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# The Implications of Leadership Change in the Arab World

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The politics of the Middle East may be more dependent on the ambitions and whims of individual leaders than in any other region of the world. Middle Eastern leaders are often unconstrained by domestic political institutions or popular sentiment: their ambitions and preferences, as well as their weaknesses and foibles, can make the difference between war and peace, revolution and stability. Leadership change in the Middle East, however, is infrequent and seldom routinized. The region often seems frozen in time, with certain leaders—Muammar-el-Qaddafi of Libya, Yasir Arafat in the Palestinian Authority, and Hosni Mubarak of Egypt, among others—ruling for decades. As Glenn Robinson remarks, “If anything, the contemporary Arab world has been marked by too much political stability at the top, not too little.”<sup>1</sup>

Table 1 suggests that a thaw is occurring. Although many Arab leaders came to power in the 1970s or 1980s, the last several years have seen remarkable change. In 1997, President Mohammad Khatami won the Iranian election, campaigning to reform the revolutionary system. In 1999, new leaders came to power in Algeria, Bahrain, Jordan, and Morocco, and in 2000, one of the most enduring leaders in the world, Syria’s Hafez al-Assad, passed away. In 2004, Yasir Arafat passed away after over three decades at the helm of Palestinian politics.

<sup>1</sup> Glenn E. Robinson, “Palestine After Arafat,” *The Washington Quarterly* 23 (Autumn 2000): 77.

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TABLE 1  
*Heads of State of Selected Middle Eastern Countries*

Country	Head of State	Year Born	Year Came to Power (formal ascension)
Algeria	President Abdelaziz Bouteflika	1937	1999
Bahrain	Amir Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa	1949	1999
Egypt	President Mohammad Hosni Mubarak	1928	1981
Iran	President Mohammad Khatami	1943	1997
Jordan	King Abdullah II	1962	1999
Kuwait	Amir Jabir al-Ahmad al-Jabir al-Sabah	1926	1977
Libya	Col Muammar Abu Minyar al-Qadhafi	1942	1969
Morocco	King Muhammad VI	1963	1999
Oman	Sultan Qaboos bin Said Al-Said	1940	1970
Palestinian National Authority	President Mahmoud Abbas	1936	2005
Qatar	Amir Hamad bin Khalifa Al-Thani	1950	1995
Saudi Arabia	King Fahd bin Abd al-Aziz Al-Saud	1923	1982
Syria	President Bashar al-Assad	1966	2000
United Arab Emirates	President Khalifa bin Zayid al-Nahayyan	1948	2004

*Source:* Chiefs of State and Cabinet Members of Foreign Governments. Central Intelligence Agency, <http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/chiefs/index.html>, accessed on April 3, 2001, and updated to reflect changes in 2004. When this report went to press, the leadership of Iraq had not yet been selected.

This article first examines how to conceptualize the issue of regime change.<sup>2</sup> It then assesses the implications of regime change in Saudi Arabia, Syria, and Egypt. These countries were chosen because of their importance in the region and to the United States. Syria represents a regime hostile to U.S. interests in a key region of the Middle East. Egypt and Saudi Arabia, on the other hand, are perhaps the most important partners Washington has in the region.<sup>3</sup>

For each case, this article attempts to discern which policies stem from geopolitical concerns and are, thus, likely to be shared by most conceivable regimes and which policies are due to particular types of regimes (e.g., Islamist versus military). In addition, it attempts to note the particular strengths and weak-

<sup>2</sup> This article examines regime change that occurs for natural causes (through the death of a leader) or through some process of internal political change (through a coup or assassination, for example). It does not examine cases of regime change that occur through external coercive military force, as was the case in Iraq in 2003.

<sup>3</sup> Examining leadership change elsewhere in the Middle East would also be valuable. Iran, Libya and the Palestinian Authority would also be important to examine, given the potential for dramatic change in these countries.

nesses of current leaders and their possible heirs to tease out how a change in the individual at the helm may affect government policies. When possible, the relative power of various alternative leaders is assessed to give a sense of the likelihood of various succession alternatives.

New regimes are likely to be cautious as their leaders try to consolidate power. However, new leaders may be particularly hesitant to risk unpopularity by cooperating with U.S. initiatives. Missteps are inevitable. Leaders may also overestimate their military forces' strength, trust unduly in international support, believe they can intimidate their adversaries, or otherwise have misperceptions that might lead to conflict. The potential changes, of course, are not all negative. In Saudi Arabia, Crown Prince Abdullah may be able to dampen anti-regime sentiment and initiate difficult reforms.

It is tempting for the United States to try to intervene in the process of regime change. The United States has few effective instruments for limited intervention, however, and open pressure often backfires. To hedge against unexpected change, Washington should consider increasing contacts with leaders and factions who are out of power but enjoy considerable support. The United States should also focus more on cultivating public opinion. Given that many countries are vulnerable to sudden changes, and almost all may, at some point, hesitate to provide access to placate domestic opinion, having many options is necessary.<sup>4</sup>

#### PARAMETERS OF REGIME CHANGE

Regime change and its implications are difficult for outsiders to predict. Western knowledge of elite politics in the Middle East is often limited. Indeed, even well-informed locals are often caught by surprise: few in Jordan anticipated that King Hussein would alter the long-established successor from his brother Hassan to his son Abdullah in his dying weeks. At times, the surprise is far more dramatic. Iran suffered a revolution in 1979 that caught almost all observers by surprise; other countries regularly suffered coups or unrest that few predicted.

Leaders differ tremendously, even if their countries' social systems and strategic environments hold constant. Leaders are capable of dramatically changing their country's foreign policy orientation, going to war despite unfavorable military circumstances, designing new domestic institutions or weakening old ones, or otherwise shaping—in addition to reacting to—their domestic political structures and international circumstances.<sup>5</sup> Egypt's President Anwar Sadat, for

<sup>4</sup> At times, a regime's leadership may prove so dangerous that military intervention is required to topple a regime. The U.S.-led campaign against Iraq in 2003 is one example. This article, however, focuses on leadership change in ways that exclude direct efforts to topple a regime. Many of the implications are immediately relevant to considerations of whether a regime should or should not be removed.

<sup>5</sup> Daniel Byman and Kenneth Pollack, "Let Us Now Praise Great Men: Bringing the Statesman Back In," *International Security* 25 (Spring 2001): 107–146.

example, led Egypt out of the Soviet camp into the American one, conducted a successful surprise attack on Israel, negotiated a peace agreement with Israel, liberalized Egypt's economy, and otherwise transformed Egypt's domestic, regional, and international policies.

Indeed, dramatic rapid regime change is possible in the Middle East, where both demagogues and visionaries have appeared with surprising frequency. During the 1950s and 1960s, Egypt, Iraq, Libya, Syria, and Yemen all experienced military coups. In 1979, a popular revolution ousted the Iranian regime. Algeria's attempt to open up its political process in the early 1990s led to a de facto military coup and a civil war. Even such democratic countries as Turkey and Israel have dramatically changed their policies when new leaders have risen to the fore.

Greater public influence on decision making is also possible, and may even be likely. Liberalization and democratization are proceeding fitfully in the region, while the information revolution is making more citizens aware of events and able to react to them quickly. These trends hardly constitute the complete transformation of Arab politics, but they do suggest that popular opinion is a growing force that should be considered by U.S. decision makers. To be clear, public opinion will not exercise a direct influence, but it may constrain what leaders do, particularly if they are politically weak.

#### CATEGORIES OF REGIME CHANGE

Regime change can follow at least three paths. First, and most obviously, it can involve a transition from one leader to another from the same cadre or power base. This would include the transition from father to son in Bahrain, Qatar, Morocco, Jordan, and Syria in the last decade, the shift to another member of the family (e.g., from Saudi Arabia's King Fahd to his half-brother, Crown Prince Abdullah as the king's health has faltered), or a transition to a leader who comes from the same set of elites and interests as the existing leader (e.g., Vice President Mubarak's ascension after the assassination of Egyptian President Sadat in 1981). This transition need not be formal or even peaceful: a coup that replaced one military leader with another (Hafez al-Assad over Salah Jaidid) or *coups de famille* (e.g., Oman's Sultan Qaboos's peaceful takeover from his father) would fall into this category as well.

