

# **Contemporary Middle East and North Africa Politics**

*Essays on a Region in Flux*

By

**Hilal Khashan**

Contemporary Middle East and North Africa Politics: Essays on a  
Region in Flux

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To George Friedman

A Man of Honor and Integrity

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# Introduction: A Rapidly Changing Region

The Middle East and North Africa is a troubled region, and it isn't easy to find a success story to write about or a rewarding political experience to report. Like other world regions, it came under a succession of imperial rule and dynastic states and saw more wars than peace. Sedition, mutiny, and poverty were typical characteristics of life throughout the region. The MENA region did not have its renaissance, and it missed the age of reason and the industrial revolution. When Arab and Muslim intellectuals in the nineteenth century took issue with the old-fashioned way of life and aspired for modernization and espoused rational thinking, European colonialism did not give them the chance to overcome their backwardness. It coerced them to retrench and adopt Islam as the vehicle for modernization and stopping European intrusion into their lives. They neglected to make Islam compatible with the requirements of modernity, espousing it in its medieval format to tackle the complex issues of progress.

The first half of the twentieth century saw defining events in the Middle East. The Middle East and North Africa state system started to take shape on the ruins of the Ottoman and Qajar Empires after the First World War and the termination of Anglo-French colonialism in the aftermath of the Second World War. The acceleration of European influence, beginning in the nineteenth century, created an identity crisis for the peoples of the MENA region who became torn between Islam, nationalism, ethnic and religious divisions, and secularism. The ruling elite and the intellectual class failed to enlist the people's support for their policy or approve of the new political arrangements. After two and a half centuries of progressive decline, the Ottoman Empire collapsed in the aftermath of the First World War, giving way to the Turkish War of Independence under Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. In 1923 he proclaimed the rise of the Republic of Turkey. The following

year, he abolished the Caliphate and, in a dramatic move, charted for Turkey a secular path in a sharp departure from centuries of Ottoman Islamic legacy. Despite his charismatic appeal, Atatürk failed to unite the Turks behind his statist regime model. Although strongly nationalistic, the Turkish people remain divided over the place of Islam in politics and society.

Iranian people's hope that the 1905 constitutional revolution would lead to democracy gave way to pessimism in 1911 after it failed after the British withdrew support for it. Britain, clearly more interested in promoting its oil interest in Iran's lucrative oil market, established in 1908 the Anglo-Persian oil company. The British supported Reza Khan's military coup in 1921, and in 1925, the parliament elected him king of Persia. He adopted the name of Reza Shah and in 1927 he launched a comprehensive modernization plan. Reza Shah changed the name of his kingdom to Iran. He set out to modernize it without daring to adopt Turkey's secularization model because of the strength and autonomy of the Shiite clerical establishment. Concern about his pro-Nazi tendencies, the British occupied most of Iran in 1941 and sent Reza Shah into exile. The British presence in Iran facilitated the rise of an informed public and a pluralistic political environment. Iran's democratic experience did not last. The democratically elected Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddegh's decision to nationalize the Anglo-Iranian oil company led to his ouster in 1953 in a military coup schemed by the USA and Britain. The Iranian people did not forget the indignity of Western manipulation of their country's sovereignty. The lackey government of General Fazlollah Zahedi allowed Mohammad Reza Pahlavi to return to Iran and rule it using maximum coercion with the assistance of the notorious SAVAK intelligence apparatus.

In anticipation of the demise of the Ottoman Empire, the British and French foreign ministers agreed in 1916 on dividing between themselves of what remained of it in what became known as the Sykes-Pi-

cot agreement. Britain took Iraq, Palestine, and Transjordan, whereas France wrested control of Syria and Lebanon. They created artificial states with no historical roots and tampered with their people's national orientation and aspirations, setting the stage for their eventual implosion and infliction of incalculable human suffering.

