergence between medieval Europe and the Middle East. In Europe, churches financed themselves by gathering tithes from the people, while in the Muslim world, Islamic waqfs worked akin to financial foundations. Where there was no financing from below, there was similarly no need to develop responsive institutions. This argument echoes the “no democracy without taxation” argument put forth by scholars who focus on oil, but it seeks the antecedents of autocracy centuries earlier.110

Others consider international actors. For instance, Hariri argues that differences in colonial penetration account for “Middle Eastern and Muslim Exceptionalism.” As did Blaydes and Cheney, he sees the early Muslim empire as fiscally and militarily stronger than other regions. He asserts, however, the effect was that the colonial expansion was less able to penetrate these areas. Consequently, there were fewer settlers from the West who had “communication and communion” with Europeans and weaker institutional legacies. The result, again, was democracy where Europeans had a strong presence but not in the Muslim Middle East.

These accounts are intriguing, but they also are problematic. Explanations for contemporary divergence in regimes must account not only for the correlation between these factors and present outcomes but also for instances in between—that is, the feudal system, taxation, or...
colonial success should account not only for a difference across regions in democracy today but for a divergence (or lack thereof) in interwar Europe and the region or elsewhere. Moreover, the underlying reasoning should follow for countries and regions outside the sample, traveling to Latin America, Asia, and elsewhere. And finally, they raise an important concern: If the outcomes of choices regarding military recruitment, financing, or colonial success are so permanent, and intervening choices of such little consequence, what are the prospects for countries as they go forward? These theories, though intriguing, give us very little guidance.

CONCLUSION

The MENA region has some particular characteristics that seem to undermine state-building, democratization, and institutional reform. One has been the prevalence and strength of Islam. There is little reason to believe that Muslims in the MENA region are unable to establish strong states or democracies, as they have done elsewhere. However, there is reason to believe that the presence of political Islam may affect the possibilities of democratization and pressures for institutional reform. When pro-democratic forces inside and outside the country step down their demands for reform out of fear that Islamists may be a Trojan horse, pretending to embrace democracy only until they hold the reins of power, the prospects for reform are dim. Similarly, when they seek external support against Islamist forces in transitional processes, the necessary democratic bargains will be less likely to emerge.

A second challenge has been the strategic location of the region. Its position—previously a major trade route to the East but now as a region seated atop massive oil reserves, located at the crossroads of the cold war, and one that includes Israel—has prompted international forces to invest enormous amounts of energy and resources into shoring up dependable leaders. They have tended to give incumbents the means to remain in power without building strong states, often rewarding them for repressing public opinion when it would advocate policies they find unacceptable. In doing so, regional and international forces not only accept the authoritarian nature of the leaders but often help to reinforce these tendencies. Moreover, the support that they offer leaders undercuts the needs for leaders to establish bargains with their citizens and thus arguably promotes a weak state.

Oil also appears to undermine state-building and political reform. Oil sales provide an easy source of revenue that can be invested in education, health, and other social policies, but this revenue also reduces the state’s need to tax citizens. This may help maintain authoritarian leaders and impede development of strong states.

Not only do oil, Islam, and international support affect the three facets of governance, but policies aimed at strengthening states, promoting democracy, and reforming institutions are equally entwined. Programs intended to promote effective governance often focus on one facet of development, and they use different strategies. Thus, for instance, programs aimed at strengthening states may focus on such factors as education and civic training. The approach is to help shape citizen-state engagement and extend state legitimacy and its mandate, which often requires long-term, relatively indirect interventions. Other programs are aimed at strengthening parliaments, political parties, and other institutions associated with increasing accountability, improving transparency, and, ultimately, promoting democracy. In this case, training programs and technical changes can help increase institutional capacity.
It may appear far easier to address problems one institution at a time, focusing on legisla-
tive strengthening, the rule of law, political parties, and the media. Yet without addressing
the broader issues of state-building, a focus on institutions—or even democratization—may
have limited impact.

Solutions, as the problems themselves, must be seen as part of an interrelated whole, each
being conditioned by and impacting the possibilities of others’ success. Programs aimed at
strengthening parliaments, the media, political parties, and judiciaries are likely to be suc-
cessful only insofar as they are associated with broader changes in the mandates of institu-
tions and changing executive-legislative relations. Strong, democratic institutions may be
ultimately necessary if legislatures, parties, courts, and the media are to function effectively.

At the same time, regimes are limited in the absence of state strength. Democratization,
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SUGGESTED READINGS