The second category of changes involves a shift from one set of elites to another. The range of alternatives is, in theory, vast. Elites can come from a different ethnic group, a different social class, a different region of the country, and so on. In the Middle East, however, religious leaders are usually the most organized set of rival elites. For the most part, Middle Eastern regimes have successfully co-opted or repressed trade unions, intellectuals, professional associations, and merchants. Religious groups are harder to suppress. They typically draw on an existing organization of mosques and community networks. Because religion is integral to the lives of many citizens, few regimes are willing to

openly suppress religious practice. Moreover, several Middle Eastern regimes depend on religion for their legitimacy. Thus, it is not surprising that in recent years, Islamists have proven a grave challenge to area regimes. Islamists captured the state in Iran and Sudan, and have at times posed a serious challenge to the regimes of Syria, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Jordan, Algeria, Libya, and the Palestinian Authority.

A third category of change involves a shift from elite-based rule to a regime that more closely involves the general population. This could occur because a popular revolution installs a regime that depends on large segments of the population or from a move toward democratization, which allows ordinary individuals a greater voice in politics and the selection of leaders. In many circumstances, however, this may not represent a change in the face of the leadership, but rather the interests the leaders represent. Existing leaders may try to cultivate the populace out of a genuine commitment to democracy, to gain support for unpopular changes, or to bolster their power against rival elites.

Each of these categories requires a different level of analysis. The first level is individual: what are the strengths, weaknesses, idiosyncrasies, and objectives of particular individuals? The second level is elite-based, focusing on what characterizes a particular family or power base. The third level involves assessing potential rival groups and their agendas. How do these elites differ from the current ruling elites? Do they have different goals, or rely on different social groups for support? The converse to these questions is understanding the sources of stability. What are the geopolitical realities and limits that will inhibit changes?

The following three country studies draw on these different levels of analysis. The analysis of each country examines the different politics of key members of the current elite, the agendas of rival groups, and the sentiments of the populace at large.

### LEADERSHIP CHANGE IN SAUDI ARABIA

Succession in Saudi Arabia appears stable. The Al Saud, who have governed the Kingdom since Abd al-Aziz seized power in a daring raid on Riyadh in 1902, have survived Western imperialism, Arab nationalism, Islamic extremism, external aggression, and other threats to their rule in the twentieth century. In so doing, they have strengthened their hold on Saudi society and smoothly passed the leadership from one member of the family of Abd al-Aziz to another.<sup>6</sup>

Yet change, even dramatic change, remains possible in Saudi Arabia. Given the lack of formal checks on the monarch's authority, the transition from King Fahd to Crown Prince Abdullah and the imminent succession after that have important implications. In addition, the power and autonomy of the Al Saud are not certain: a rival might emerge who better reflects public sentiment or that of rival elites, such as the Kingdom's many Islamists.

<sup>6</sup> Indeed, in many ways, the problems the Kingdom encountered with such inept rulers as Saud bin Abd al-Aziz demonstrate the vitality of the Al Saud. In what was in essence a family coup, Saud's powers were curtailed in the early 1960s because of his economic mismanagement and bungled at-

This section explores the possible pace of change in Saudi Arabia, examining different succession alternatives and their policy implications. It also tries to identify what will not change. In Saudi Arabia (as in all countries), policy is shaped by geography and the opinions shared by Saudis of all political stripes.

### *Change within the Al Saud*

King Fahd's final days are near, and his successor, Crown Prince Abdullah, is consolidating power. King Fahd relinquished day-to-day leadership to his half brother after his stroke in 1996. Abdullah, however, is in his late seventies and is only two years younger than Fahd, raising the prospect that another leader may take his place shortly.<sup>7</sup>

*Al Saud constants.* Regardless of which ruling family member takes power, the next king is likely to share certain characteristics and objectives that are common to the family in general. The Al Saud, in general, agree on most issues. As one prince commented, "We never debate direction. We debate its focus, speed, style, emphasis, colors."<sup>8</sup>

Most would-be leaders place the Al Saud's family interests ahead of those of Saudi Arabia in general. Ensuring their continued rule is thus a priority, one that often trumps more standard economic and strategic concerns. As a result, security concerns often reflect efforts to deflect domestic opposition as well as attempts to secure the country's borders.<sup>9</sup> The family was particularly sensitive to Saddam Hussein's repeated challenges to its legitimacy; relations with Iran, in contrast, have improved since 1996, as the regime in Tehran has toned down its rhetorical challenges to the Al Saud.

In style, any leader is likely to be conciliatory and a consensus builder. Although technically a monarchy, the Al Saud exhibit many characteristics of an oligarchy: leadership is often collective and consensus-based, resulting in steady but slow decisions.<sup>10</sup> Since consolidating power, the Al Saud, in general, have proven cautious, reacting to rather than shaping events.

The family is ambivalent in its attitude toward the United States. Fahd, Abdullah, and other Saudi leaders recognize the importance of security ties to the United States and appreciate the U.S. role in defending the Kingdom against Iraq. They fear, however, that the U.S. commitment may be transitory. In addi-

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tempts to resist Nasser's threatened pan-Arab revolution; his brother, the highly competent Faysal, was given additional power and eventually made king.

<sup>7</sup> The Kingdom does not have a British-style succession in which the monarchy passes from father to son. Succession has passed among the sons of Abd al-Aziz but will soon have to go to the next generation.

<sup>8</sup> See Susan Sachs, "Saudi Prince Urges Reform, and a Move from Shadow," *New York Times*, 4 December 2000.

<sup>9</sup> F. Gregory Gause III, *Oil Monarchies: Domestic and Security Challenges in the Arab Gulf States* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 1994), 120.

<sup>10</sup> Nadav Safran, *Saudi Arabia: The Ceaseless Quest for Security* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988), 451–456.

tion, they recognize that the United States is not popular in the Kingdom and are concerned that the U.S. presence is a rallying cry for oppositionists at home.<sup>11</sup> The Al Saud seek to continue the security relationship with the United States but prefer it to be low profile, whenever possible. Current proposals to reduce or eliminate the permanent U.S. military presence in the Kingdom are falling on sympathetic ears.

This ambivalence is particularly profound with regard to cooperation on counterterrorism. The Al Saud recognize that Islamic militancy as championed by al Qaeda is a threat, perhaps the greatest threat, to their rule. However, open cooperation with the United States only adds credibility to the Islamist charge that the Al Saud family is a puppet of Washington. The Al Saud weathered such criticism during the 2003 war against Iraq, but the family remains concerned that this may undermine its legitimacy.

*Succession after Fahd.* Although the Al Saud share many objectives, which member of the family leads the country remains a vital question. Abdullah differs from Fahd in several ways, with implications for the regime's domestic and foreign policies. Abdullah is also perceived as more pious and more concerned about reducing royal family profligacy than is Fahd. He has strong ties to many of Saudi Arabia's conservative tribal leaders. Although he is not anti-American, he has at times criticized Washington harshly for its pro-Israel stance and is less comfortable with Western values.<sup>12</sup>

If Abdullah successfully consolidates power, and lives long enough to wield it, he may be better able than Fahd or, most likely, other successors to tackle the knotty problem of economic reform. Abdullah recognizes that the Kingdom's economy requires liberalization, and his personal probity enables him to ask Saudis to make sacrifices where other leaders would be accused of hypocrisy. He is also more willing to try to cut royal family interference in business.<sup>13</sup> Second, Abdullah will be better able to manage Islamist criticism of the regime. His honesty and piety are respected by Islamists, making the regime under his rule less vulnerable to charges of corruption, perhaps the leading weapon in the Islamists' arsenal of rhetoric.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Gause, *Oil Monarchies*, 122; Simon Henderson, *After King Fahd: Succession in Saudi Arabia* (Washington, DC: The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 1994), 47.

<sup>12</sup> See Sachs, "Saudi Prince"; Henderson, *After King Fahd*, 42. In May 2001, Abdullah turned down an invitation to visit Washington because of U.S. support for Israel in the Al Aqsa intifada. Abdullah also appears more willing than Fahd to cut government spending and open Saudi Arabia up economically. To the surprise of many observers, he has pushed for Saudi membership in the World Trade Organization. He has also tried to push aside military leaders, including family members, known for their graft.