Ibn Saud expanded the Najd-based Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in the Arabian Peninsula by 1932 after annexing Hijaz and Asir in the west and Ahsa and Qatif in the east. The much smaller Arab emirates on the western coast of the Persian Gulf sought British protection in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, eventually winning their independence between 1960 and 1971. The Sultanate of Oman had been independent for centuries and succeeded in creating a maritime empire that its vast territory dissipated in the twentieth century. In the Peninsula's southwest, Yemen's Mutawakilite kingdom languished in poverty and squalor. At the same time, the British controlled its strategic southern part until 1968, when they granted it independence to become the Arab world's only communist country.

Egypt charted its independent path from west Asia following the French invasion in 1798. The British, however, moved in quickly, destroyed the French fleet in the Battle of the Nile, leading to Napoleon's army's isolation and withdrawal. Before the end of 1803, the British withdrew their troops from Egypt under the 1802 Treaty of Amiens. In 1805, Muhammad Ali Pasha, dispatched by the Ottomans to Egypt to stabilize it after the Mamluks who ran amok, established his state and dynasty that lasted until 1952. Determined to construct an empire, he developed his military and modernized the state machinery. His army seized Sudan, ventured into the Arabian Peninsula, evicted the Ottomans from Syria, and advanced deep into Anatolia after winning the Battle of Konya in 1832. In the 1839-1841 Egyptian-Ottoman War, the British-led Europeans intervened in the fighting against Muhammad Ali's army and, in the 1840 Convention

of Alexandria, forced him to relinquish his territorial claims in Syria and Anatolia. They allowed him, however, to keep his dynasty in Egypt and Sudan.

After preventing Egypt from becoming a regional power, the British had an irresistible need to occupy it once the Suez Canal became operational in 1869. They took advantage of Khedive Tewfik Pasha's defaulting on paying his debt and Ahmad Urabi's rebellion against his corrupt rule. British troops landed in Alexandria in 1882, defeated the uprising, and declared Egypt a British crown protectorate. Even though Egypt won its nominal independence in 1922, British troops remained in the Suez Canal area until 1954, two years after a group of young army officers deposed King Farouk, the last ruler of Muhammad Ali's dynasty.

European colonization of North Africa had a different dynamic than the unfavorable turn of events for Middle Easterners. In North Africa, the early arena of confrontation between Muslims and European Christians occurred in the Iberian Peninsula, most of which fell to the Muslims in 711. The Battle of Granada in 1492 ended Muslim rule after three centuries of steady decline. The demise of al-Moravid and al-Mohad dynasties in Iberia and Morocco by the end of the thirteenth century saw the rise of small and fragmented Muslim entities that were no match for the Spaniards' surge during the Reconquista. The decline of Muslim power in Morocco and Spain resulted in the early phase of European colonialism. The Portuguese seized Morocco's Ceuta in 1415 before ceding it to Spain in the 1668 Treaty of Lisbon. In 1497, Spain took Moroccan Melilah during the peak of its naval power.

In 1830, the French seized Algeria. Although they defeated the rebel forces of Prince Abdu Qadir al-Jaza'iri by 1847, the occupation of Algeria took until 1870 to complete and the early twentieth century to pacify the restive population. The French scorched land policy killed more than 800,000 natives. French occupation policy and the excesses

against the local people from 1945 until Algeria's independence in 1962 traumatized its population, left indelible scars, and stood as a grim testimony to brutal colonization. The French pursued a policy of colonization for prestige, competition with Great Britain, and assimilationist mission of spreading the cultural values of the White Man took Tunisia in 1881 and placed Morocco under their protection in 1912, even though French penetration of the country started in 1907. It took the joint efforts of France and Spain to crush Abd el-Krim's rebellion in 1925 before Morocco's pacification in 1934.

The emergence of an Arab state order coincided with the end of the Second World War and the formation of the Arab League in 1945 of seven founding members: Egypt, Iraq, Syria, Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, Jordan, and Yemen. Inherent divisions perturbed Arab politics and prevented the Arab League from achieving collective economic, political, and defense integration. In 1948, the Zionist Movement achieved its objective of creating a Jewish state in Palestine, further weakening the Arab order, whose countries failed to address the new territorial challenge. The rise of Israel has impacted the entire Middle East and North Africa region and continues to shape its events. It precipitated the Palestinian refugee problem, radicalized Arab politics, and triggered a chain of significant developments that continue to unravel.