<sup>13</sup> "Can Crown Prince Abdullah Lead His Desert Kingdom into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century?" *Business Week*, 21 May 2001, accessed at [http://www.businessweek.com/2000/00\\_30/b3691008.htm](http://www.businessweek.com/2000/00_30/b3691008.htm), 19 May 2001; Youssef M. Ibrahim, "The Saudi Who Can Speak Our Language," *Washington Post*, 24 February 2002 (electronic version), accessed at <http://www.library.cornell.edu/colldev/mideast/abdlhsa.htm>, 22 December 2004.

<sup>14</sup> M. Ehsan Ahrari, "Political Succession in Saudi Arabia: Systemic Stability and Security Implications," *Comparative Strategy* (January–March 1999): 25.

The picture of succession after Abdullah is not clear. The Al Saud formed a family council in 2000 to help ensure consensus on key issues, but this has not led to clarity with regard to who will rule in the future. Ignorance of Saudi politics is lessening but is still profound, particularly with regard to the dynamics of ruling family decision making. Although the regime appears stable, this perception is founded on few data. Even natives have little insight into leadership issues.<sup>15</sup>

With this caveat in mind, several names are commonly raised when the question of succession is raised. Fahd's brother, Prince Sultan, the Minister of Defense and Aviation, is widely considered to be next in line after Abdullah. Other full brothers of King Fahd—Abd al-Rahman, Turki, Nayef, Salman, and Ahmad—are also contenders. Several of the sons of the late King Faysal (Saud, Turki, and Khalid) are respected as administrators and may be considered as candidates as Fahd's brothers age.

Several of these potential leaders, like Abdullah, are experienced administrators (several oversee strategic provinces in the Kingdom), who share the Al Saud's general perspective on the region and the world in general. However, they are not equally skilled. The sons of Faysal are believed to lack a deft political touch, raising the possibility that the regime will not manage dissent well.<sup>16</sup> Sultan, the most likely successor after Abdullah, is viewed by many as among the most grasping of the potential claimants to the throne, a perception that will increase the alienation many Saudis feel toward the ruling family and make belt-tightening more difficult.

Two problems may emerge, depending on who takes power and the circumstances of the transition. First, the Al Saud may be less unified than in the past. The lack of a clear contender after Abdullah may lead to dissent within the ruling family. Second, it is possible that a leader may emerge who is a poor administrator or who does not seek to rule, such as King Saud (1953–1964) and King Khaled (1975–1982), respectively. The Kingdom has weathered such problems in the past through collective leadership that included several highly competent individuals, such as the current King Fahd, who bolstered King Khaled. Whether collective leadership would work if similar problems emerged in the future is uncertain.<sup>17</sup>

Although the Al Saud appear firmly entrenched, our limited knowledge of Saudi political dynamics requires an assessment of potential leadership alterna-

<sup>15</sup> Ahrari, "Political Succession," 13. On 1 March 1992, King Fahd spelled out the procedures for succession. The throne is to remain in the hands of the children of Abdel Aziz, the founder of Saudi Arabia. The king will choose which among them will take the crown. This goes against tradition, however, according to which the royal family collectively decides who among them is most worthy. In addition, the king's decree excluded several collateral family branches, making it particularly controversial. Ahrari, "Political Succession," 17; Henderson, *After King Fahd*, 21.

<sup>16</sup> Henderson, *After King Fahd*, 21–28.

<sup>17</sup> Saud almost drove Saudi Arabia into bankruptcy and led to the Al Saud's overthrow. Ahrari, "Political Succession," 16.

tives. Saudi Islamists are probably the most organized and popular source of opposition. They differ dramatically from the Al Saud and they disagree with the United States on such issues as the presence of U.S. forces in the Kingdom and the degree of support to give to Islamic militants. In addition, a leader who better reflects popular preferences could emerge. This latter possibility would usher in a new era for U.S.–Saudi relations, one in which cooperation would be more difficult.

### *Constants in Saudi Society*

For most Saudis, domestic concerns appear to take priority over foreign affairs. In the 1950s and 1960s, much of the Saudi elite was consumed with the question of the proper attitude toward Arab nationalism, but most Saudis today are focused on issues of corruption, prosperity, and morality. Foreign affairs are often ancillary to these issues, or viewed with these concerns in mind.

Many Saudis oppose close relations with the United States and see the United States as a foe rather than a friend. As F. Gregory Gause argues, “Many Saudis . . . continue to think that their country’s finest hour was when it defied the United States with the 1973 oil embargo.”<sup>18</sup> Saudis accept many conspiracy theories about U.S. intentions in the region, and even Western-educated liberals believe that the United States seeks to protect the Al Saud, not Saudi Arabia.<sup>19</sup> Nor do the Saudi people share the regime’s attempt to balance American and Arab concerns on the Palestinian issue. Unauthorized demonstrations against Israel, rare in Saudi Arabia, occurred in response to the outbreak of the Al Aqsa intifada.<sup>20</sup> Although many Saudis do not support terrorism against the United States, at least some segments of the Kingdom favored the attacks of September 11 and in general believe that violence is justified against Americans, particularly American soldiers fighting in Iraq or elsewhere in the Middle East. Many others embrace conspiracy theories about who was responsible, while far more believe that U.S. policy in the Middle East is the ultimate cause of the attacks.

Saudis in general have little love for Iraqis and even less for Iranians. Although the suffering of the Iraqi people under sanctions received attention in opposition circles, this appeared to be, in large part, a means of criticizing U.S. policy. The suffering of Iraqis in the 1980s received little sympathy. Many Saudis, particularly Islamists, are also virulently anti-Shi’a, considering them to be apostates. As a result, they are suspicious of Iran’s regime and also of the future of Iraq, which has a Shi’a majority. Islamist Saudis would view a secular Iraq, or one dominated by Iraq’s Shi’a, with concern. However, a more democratic Iraq that had an accountable government would also be viewed as a potential model for the Kingdom, increasing pressure on the Al Saud to liberalize.

<sup>18</sup> Gause, *Oil Monarchies*, 122.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 141.

<sup>20</sup> See Sachs, “Saudi Prince.”

### *Saudi Islamists*

Saudi Islamists are probably the most organized source of opposition to the regime and, if the Al Saud became paralyzed by infighting or if the Saudi economy became mired in a recession, they might find an opening for increased influence. Through a network of mosques, schools, and religious associations, many supported by the state, Islamists have a means to organize and propagate their message. Perhaps 20 percent of Saudis see themselves as extreme conservatives on matters of religion, with many more sharing many of the objectives of the Islamists.<sup>21</sup>

The Islamists' attitude toward the Al Saud is ambivalent. Leading Islamist critics of the regime believe that Islam is under siege and that the Al Saud have contributed to, rather than fought against, this problem. More mainstream Islamists are troubled by the profligacy of many of the Al Saud, which they see as reflecting an overall degeneration of Saudi morality. Crown Prince Abdullah, however, is respected for his piety and honesty.<sup>22</sup>

The Islamist agenda would represent a departure from Al Saud policy in several ways. The Islamists' primary agenda is internal: they seek to resist Westernization and secularization, and otherwise preserve Saudi Arabia's traditional order. Islamists also oppose the corruption and conspicuous consumption that have characterized much of the Al Saud's rule.<sup>23</sup> Their economic plans appear muddled. They issue vague calls for justice and an end to corruption, but provide few specifics. However, Islamists also have an ambitious foreign agenda. They call for aiding Muslim causes throughout the world and, as an obvious corollary, oppose ties to anti-Islamist Arab regimes such as Syria and to the United States, for its support for Israel.<sup>24</sup>

In the eyes of many Islamists, the United States is a dual threat. Islamists disagree with many aspects of U.S. foreign policy, which is viewed as hegemonic and hostile to Islam. Islamists also see the United States as a cultural threat: the U.S. military presence, in their view, brings with it Western promiscuity, vice, and threatening social mores. Many Islamists believe that the U.S. troop presence emboldens women and others to challenge traditional roles.<sup>25</sup> A U.S. withdrawal from the Kingdom would reduce some of this criticism, but more ineffable concerns regarding U.S. culture and supposed hostility to Islam will keep these grievances acute.

<sup>21</sup> Mamoun Fandy, *Saudi Arabia and the Politics of Dissent* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), 4, 33.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 3, 36.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

<sup>24</sup> See Sachs, "Saudi Prince"; Fandy, *Saudi Arabia and the Politics of Dissent*, 59.

<sup>25</sup> Gause, *Oil Monarchies*, 142; Fandy, *Saudi Arabia and the Politics of Dissent*, 49. For example, the protest of Saudi women drivers during Operation Desert Shield is believed by Islamists to have been encouraged by the U.S. military presence.

### *Geopolitical Constants*

Saudi Arabia is vulnerable. It lacks the population and fighting power to defend itself against the armies of its large neighbors and would be open to aggression or intimidation should the United States withdraw its forces from the region. Any successor regime will also rely on Western technical assistance to increase oil production capacity and streamline the production process. Even if a different leadership comes to power, it will face this security problem and thus may be compelled to look outside the Kingdom for assistance. The toppling of Saddam's regime gives the Kingdom breathing space for years to come, but both Iraq and Iran remain long-term concerns, given their large populations and historic aspirations for regional leadership.

Any successor regime is likely to find itself facing dilemmas comparable to those that have plagued the Al Saud. Under the Al Saud's leadership, the Kingdom "was simply too rich and ostensibly influential to be ignored by others, and too weak and cautious to be able to ignore them."<sup>26</sup> Alternative leaderships are likely to share this combination of wealth and weakness. Unlike the Al Saud, however, a new regime may not recognize the problem until the threat is strong and imminent.

### *Implications*

Who rules in Riyadh is a vital question for the United States. Although the most likely alternatives are favorable to U.S. interests, dramatic change remains a distinct possibility and, should it occur, Saudi Arabia may go from a leading U.S. ally to a potential foe. The majority of Saudis appear hostile to the United States and to Israel. Although they are not likely to ally with Iran or Iraq, they might curtail cooperation with the United States, particularly the U.S. military. Geopolitics may eventually force them to find an outside power to balance Iraq, but it may take years or an immediate crisis for a new regime to fully appreciate its vulnerability.

Domestically, Saudi Arabia may become more conservative, not less. Political liberalization and the growth of civil society are likely to empower Islamists, who are the best-organized opposition force and have a message that has strong popular appeal. The regime may also face pressure to avoid contentious economic reforms, particularly if it is not able to rein in the royal family's conspicuous lifestyle.

Even if Saudi Arabia retains a strong relationship with the United States, it may have difficulty acting decisively. Consolidating power will take time, and Abdullah's age makes it likely that the succession question will be an active one for some time to come. As a result, any leader will have to gain a consensus among the Al Saud in general, a process that is, at best, time-consuming and, at worst, paralyzing.

<sup>26</sup> Safran, *Saudi Arabia, The Ceaseless Quest*, 499.

Even if there is no overt change from the Al Saud to another faction in Saudi society, future leaders may be less willing to sacrifice their popularity at home to preserve a strong relationship with the United States. Although the Al Saud, in general, recognize the importance of security ties to Washington, a shortsighted leader facing domestic pressure could cut or curtail U.S. activities to court the favor of the Islamists.

### LEADERSHIP CHANGE IN SYRIA

The regime that Bashar al-Assad heads is likely to remain in power, but its grip could become weaker in coming years. Bashar's father, Hafez, ruled Syria with an iron hand for almost thirty years until his death in 2000, transforming the chronically unstable country into a bulwark of stability. This transformation came at a price. The regime relied on brutal repression, economic cronyism, and minority rule to stay in power. It is not clear whether the inexperienced Bashar can inspire the same mix of loyalty from his henchmen and fear among his opponents while successfully reforming the economy, as he has promised to do. Assessing the outlines of regime change in Syria is thus essential if we are to understand the range of possible, if not necessarily likely, scenarios for the country's future.

#### *Bashar versus Hafez*

Definite portraits of Bashar al-Assad and his father Hafez are difficult to draw. Bashar has been on the Syrian stage for less than a decade, and his father was famously known as the "Sphinx of Damascus" because he puzzled observers in Syria and the region as to what his true goals were. Nevertheless, given the concentrated nature of power in Syria's political system, understanding any differences between the two is essential.

Bashar lacked the experience his father had when he took power. After years in the military (and thus, in Syria, in politics), Hafez became a key figure after a military coup in 1966 that led his Alawi community to power. In 1970, he formally took control after ousting his rivals. Unlike his father, Bashar had little background in politics or governing when he took power. His older brother Basil had been groomed for the throne, but he died in an automobile crash in 1994. Bashar, then only twenty-eight and an ophthalmologist living in England, was quickly elevated.<sup>27</sup>

Both leaders appear to share several similarities. Neither lets ideology blind them to the necessities of power politics. Hafez worked with Christians in Lebanon against Arab nationalists, tried to divide the Palestinian camp, aided Iran

<sup>27</sup> Any pretense that Bashar was being selected according to established rules was quickly dispelled. In the six months before Hafez's death, Bashar went from being a colonel to the commander-in-chief of Syria's military. On the day of his father's death, the constitution was amended, lowering the age for assuming the presidency from forty to thirty-four, Bashar's age. Rachel Bronson, "Syria: Hanging Together or Hanging Separately," *The Washington Quarterly* 23 (Autumn 2000): 97.

over Iraq during their eight-year war, and otherwise turned his back on the Baath's Arab nationalist agenda. Shortly after taking power, Bashar made a tentative rapprochement with Iraq and Jordan and otherwise tried to preserve calm abroad while he consolidated power at home.

It is not known whether Bashar shares several qualities that helped Hafez stay in power and preserve Syria's influence. Hafez was cautious. After Israel's overwhelming victory in 1967, Hafez became acutely aware of Syria's military limits and tried to avoid a direct confrontation, even as he used terrorism to maintain pressure on Israel.<sup>28</sup> Hafez was also calm and collected, even in the face of military disasters or widespread instability. Finally, Hafez was often ruthless, willing to turn on longtime comrades and slaughter tens of thousands of Syrians to stay in power.<sup>29</sup> As a result, he could advance his agenda, even if it was not popular at home, and otherwise dominate the political debate.

Bashar's inexperience, in contrast, inspires neither fear nor confidence. Friends describe his demeanor as meek and awkward.<sup>30</sup> Many doubt whether he can rule effectively and, more fundamentally, whether he has the right to rule.<sup>31</sup> As a result, he must move cautiously while consolidating his rule.

So far, Bashar's biggest impact has been in the domestic area. He has not initiated changes that would fundamentally threaten the system or his rule, but minor dissent is tolerated, a dramatic change from his father's draconian policies. Bashar has emphasized economic reform in his speeches. In addition, he has allowed human rights organizations and civil society to reemerge, albeit tentatively.<sup>32</sup>

Bashar has also eased, though not ended, several of Syria's most contentious foreign policy rivalries. Relations with Turkey have improved since he took office.<sup>33</sup> Bashar also proved more amenable to cooperating with Saddam's Iraq, even in the regime's dying days.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>28</sup> Martha Neff Kessler, "Syria, Israel and the Middle East Peace Process: Past Success and Final Challenges," *Middle East Policy* 7 (February 2000): 70.

<sup>29</sup> Harvey Sicherman, "Hafez al-Assad: The Man Who Waited Too Long," *Peacefacts*, 7 (July 2001): electronic version, accessed at <http://www.fpri.org/peacefacts/071.200007.sicherman.assadwaitedtoolong.html>, 22 December 2004.

<sup>30</sup> "Bashar's World," *The Economist*, 17 July 2000, electronic version, accessed at [http://www.economist.com/displaystory.cfm?story\\_id=81745&CFID=43898303&CFTOKEN=f32ca7-d2021e79-7311-4241-b9ee-d483ce87c58f](http://www.economist.com/displaystory.cfm?story_id=81745&CFID=43898303&CFTOKEN=f32ca7-d2021e79-7311-4241-b9ee-d483ce87c58f), 22 December 2004.

<sup>31</sup> Bronson, "Syria: Hanging Together," 95.