The 1967 Six-Day War altered the region's territorial and geopolitical contours as Israel won decisively against the combined Egyptian, Syrian, and Jordanian armies. The 1970s saw the rise of independent Qatar, Bahrain, and the United Arab Emirates. Oman had already won its independence from Britain in 1951 and Kuwait in 1960. Yemen became sovereign in 1918, and Saudi Arabia took its current shape and boundaries in 1932. Oman became independent after it signed a treaty of friendship with Britain in 1951. Britain gave South Yemen its independence in 1967 as part of its policy of withdrawing from East of Suez. It adopted the name of the People's Republic of Yemen, becom-

ing the only communist Arab state. It merged with north Yemen in 1990 but tried to secede in 1994, prompting an unsuccessful civil war to regain its independence.

Iran's Islamic Revolution in 1979 coincided with Egypt's becoming a pariah state in the Arab region after signing the Camp David Peace Accords in 1978. Adopting an aggressive Arab policy, Iran provoked Iraq, urged its people to topple Saddam Hussein's regime, and replace it with an Islamic state inspired by Iran's. It articulated a firm anti-Israel policy and, in 1982, sent military trainers and Islamic revolutionary preachers to Lebanon to prepare for the rise of Hezbollah. Iran took advantage of Lebanon's civil war and the collapse of the state authority to build its power status by challenging Israel's regional supremacy.

Iran's Pahlavi Dynasty and Turkey's Mustafa Kemal Atatürk and his successors sought to modernize their countries economically while keeping their tight grip on politics and society. In the Arab East, the new regimes tried to comprehend the consequences of establishing Israel as a Jewish state and the rise of the Palestinian refugee question. In 1949, the UN voted in favor of granting independence to Libya, and in 1951 Idris Sanusi declared Libya an independent Kingdom. The French allowed Tunisia and Morocco to declare their independence in 1956 and Mauritania in 1960. The Algerians fought a bloody independence war as France resisted giving it freedom, considering Algeria an extension of the Province of Marseilles. The 1950s and 1960s saw military coups surging throughout the region. At the same time, plans to develop economically accelerated, and political development stalled as many countries adopted the one political party system. In contrast, others allowed none, such as the Arabian Peninsula and Iran.

Relations between Morocco and Algeria were never friendly due to unresolved border territorial claims, a permanent legacy of the reckless land allocation of the colonial era. One among many examples

of the colonial territorial policy is Spain's ending of its colonization of Western Sahara in 1976 after a 92-year rule that precipitated a protracted conflict between Morocco and the Algerian-backed Polisario Front, who wanted independence for the Sahrawi people.

Everywhere in the region, the ruling elite attempted to economically modernize their countries while eschewing political development or even granting their peoples a modicum of freely expressing their views or articulating their demands. Economic development failed in most countries, including the oil-rich Persian Gulf states, whose reasonably high living standards vacillated due to unstable oil prices. Even Turkey, who made impressive economic leaps during the past two decades, could not escape falling into the trap of cyclical financial crises.

The first quarter of the twenty-first century saw the destruction of Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, Libya, and Sudan's partitioning. In Sudan, following massive demonstrations over runaway corruption and worsening economic conditions, the Commander of the Army, General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, and the leader of the Rapid Support Forces, Mohammad Hamdan Dagalo, overthrew President Omar al-Bashir in April 2019. However, they clashed shortly afterward over sharing power, eventually plunging Sudan into a civil war since April 2023. In Syria, the regime of President Bashar al-Assad finally collapsed in December 2024 after more than 13 years of civil war that killed more than one million people and displaced 14 million Syrians. The new regime in Damascus faces immense challenges that threaten the disintegration of the country into several sectarian and ethnic ministates.