<sup>32</sup> Public meetings, long banned, are now tolerated, and several hundred political prisoners have been released. Bashar's regime has allowed petitions calling for change to circulate. He has also tried to increase access to mobile telephones and the Internet, both of which were suspect because of their potential for sedition. Roula Khalaf, "Bashar Steps Out of His Father's Shadow," *Financial Times*, 16 January 2001, 15; "Bashar's World"; Alan Makovsky, "Syria Under Bashar al-Asad: The Domestic Scene and the 'Chinese Model' of Reform," *Policywatch* 512 (January 2001): electronic version, accessed at <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/watch/policywatch/policywatch2001/512.htm>, 22 December 2004.

<sup>33</sup> The roots of this rapprochement lie in the Syrian expulsion of the Kurdish Workers Party (PKK) head Abdullah Ocalan in October 1998, a decision made under threat of Turkish military intervention.

<sup>34</sup> Ahman S. Moussalli, "The Geopolitics of Syrian-Iraqi Relations," *Middle East Policy* 7 (October 2000): 104-105.

Hafez's attitude toward the Israeli–Palestinian dispute was a mixture of pride, contempt, and opportunism. He thought little of Arafat and the Palestinian movement in general, but he believed that the Palestinian dispute was at the center of regional instability. Thus, he sought to control and guide the Palestinian struggle, reducing any radicalism that could shake his regime while trying to direct it to weaken Israel in a manner that served Syria's purposes. But his policies may not be entirely Machiavellian. Some analysts believed that he saw his dignity, and that of Syria, as linked to the manner in which the dispute was resolved, a belief that made him reluctant to make concessions in the peace negotiations.<sup>35</sup>

Bashar initially continued his father's approach on the peace negotiations. Like his father, he has called for "peace of the strong"—meaning, in effect, few Syrian concessions on the Golan Heights. As the second intifada continued, moreover, he allowed (and, at times, may have encouraged) Arab and Islamic radicals (in Syria and, particularly, in Lebanon) to attack Israel. He has also used pan-Arab and anti-Israel rhetoric to shore up support among Syrians in general. In addition, he has supported Hezbollah's attacks on Israel as a means of keeping pressure on the Israeli government. Because of his weak domestic position, making any concessions to Israel beyond what his father promised would be difficult. However, Bashar's support of anti-Israel radicals goes beyond domestic politics. He appears committed to at least some degree of support for radical activity.

### *A Shift from Bashar to Other Domestic Actors*

Bashar has not made it clear who will succeed him should he die prematurely. The most likely threat is from rivals within the power elite, particularly the Alawi "Barons." A less likely danger, but one that would more profoundly change Syria, would be an Islamist-influenced regime.<sup>36</sup> Whoever takes power would probably have considerable latitude to implement his policies because of the weak state of Syrian institutions.

*The Alawi "Barons."* In his years in power, Hafez al-Assad created a family- and clan-based system with a veneer of ideology.<sup>37</sup> Hafez systematically

<sup>35</sup> Henry Siegman, "Being Hafiz al-Assad: Syria's Chilly but Consistent Peace Strategy," *Foreign Affairs* 79 (May/June 2000): 3; Kessler, "Syria, Israel and the Middle East Peace Process," 72.

<sup>36</sup> Any ruler would also have to contend with the sentiments of Syria's population, but there is little information on their preferences. Syrians appear reconciled to Israel's existence but in general favor a hard line on any negotiations. In contrast to much of the Syrian leadership, sympathy for the Palestinian cause runs deep. A shared history and close proximity to many refugees have left many Syrians acutely aware of the Palestinians' miseries. Most Syrians appear to see peace as likely, but desirable only if it involves significant Israeli concessions. Most Syrians seek a complete return of the Golan Heights as a condition for peace, and Hafez al-Assad's refusal to make concessions on this issue appeared to have widespread support. Kessler, "Syria, Israel and the Middle East Peace Process," 68–81.

<sup>37</sup> There is a nominal Baath ideology. It promotes a secular version of Arab unity, led by a small vanguard, which, in turn, is led by a supreme leader. That said, Syria (and that other nominally Baath

placed members of his Alawi community in the country's leading security and army posts. These individuals control (although they do not always formally head) Military Intelligence, the General Intelligence Directorate, Air Force Intelligence, and Political Security, as well as several elite military units that, in effect, serve as a praetorian guard. These "Barons" could move against Bashar if he proved incompetent or threatened their hold on power.

Should a putsch within the elite occur, it is not likely to result in a dramatic change in Syrian policy, particularly with regard to foreign policy. These "Barons" are focused on ensuring their community's, and of course their own, dominant position more than on any particular policy goal.<sup>38</sup> Like Hafez al-Assad, they will have to avoid highly controversial policies that might stir up popular resentment. However, it is possible that a leader may emerge and consolidate power, and, like Hafez, be able to impose his own vision on Syria and its policies.

*Syrian Islamists.* Islamists in Syria are weak. The Baath regime devastated the Islamist movement after its opposition led to widespread violence and instability in Syria from 1977 to 1982. Arrests, imprisonment, torture, and other forms of oppression, including the destruction of the city of Hama, a stronghold of the Muslim Brotherhood, involving thousands of civilian deaths, left the movement without an effective leadership or organization inside Syria.<sup>39</sup>

Islamist sentiment remains powerful. Perhaps 70 percent of Syrians are Sunni Muslims, and religious organizations retain a social network throughout Syrian society.<sup>40</sup> Islamists are highly suspicious of the Alawi-led regime. Many Islamists see Alawis as apostates, and they all oppose the vigorous secularism that the Baath party champions. Assad's brutal crackdown on Islamists in the early 1980s led to an enduring hatred among Islamist ranks.<sup>41</sup> Even many less-religious Sunnis regard the Alawis as upstarts and seek to restore their community's former dominance. If infighting paralyzed the Alawis, particularly if it led to a split in the military, Islamists might increase their influence.

An Islamist takeover would result in a wholesale transformation of Syrian society. The imposition of Islamic law and more-traditional dress codes would replace the secular credo of the Baath. Moreover, Alawis and Sunnis who benefited from the current regime would probably be dispossessed and possibly se-

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state, Iraq) had used the ideology as a pretext for political domination by an individual, constructing an authoritarian state to this end. Siegman, "Being Hafiz al-Assad," 2-7.

<sup>38</sup> Michael Eisenstadt, "Who Rules Syria? Bashar al-Asad and the Alawi 'Barons,'" *Policywatch* 472 (June 2000): electronic version, accessed at <http://washingtoninstitute.org/watch/Policywatch/policywatch2000/472.htm>, 22 December 2004. For a thorough overview of the role of ethnic and sectarian factions during the last thirty-five years, see Nikolaos Van Dam, *The Struggle for Power in Syria: Politics and Society Under Asad and the Ba'th Party* (New York, London: I.B. Tauris, 1996).

<sup>39</sup> Van Dam, *Struggle for Power*, 111-117.

<sup>40</sup> Bronson, "Syria: Hanging Together," 100.

<sup>41</sup> Kessler, "Syria, Israel and the Middle East Peace Process," 86; Van Dam, *Struggle for Power*, 107-108.

verely repressed. The Islamists' foreign policy views are not carefully articulated but, like Islamists elsewhere, the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood is highly critical of peace negotiations with Israel.<sup>42</sup>

### *Geopolitical Constants*

Whoever is in power in Damascus must confront several bitter realities of Syria's current political position. Most important, Syria is poor. The economy slowly stagnated under Hafez al-Assad, and Bashar's halfhearted efforts to liberalize have so far done little. Any regime will have few resources to co-opt domestic interest groups or to build up Syria's military strength. Unlike Saudi Arabia, Syria lacks economic influence.

Damascus will be vulnerable to bullying by its stronger neighbors. Syria's conventional military forces are weak, and the gap between it and its neighbors, especially Turkey and Israel, is likely to grow. Its military forces are large in size but poorly equipped and not well trained. Many of the elite units are focused on domestic stability, not on protecting Syria against its enemies. In 1998, Ankara forced it to stop support for the Kurdistan Workers Party through a direct threat of military force. In addition, Syria cannot risk too much escalation in its confrontation with Israel, inasmuch as in the end, Israel's superior forces would easily defeat those of Syria.

As a result of this conventional weakness, Syria will probably rely heavily on chemical weapons, missile programs, and other asymmetric threats. Missiles allow Syria a means to strike Israel, something its troubled air force and poorly trained and equipped army probably could not accomplish. In addition, missiles allow Syria to deliver chemical weapons, a potential deterrent against Israel's nuclear forces. Damascus will probably retain its ties to terrorist organizations, even if it does not employ them, to preserve a cheap and effective means of striking its opponents.<sup>43</sup>

### *Implications*

Whether Syria's current power elite will support Bashar over the long term remains an open question. Should he stumble, they may oust him or reduce his authority, transforming the country from a dictatorship into an oligarchy. Bashar's need to consolidate power will probably make him cautious, particularly on contentious foreign policy issues such as peace negotiations with Israel.

In addition, efforts to reform Syria's backward economy—which is necessary if Syria is to avoid a steady decline in power and influence—may also generate instability. Allowing the free movement of individuals and the exchange

<sup>42</sup> Van Dam, *Struggle for Power*, 92.

<sup>43</sup> Monterey Institute of International Studies, Center for Nonproliferation Studies, "Syria's Scuds and Chemical Weapons," accessed at <http://cns.miiis.edu/research/wmdme/syrscud.htm>, 19 January 2001.

of ideas poses a direct challenge to the Baath's domination of political discourse in the country. The Syrian merchant class has traditionally been a Sunni stronghold, and the Baath's economic reforms emphasize state control or industrialization as a means to offset the political power of the merchants.<sup>44</sup> In addition, many within Bashar's Alawi and Sunni power base depend on exclusive access to government contracts and on corruption to ensure their advantage. As *The Economist* notes, "If the army cannot use its private road into Lebanon as a tax-free conduit, how will it dodge the 250 percent duty on cars and other luxury imports?"<sup>45</sup>

Instability is even more likely if other Alawi leaders or Islamists take power. As Nikolaos Van Dam notes, "In Syria the principle of collective military leadership has, however, never been practiced successfully for long."<sup>46</sup> Politics could return to the chronic instability of the 1950s and 1960s, when coups were the order of the day. If the Alawis were forced from power, violence and unrest would be even more likely as Islamists and other victims of the Baath rule seek their revenge.

The impact of regime change will be far more profound at home than abroad. A shuffle within the Alawi elite would probably result in little change. Although an Islamist-influenced government would be far more hostile to Israel, it, too, would be bound by Syria's weak economy and crumbling conventional forces. A more hostile regime in Damascus might make cooperation on issues such as counterterrorism more difficult, but given the poor state of U.S.–Syrian relations in general, the overall impact will be limited.

#### LEADERSHIP CHANGE IN EGYPT

Egyptian President Mubarak does not rule with the same degree of control as do the leaders of Saudi Arabia and Syria, but this looser rule is a strength of the Egyptian system, not a weakness: it indicates that the regime is well-entrenched and goes beyond a single individual, family, or communal group. Yet Egypt's regime, like those of other Arab states, relies on a mix of co-optation and coercion to ensure its rule. The Egyptian public, particularly elements that oppose the current regime, are ignored or repressed. Because the public and opposition have objectives widely different from those of the current regime in Cairo, regime change could result in a fundamental transformation of Egypt's domestic politics and foreign policy.

#### *Change within the Egyptian Elite*

Egyptian President Mubarak is often considered an unremarkable leader. Mubarak's views appear closer to the norm of Egyptian elites than were those of

<sup>44</sup> "Bashar's World."

<sup>45</sup> "Is Syria Really Changing?" *The Economist*, 18 November 2000.

<sup>46</sup> Van Dam, *Struggle for Power*, 132.

past Egyptian leaders. In many ways, he appears to typify the views of Egypt's military and security leadership. He lacks Gamal Abdel-Nasser's charisma or Anwar Sadat's dynamism.<sup>47</sup> Mubarak is stolid, conservative, and predictable. Domestic stability is his primary concern. He has avoided grave mistakes in his twenty years in power, but at the same time, he has allowed the government to become torpid.<sup>48</sup>

There is no clear succession procedure, should Mubarak die, but an immediate successor would probably have a military or security background.<sup>49</sup> Mubarak has not appointed a vice president, probably to prevent any rival from building a power base.<sup>50</sup> Since the monarchy was overthrown in 1952, however, all of Egypt's leaders have come from the military. Possible candidates include Omar Suleiman, a veteran of Egypt's security services; the head of the air force, Ahmed Sharif; Armed Forces Chief of Staff Magdi Hatata; and Osama al-Baz, a political advisor to Mubarak.<sup>51</sup> With the exception of Osama al-Baz, these individuals have little experience in foreign policy. This relatively narrow circle of military and security leaders has tried to co-opt other military and government officials, as well as leading businessmen, while keeping the Egyptian people away from decision making.<sup>52</sup>

Egyptian elites share one overriding objective: to ensure their own grip on power. They enjoy a privileged economic position and believe the current system is a bulwark against religious radicalism. Leaders, however, can have tremendous latitude: Nasser and Sadat demonstrated that Egyptian leaders have considerable leeway on even such core issues as economic reform and relations with Israel. However, security and military elites are sensitive when economic reforms or foreign policy changes might spill over into unrest at home.

Many Egyptian elites recognize the importance of the U.S.–Egyptian relationship. Since the signing of the Camp David treaty in 1979, the United States has provided almost \$40 billion in military and economic aid. Some elites believe this assistance helped Egypt turn its stagnating economy around after the Gulf War. In addition, the United States is viewed as a stabilizing force with

<sup>47</sup> Sadat, in particular, was a rare leader. As Jerrold Green notes, “Anwar Sadat was not only able to assume power and to retain it, but also to exercise it with, at times, breathtaking boldness, innovation, imagination, and courage.” Jerrold D. Green, “Leadership Succession in the Arab World: A Policy-Maker's Guide.” University of Judaism, The Center for Policy Options, Summer 2000, 16. Accessed at <http://cop.uj.edu/Content/ContentUnit.asp?CID=529&u=1500&t=0>, 26 January 2005.

<sup>48</sup> This composite of Mubarak is taken from the author's interviews of several U.S. government officials, academic analysts, and policy analysts.

<sup>49</sup> Technically, the speaker of the People's Assembly becomes the president until the Assembly chooses a candidate, who is then subject to a popular referendum. However, that candidate is expected to be determined by Egypt's power brokers and then handed down to the Assembly for ratification.

<sup>50</sup> Egyptians joke that “the most dangerous job in Egypt is to be the second-most powerful person in the country.” Jon B. Alterman, “Egypt: Stable, but for How Long?” *The Washington Quarterly* 23 (Autumn 2000): 113.

<sup>51</sup> Author's interviews with U.S. academics; Alterman, “Egypt: Stable, but for How Long?” 114.

<sup>52</sup> Alterman, “Egypt: Stable, but for How Long?” 113.

regard to Israel–Arab tension.<sup>53</sup> Some business elites see peace and ties to the United States as necessary if Egypt is to prosper. That said, many elites have been highly critical of the U.S.–Egyptian relationship, particularly as the Middle East peace negotiations have soured, even though they recognize that it does bring Egypt a range of benefits.<sup>54</sup>

### *Geopolitical and Societal Constants*

Whoever rules Egypt will have to contend with the country's distinct characteristics and geopolitical situation. These include:

- Expectations of leadership. Egyptians have always considered themselves the leading Arab nation, a perception reinforced by its large population and proud history. Both the Egyptian people and the elites expect their leaders to take an active role in Arab and regional issues.
- Military weaknesses and strengths. Egypt is militarily strong, on paper. It possesses large quantities of sophisticated equipment.<sup>55</sup> If there is an “Arab” force deployed in the Gulf to assist the states of the Gulf Cooperation Council, Cairo is a logical candidate to head it. That said, Egypt's military poses little challenge to Israel: its level of training is poor, it does not use advanced technology well, and it cannot conduct combined arms operations. Should the Egyptian–Israeli relationship sour completely, a conventional military option is not available.
- In general, Egyptians outside the ruling circle do not seek a close relationship with the United States. The Egyptian media, including pro-government organs, are often highly critical of U.S. policies and lambaste the “Jewish lobby” in Washington.<sup>56</sup> U.S. support of Israel is roundly criticized, inasmuch as Egyptians believe that Washington could deliver concessions from Israel.<sup>57</sup> As the second intifada has continued, this criticism has grown. The United States is generally seen as high-handed and biased against Arabs.