In October 2023, Hamas launched a surprise attack on Israeli settlements around Gaza, killing more than one thousand Israelis and causing widespread destruction. Israel responded massively to destroy Hamas, but in the process, it killed more than 50 thousand Gazans and



made the entire Gaza Strip unlivable. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu pledged that the war will not end before transforming the Middle East, especially after Lebanese Hezbollah decided to open a front of solidarity with Hamas. Israel retaliated powerfully against Hezbollah, killing nearly all of its top military and political leadership, including its chief, Hasan Nasrallah, and delivering a crippling blow to Hezbollah's military capability. The war in Gaza, the defeat of Hezbollah, and US President Donald Trump's decision to use overwhelming military force to end Yemen's Houthis attacks on shipping in the Red Sea delivered a deadly blow to Iran's regional ambitions, especially after it lost Syria. Other countries, such as Egypt, Algeria, and Jordan, were rocked by uprisings, arbitrary rule, and rejection of power-sharing. Ideological divisions and economic difficulties turned into protests in Turkey, especially in Iran, where the regime came under grueling economic sanctions.

The MENA is a conflict-ridden region, and positive developments scarcely come out of it. This volume consists of 100 easy-to-read essays tackling the region's conflicts and historical evolution, relating them to contemporary issues. Each piece includes the publication date to link certain events to a specific period. It specifically questions and analyzes the political, economic, and interstate issues that beset the region without resolving them, either at the domestic or collective level. The readings do not address Israel's domestic politics, even though it covers its relations with other Middle Eastern countries. In terms of presentation, the readings consist of the following six parts: (1) Emerging Trends; (2) The Levant; (3) The Arabian Peninsula; (4) The Nile Valley; (5) The Maghreb; and (6) The Turkish-Iranian Belt.

The volume concludes by drawing on the sobering turn of events in the MENA region in the past few decades. Most of its countries suffer from fundamental, seemingly unyielding problems regardless of the structure of their political systems and human development

index rankings. The conclusion does not sermonize these countries' ruling elites on what they need to do to transform their societies for the better, but of the devastating consequences of failure to rationalize their decision-making process and pursuing narrow personal interests at the expense of national well-being.

Several individuals contributed to the production of this volume. I am grateful to my wife, Manal, who selflessly gave me the space and the time to write the essays and prepare them for publication in a book format. I am greatly indebted to George Friedman, founder and chairperson of Geopolitical Futures, who permitted me to republish the essays as a collection of readings. I also thank Meredith Friedman, who supported this project and took care of the paperwork. Valentina Jovanovski did a great job editing the essays, and Jill Bellenger, GPF's Marketing Director, has continuously motivated me to keep writing. Finally, I am grateful to my graduate assistant, Fares Harald Sinno, who contributed to the list of further reading. While many individuals contributed to this book, I am solely responsible for its content.

The collection is adapted from selected works published between 2019 and 2024 in the Geopolitical Futures forum.

Part One

# Emerging Trends

# 1. Does Trump's Peace Plan Matter?

In 2020, U.S. President Donald Trump announced a plan to end the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Although the Palestinians immediately rejected the proposal, many Arab states embraced it. In fact, the ambassadors of the United Arab Emirates, Oman and Bahrain attended the press conference where the plan was announced – though the ambassadors of Egypt and Saudi Arabia, two core Arab countries that have also endorsed the proposal, were conspicuously absent. Nonetheless, the presence of representatives from three small Arab states was aimed at giving the plan a modicum of Arab legitimacy. Ultimately, however, Trump's peace plan will not bring peace to the Middle East.

## **Changing Attitudes Toward Israel**

Arabs did not enter the 1948 war against Israel enthusiastically. The Egyptian Cabinet was opposed to it; the Hashemites joined it to grab their part of Palestine as per the 1947 partition plan; and the Syrians had a rudimentary and poorly led army. Until 1967, when the Six-Day War broke out, Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser insisted that he had no intention of going to war with Israel, and that he would only consider a defensive war to repel an Israeli attack. He demanded the implementation of United Nations resolutions for ending the conflict with Israel, especially U.N. Resolution 194, which called for repatriating or compensating Palestinian refugees. But in 1967, Nasser miscalculated when he closed the Tiran Strait to Israeli shipping. This gave Israel the pretext to go to war, complete the unfinished 1948 conflict and seize all of historical Palestine.