<sup>53</sup> Yoram Meital, “Domestic Challenges and Egypt's U.S. Policy,” *Middle East Review of International Affairs* 2 (November 1998): electronic version, accessed at <http://meria.idc.ac.il/journal/1998/issue4/jv2n4a1.html>, 22 December 2004.

<sup>54</sup> For example, Abd al-Halim Abu Khazala, a former defense minister, once considered a possible successor to Mubarak, wrote that U.S. ties to Israel damage Egypt's interests. See Meital, “Domestic Challenges.”

<sup>55</sup> The United States has sold Egypt modern tanks, artillery pieces, fighter aircraft, and other systems that have augmented Egypt's military. For a review, see David Honig, “A Mighty Arsenal: Egypt's Military Build-Up, 1979–1999,” accessed at <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/watch/policywatch/policywatch2000/447.htm>, 22 December 2004.

<sup>56</sup> Abdel Monem Said Aly, “Egypt–U.S. Relations and Egyptian Foreign Policy,” *Policywatch* 448 (March 2000): electronic version, accessed at <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/watch/policywatch/policywatch2000/448.htm>, 22 December 2004.

<sup>57</sup> This view is endorsed by many Egyptian leaders. President Sadat claimed that the United States holds “90 percent of the cards” with regard to Israel's policies. As quoted in Meital, “Domestic Challenges.”

The Al Aqsa intifada and the war against Iraq have worsened Egyptian perceptions of the United States. In one poll taken by the Pew Charitable Trust in the last months of 2002, only 6 percent of Egyptians held a favorable opinion of the United States.<sup>58</sup> Thus, while current Egyptian elites appreciate the benefits of ties to Washington, this appreciation is not reinforced by a broader sentiment of good feeling toward the United States.

### *The Islamist Alternative*

Islamists represent the most organized source of opposition to the current order. There are many tendencies within the broad Islamist movement, ranging from the radical *Jama'a al-Islamiyya* to more-mainstream organizations such as the Muslim Brotherhood, to the many individual religious leaders who regularly work with the Egyptian government. The groups are often at odds with one another, and even groups with similar objectives have highly different views on how to pursue them.<sup>59</sup>

Islamist movements draw on several grievances to enhance their popularity. Islamist groups have capitalized on feelings of alienation among Egypt's poor, many of whom believe they have little voice and few opportunities. Even many Egyptians who do not endorse the Islamist ideology are sympathetic to it. Islamists are widely seen as honest, and their message promises dramatic change. In effect, they represent the only voice of opposition to the current order.<sup>60</sup>

Islamist goals are at variance with the policies of the current regime. As with Islamists elsewhere, their primary agenda is domestic: they seek the implementation of the Islamic *sharia* as Egypt's law. Many Islamist groups are hostile toward Jews and Christians, including Egypt's large Coptic Christian community, which is roughly 6 percent of the population.<sup>61</sup> Many are also suspicious of Sadat's and Mubarak's economic liberalization programs, instead endorsing vague calls for economic justice and a major government role in the economy. In their rhetoric, Islamists seek to return to a policy of confrontation with Israel and are highly critical of close ties to the United States.<sup>62</sup>

<sup>58</sup> "America's Image," *Online Newshour*, accessed at [http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/media/july-dec02/kohut\\_12-05.html](http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/media/july-dec02/kohut_12-05.html), 22 December 2004.

<sup>59</sup> For a comparison, see David Zeidan, "Radical Islam in Egypt: A Comparison of Two Groups," *Middle East Review of International Affairs* 3 (September 1999): electronic version, accessed at <http://www.biu.ac.il/SOC/besa/meria/journal/1999/issue3/jv3n3a1.html>, 22 December 2004.

<sup>60</sup> In addition, many wealthy Muslims, including many outside Egypt, give generously to religious causes, strengthening religious influences. Egyptians working in Saudi Arabia were exposed to a far harsher and more extreme version of Islam. Fawaz Gerges, "The End of the Islamist Insurgency in Egypt? Costs and Prospects," *Middle East Journal* 54 (Fall 2000): 600; Alterman, "Egypt: Stable, but for How Long?" 109–110.

<sup>61</sup> Central Intelligence Agency, *CIA Factbook*, "Egypt," accessed at <http://www.odci.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/eg.html#People>, 26 April 2001.

<sup>62</sup> Gerges, "End of Islamist Insurgency," 602–603; Zeidan, "Radical Islam in Egypt"; Fawaz Gerges, "The Decline of Revolutionary Islam in Algeria and Egypt," *Survival* 41 (Spring 1999): 114. In the mid-1990s, the United States established contacts with mainstream Islamists, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, as a hedge should instability sweep Egypt. It discontinued such contacts after heavy pres-

For now, Islamists are not likely to topple the current regime. Radical Islamist organizations such as *Jamaa'at al-Jihad* and the *Jama'a al-Islamiyya* engaged in a disorganized paramilitary struggle against the regime from 1990 until 1997, resulting in perhaps 1,300 casualties.<sup>63</sup> In the course of fighting the insurgency, Egyptian security forces arrested thousands of Islamists and penetrated and disrupted revolutionary cells. The regime licensed and controlled previously independent Islamist civil organizations, both radical and mainstream, and purged the armed forces of suspected radicals. Non-Islamist opposition voices, fearing the Islamists' radical message, backed the government's campaign.<sup>64</sup> The campaign devastated the Islamists: radical groups were shattered, and mainstream groups such as the Brotherhood found themselves on the margins of the overall debate.<sup>65</sup> The regime continues to arrest and detain suspected radicals, making it difficult for them to recruit and organize.

In addition to repressing the Islamists and their supporters, the regime also tried to co-opt less radical elements during the mid-1990s. The regime promoted the trappings of Islam, increasing religious education and media programming. Mainstream Islamists, such as those at Al-Azhar, the ancient institution of higher learning, were allowed to vehemently criticize secular intellectuals.<sup>66</sup> This co-optation reduced the power of the radicals, but it increased the power of the more mainstream movements.<sup>67</sup> If Egypt's economy stagnates such that the regime finds itself seeking greater popular legitimacy, it may allow Islamists additional influence.

### *Implications*

Leadership change within Egypt's elite may alter the emphasis of Egypt's foreign policy, but not its direction. A leader other than Mubarak may be more willing, and more able, to go outside the narrow consensus in the current elite, shaping Egypt's policy rather than simply implementing agreed-upon goals. A shift outside the current power base to an Islamist regime would represent a far more fundamental change, but Islamists, too, would face limits on their freedom of action because of Egypt's military weakness.

Political liberalization is likely to founder, while economic reform will probably be limited. Even though support for liberalization may be considerable, there is no organized base for it. The current regime has successfully portrayed itself to other elites as the only bulwark against the Islamists and will

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sure from the Egyptian government and a broader belief that contacts legitimated the very forces Washington opposed. Gerjes, "End of Islamist Insurgency," 606.

<sup>63</sup> Gerjes, "End of Islamist Insurgency," 592.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 603–604; Alterman, "Egypt: Stable, but for How Long?" 110–112.

<sup>65</sup> Gerjes, "End of Islamist Insurgency," 600–601.

<sup>66</sup> Steven Barraclough, "Al-Azhar: Between the Government and the Islamists," *Middle East Journal* 52 (Spring 1998): 239–245.

<sup>67</sup> Gerjes, "End of Islamist Insurgency," 593–594; Alterman, "Egypt: Stable, but for How Long?" 108, 112.

not hesitate to play up this concern if challenges to its rule mount. Because the regime relies heavily on business interests, economic changes are likely to avoid a return to the state-dominated policies of the past. That said, reform is also likely to avoid measures that threaten the existing businesses' position, even if this results in reduced competition and productivity.