Over time, however, attitudes among some Arab states toward Israel have begun to change. Israel signed the Camp David Accords with

Egypt in 1978 and the Wadi Araba Peace Treaty with Jordan in 1994. The 2002 Arab Peace Initiative would have recognized Israel's right to exist and extended official legitimacy to it, though Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon never agreed to the proposal. Arab countries are eager to bury the hatchet with Israel and engage on economic, political and defense matters. They have a vested interest in aligning with Israel militarily against what they see as a looming Iranian threat and politically against an increasingly aggressive Turkish foreign policy in the Gulf, Red Sea and Eastern Mediterranean. In fact, they have been cooperating with Israel on economic and intelligence issues for years. But most of the Arab-Israeli cooperation has been taking place covertly. This is why Arab states are eager to find a deal that would solve the Palestinian issue. Arab tradition places great emphasis on honor, so having an agreement between the Israelis and Palestinians would allow the Arabs to deal with Israel openly without being accused of selling out.

But agreeing to a deal has proved exceedingly difficult. For Israel, negotiating peace agreements with Egypt and Jordan was fairly easy. Its territorial claims on Sinai were flexible; after occupying it three times in 1948, 1956 and 1967, it always proved willing to return it to Egyptian rule. The 1974 Arab summit in Algiers relieved Jordan of its claim to the West Bank, which made making peace with Israel more manageable. However, the Golan Heights and the West Bank are a different matter. The Israelis believe they have a right to these areas – that they already paid a high price for the security they would afford. The West Bank also has religious significance for Israelis, so they will not give up their claims to it quietly. The Palestinians feel betrayed by their fellow Arabs who made peace with Israel without defending their rights and transformed the Arab-Israeli conflict into a Palestinian-Israeli conflict. It should be no surprise, therefore, that the latest plan has been met with mixed responses from the region.

## **A Breakthrough Deal?**

While U.S. officials have hailed Trump's "deal of the century" as a breakthrough, the Palestinians have fiercely denounced it as the "slap of the century." Peace treaties usually reflect the economic, political and military balance of power in the conflicts they are meant to resolve. But this concept often does not apply in matters of high principle such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Israel has won every conventional war against Arabs, and the Palestinians realize that they are the weaker party in the negotiating process. But the financial incentives in Trump's plan have not convinced the Palestinians to accept the loss of East Jerusalem as their capital and all but 15 percent of Palestinian-claimed land.

The Israeli position on accommodating Palestinian national aspirations has not changed since the 1978 Camp David Accords, which promised to grant the Palestinians a self-governing authority within five years but only under a permanent Israel Defense Forces presence inside the West Bank. This was followed by the 1993 Declaration of Principles to establish interim Palestinian self-rule that would lead to a permanent settlement of the conflict within five years on the basis of Security Council resolutions 242 and 338. The same resolutions governed the formulation of the Oslo I (1993) and Oslo II (1995) agreements. Trump's plan gives the Palestinians four years to comply with certain prerequisites of statehood, including recognizing Israel as a Jewish state (despite the fact that 21 percent of its population are Arabs). The Palestinians believe that by the end of the four years, Israel will conclude that they have defaulted on the deal and continue to build settlements and change the reality on the ground.

Indeed, both the Israelis and the Palestinians view each other with suspicion and distrust. The Israelis believe that the ultimate objective of the Palestinians is to see the destruction of their state, whereas the

Palestinians argue that Israel is stonewalling any attempts at peace. They would cite as an example the 2002 Quartet on the Middle East, which introduced a roadmap to peace that would help the Palestinians prepare for statehood. The roadmap ultimately went nowhere. The latest proposed peace deal also seems destined to go nowhere. Though the Palestinians have rejected it, Arab countries like Morocco, Egypt, Oman, Bahrain and the UAE have embraced it. Arab rulers are undeterred by the plan's recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's undivided capital; they understand that Trump's peace plan is an attempt to appeal to his evangelical base ahead of U.S. elections in November. On Feb. 1, Arab foreign ministers gathered for an emergency meeting requested by the Palestinian Authority. This is just one more sign of the growing divide between the Palestinians and Arab countries that want to move beyond the Palestinian question.