Egypt's close relationship with the United States rests on thin foundations. Cooperation on counterterrorism is excellent, but this is usually conducted behind the scenes. Because the Egyptian populace and potential opposition figures are not supportive, and because many elites are, at best, lukewarm about ties to Washington, the regime may be tempted to distance itself from Washington should it find itself in a domestic crisis. This temptation will be acute if Palestinian-Israeli tension is high and the United States is seen as close to Israel. Efforts to liberalize the regime as a means to offset and channel dissent could lead to increased criticism of the U.S.-Egyptian relationship.

The regime's co-optation of mainstream Islamists also has far-reaching foreign policy implications. Many traditional Islamic authorities now have a degree of autonomy from the government that they use to press it on issues of religious importance, particularly social issues.<sup>68</sup> They may use this autonomy to press for changes in Egypt's foreign policy, particularly with regard to the peace negotiations or relations with the United States in high-profile issues.

The "Cold Peace" with Israel could get even colder. Peace for Egypt is necessary for good relations with the United States, and the limited quality of the Egyptian military makes a military confrontation difficult to conceive. However, the regime may become less supportive of concessions by the Palestinians, use more bellicose rhetoric, reduce economic ties, or otherwise distance itself from Israel.

A hardening of positions toward Israel could lead Egypt to renew its quest for weapons of mass destruction (WMD). Egypt is believed to have a stockpile of chemical agents and has not signed the Chemical Weapons Convention, although it is not believed to have a significant biological or nuclear program.<sup>69</sup> Increased tension with Israel, however, could cause Cairo to seek WMD as an offset to Israel's conventional military superiority.

### PREPARING FOR REGIME CHANGE

As the above analysis suggests, the most probable scenarios are variations on current themes. Sons will succeed fathers, or members of the same power base will take the helm if a current leader dies or becomes ill. The potential for change, however, is quite large. Leaders are often out of touch with the population as a whole, and opposition voices have little say. As a result, a shift in ruling

<sup>68</sup> For a review, see Barraclough, "Al-Azhar," 239–245.

<sup>69</sup> Center for Nonproliferation Studies, Monterey Institute of International Studies, "Nuclear, Biological, Chemical, and Missile Capabilities in the Middle East," accessed at <http://cns.miiis.edu/research/wmdme/egypt.htm>, 29 January 2001.

elites could lead to dramatic changes in a country's policy. Indeed, given the centralization of power in most Arab states, even a shift from one member of an existing power elite to another could have important implications for U.S. policy. Geopolitical realities and social constants will limit change or shape it to some degree, but dramatic shifts in a country's alignment and policies are possible.

This final section summarizes several of the most pressing concerns and dangers that emerge from the above cases. It identifies signposts that would suggest that regime change may occur. It then offers actions to shape the environment to prevent unfavorable regime change, and if this cannot be averted, proposes hedging actions to minimize any dangers.

### *Potential Risks and Opportunities*

Leadership change in the Middle East raises the risks of several dangers. Among the most important, for friends as well as adversaries, are the difficulties inherent in consolidating power. Even if there is no change in a regime's power base, a new leader will still have to establish his supporters in power while minimizing the influence of potential challengers. During this interim period, a leader's ability to make policy will probably be circumscribed. Moreover, new leaders will be focused primarily on domestic politics and may be reluctant to take risks on foreign policy. Given that open ties to the United States are questioned by their populace, new leaders may hesitate to risk unpopularity by cooperating with U.S. initiatives.

More generally, U.S. alliances and positive developments in the peace negotiations rest on a thin foundation. Leaders who are not beholden to public opinion are better able to make concessions to Israel or at least moderate their government's policies. If liberalization occurs in Egypt or Saudi Arabia, to say nothing of an increase in Islamist influence, then anti-U.S. and anti-Israeli policies are likely to gain strength.<sup>70</sup>

The inexperience of some leaders also poses risks. Although Crown Prince Abdullah is highly experienced, Bashar al-Assad remains a neophyte. Future leaders of Saudi Arabia after Abdullah, and the successors to Mubarak or Saddam, may be more skilled in domestic politics than in foreign affairs. This may lead simply to missteps and clumsiness, but it also could have far graver consequences. Leaders may overestimate their military forces' strength, trust unduly in international support, believe they can intimidate their adversaries, or otherwise have misperceptions that might lead to conflict.

Democratization is also a mixed proposition. Successful liberalization and power sharing raise the prospect for more-stable regimes. However, many populations in the Middle East are hostile to the United States, and if they gain a greater voice their regimes, are likely to face pressure to reduce ties to Washington. Islamists, in particular, are often the best organized and best prepared to take advantage of a more open political system.

<sup>70</sup> Green, "Leadership Succession," 6.

### *Recommendations*

The United States should anticipate potential changes to current assumptions about regime stability and shape and hedge accordingly.

*Anticipating changing assumptions.* Planning for regime change requires recognizing when assumptions about how a regime will behave are vulnerable. Obviously, analysts should continue to follow the changing fortunes of individual leaders to best determine who may take power should a current leader die or become incapacitated. Anticipating more-fundamental shifts is far more difficult. Predicting a coup, revolution, or other forms of rapid and radical regime change is exceptionally difficult. However, certain indicators suggest that a country is likely to face regime instability, including:

- The presence of partial democracy. In general, mature democracies and established autocracies are fairly stable. Regimes that are in transition, however, often face unrest and instability and are more likely to go to war. If Egypt, Syria, or other regional states liberalize, they may be vulnerable to sudden changes.<sup>71</sup>
- A crisis among the elite. Many revolutions begin after a split in the existing elite. As a result, regimes may find it difficult to repress or co-opt dissent, providing opportunities for revolutionaries.
- The spread of populism. Even if democracy does not spread, elites may rely more on populism to mobilize support for their rule. For many years, politics in the Middle East was the purview of elites such as military leaders, security officials, wealthy landowners, and businessmen. If leaders appeal more and more to the people for support, popular views, which are often at odds with those of current regimes, will matter more.

*Shaping and hedging.* The United States should also consider actions to shape the environment to make any regime change more favorable and, should that not be practical, hedge against unfavorable changes.

Given the importance of regime change, it is tempting for the United States to try to intervene in the process. Unless the United States is willing to intervene decisively, as it did in Iraq, it often has little influence over succession in most countries and, in general, lacks enough information to use what little influence it possesses. Pressure may backfire, leading to the rise of anti-U.S. leaders.<sup>72</sup>

<sup>71</sup> *State Failure Task Force Report: Phase II Findings* (Washington, DC: Science Applications International Corporation, 1998), 19–22; Edward D. Mansfield and Jack Snyder, “Democratization and the Danger of War,” *International Security* 20 (Summer 1995): 5–38.

<sup>72</sup> Green, “Leadership Succession,” 3–5. Indeed, information is often lacking among Middle Eastern elites. As Jerrold Green notes, “No one was more surprised at the election of President Mohammad Khatami than was Khatami himself.”

Washington should also consider increasing contacts with leaders who are out of favor and factions that are out of power but enjoy considerable support. Focusing exclusively on the current power set risks being blindsided should dramatic change occur, as it did in Iran. Islamist groups deserve particular attention. Many of these groups are hostile to the United States, but dialogue is possible with some members, and indeed necessary, if many of the stereotypes and conspiracy theories are to be dispelled. Establishing contacts with nonregime figures, of course, will anger the regime, a tricky balance to negotiate.

The United States should also focus more on cultivating public opinion. The current U.S. focus on elites will be less fruitful in the coming years. The possibility that publics may play a greater role in decision making than in the past is currently a danger for the United States because of the hostile perceptions many Arab publics hold toward U.S. policy. Washington should attempt a media strategy that explains U.S. positions, going beyond the standard Western outlets and focusing on Arab satellite television stations and newspapers. The United States should also consider increased student and military exchanges to improve familiarity with the United States.

The U.S. military should consider a diverse and redundant basing structure and access arrangements as a hedge against instability or change in one country. Given that many countries are vulnerable to sudden change, and almost all may at some point hesitate to provide access to placate domestic opinion, having many options is necessary. States such as Saudi Arabia and Egypt, where domestic and opposition opinion appears firmly against ties to the U.S. military, are of particular concern.