## **No End in Sight**

The stateless Palestinians are the weakest link in the Arab world. Yet, they possess the strongest bargaining chip vis-a-vis Israel, because as long as there is no agreement on their status, there will be no peace in the Middle East. Israelis demand that Palestinians accept Israel as a Jewish state but are willing to make few concessions. The Palestinians argue that the creation of the state of Israel in 1948 and their expulsion from their homeland was an injustice. They believe that the Hashemites and Ibn Saud colluded with the British and the Zionist movement to facilitate the rise of the Jewish state at their expense.

The center of gravity for Arab politics has shifted over the past 40 years from Egypt, Iraq and Syria to the Gulf – namely, Saudi Arabia and the UAE, countries that do not view Israel as their enemy. They want to establish an alliance with Israel to neutralize the threat from Iran and Turkey. (Egypt and Morocco are not concerned about Iran because, as a Shiite country, Iran is incapable of religiously influencing their

populations. They are, however, concerned about Turkey, a Sunni country currently governed by the pan-Islamist Justice and Development Party, or AKP.) The Palestinians know that they will continue to live under Israeli surveillance with or without a peace treaty. They have endured conflict for more than a century, and it has no end in sight. Their rejection of Trump's plan will preclude the establishment of an open alliance between Arab states and Israel. Without Palestinian endorsement, there's little hope that Arab-Israeli cooperation can move forward.



## 2. In the Arab World, Sham Elections Still Rule the Day

After being ruled by various empires for millennia, Arab societies missed out on the social and technological movements that swept through Europe and transformed European societies into modern democracies. Arab societies were subjugated by their colonial rulers and missed the opportunity to bring Islam into the modern age. They remained captives of the Quranic text, which required Muslims to “Obey God and obey the Messenger [the Prophet Muhammad] and those in authority.” Islam forbade its followers from rebelling against their rulers except under two conditions: if a ruler was guilty of infidelity or was considered an unjust leader. The expectation of complete obedience blunted efforts to develop democratic institutions, leading to a system of perpetual instability and uncertainty.

The Arab state system emerged gradually after the First World War. Prior to the 1950s, a decade in which many military coups were carried out across the developing world, political systems in the region allowed for pluralism and periodic elections – especially in Egypt, Iraq and Syria. But the ruling elites focused on clinging to power instead of building a civil state, leading to the emergence of monarchies (as in Egypt and Iraq) and upper-class aristocracies (as in Syria). These regimes were often overthrown by their own militaries – whose rank and file came from lower social classes – as a direct result of their unwillingness to build solid democratic foundations and their determination to maintain power at any cost.

## Guise of Democracy

Prominent 20<sup>th</sup>-century Arab poet Ahmad Shawqi argued that nothing could stop ambitious people from achieving success if they were bold enough – a statement that rings true for Arab regimes past and present. Arab upper and middle classes viewed military service with disdain, making it easy for officers of humble origins who held grudges against the elite to seize power. In Egypt, former President Gamal Abdel Nasser's father was a postman, and current President Abdel Fattah el-Sissi's father owned a small shop in a bazaar in Cairo. Former Tunisian President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali failed to earn a certificate in his vocational school studies and enlisted in the military. The fathers of Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein and Algerian President Houari Boumediene were poor peasants, while Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh was a shepherd in his youth.

Once in office, these leaders rigged elections to acquire popular legitimacy and claim that they had the population's full support. They abhorred competitive elections, administering them as ratifications of their presidential sponsorship by members of the parliament. In 1952, a group of Egyptian army officers overthrew the monarchy and appointed Maj. Gen. Mohammad Naguib to the presidency. Two years later, Gamal Abdel Nasser overthrew him and declared himself prime minister, before assuming the presidency in 1956. He won a new term in office in the 1965 plebiscite, receiving 99.99 percent of the vote with a 98 percent turnout.

When Nasser died in 1970, his vice president, Anwar Sadat, succeeded him. He called a referendum to confirm his candidacy, receiving 90 percent support in a vote that garnered a 90 percent turnout. Sadat apologized to the Egyptian people for not winning their unanimous support and promised to do better in the future. In the 1976 referendum, 81 percent of eligible voters participated and nearly 99 percent

supported Sadat. In the 1987 elections, President Hosni Mubarak received the support of 89 percent of the voters. In the 2005 elections, Mubarak was challenged by opposition leader Ayman Nour, who was soon arrested on bogus charges and evicted from political life.

A year after he overthrew democratically elected Egyptian President Mohammad Morsi in 2013, Abdel Fattah el-Sissi, who was defense minister at the time, ran for president while wearing a full military uniform. He won the election, described by the Anti-Coup Alliance – a coalition of 12 parties, 24 professional associations and army veterans – as a farce. According to exit polls, he received 97 percent of the vote, in an election with a 47 percent turnout. In 2018, el-Sissi received the same percentage of votes. The parliament extended his term in office until 2024, with the approval of 96 percent of lawmakers, and announced that he could run for a third term. El-Sissi's defense minister, Sami Anan, decided to run against him in the 2018 vote but was arrested on the grounds that he violated the military establishment's regulations. El-Sissi feared Anan's influence in the military and decided to remove him from his path to reelection.

In Yemen, the presidential council elected Ali Abdullah Saleh unanimously to the presidency in 1978. His first move as president was to execute 30 people accused of attempting to overthrow him. In 1999, he won more than 92 percent of the vote in an election with a 67 percent turnout. In 2005, he repeatedly said he wouldn't seek another term but, one year later, said he intended to run again because it was the will of the people. In Syria, a spate of military coups was carried out between 1949 and 1970, leading to frequent regime changes. In 1949, Brig. Gen. Husni Zaim brought down the government of President Shukri Quwatli. After conducting a sham referendum in which he received 99 percent support, he installed himself as president. Similar coups occurred in Libya, Algeria, Sudan and Yemen, eventually leading to a collapse of their political systems and triggering bloody

civil wars. In Syria's 1971 presidential elections, 95 percent of eligible voters cast ballots, according to official statistics, and Hafez Assad received more than 99 percent of the vote.

In Iraq, after overthrowing President Ahmad Hasan al-Bakr in 1979, Saddam Hussein executed dozens of his comrades in the Baath Party in what was known as the al-Khold massacre. A few days later, he eliminated hundreds of senior party officials to become Iraq's absolute leader. The last presidential plebiscite conducted during Saddam's presidency in 2002 garnered 100 percent voter turnout. The fact that not even a single dissenting vote was registered out of more than 11 million counted cast serious doubt over the legality of the election. It also revealed the importance of consensus and conformity in Arab politics.

The situation is somewhat different for North African states, whose complex politics and diversity of opposition groups compel ruling elites to avoid the pretense of consensus. For example, Algeria's 2020 constitution was approved by about 67 percent of voters in a referendum that had a 23 percent turnout. In Tunisia, President Kais Saied called a referendum in 2022 on a new constitution. Exit polls showed an overwhelming approval rate of 94.6 percent, but a large boycott resulted in just 30 percent participation. There are two exceptions to the rule, however. Tunisia's first president, Habib Bourguiba, who led the country's independence from France in 1956, was reelected in 1964 with 99.8 percent of the vote and a 97 percent turnout. Former Tunisian President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali, who overthrew Bourguiba in a bloodless coup in 1987, opened the door to competition for the presidency in the 2009 elections. He won about 90 percent of the vote, which had close to 90 percent turnout, according to the supervising committee.

## **Grim Outlook**

For decades, Arab regimes have failed to instill democratic values and eschew political violence. Elections in Arab countries are demonstrations of political theater, as ruling regimes reject peaceful transfers of power and block opponents from challenging incumbent candidates. Those who hold official positions think they are entitled to keep them for life. Arab military rulers control their populations through intimidation, the media and the security apparatus. The measures applied by Hafez Assad are a prime example: Syrian intelligence made sure that daily editorials in all newspapers and magazines were about Assad. On one occasion, intel agents monitoring a seminar arrested a government employee accused of not applauding Assad's name enthusiastically enough. Syrians even avoided using newspapers as table covers, fearing they could be punished if Assad's picture was placed under their food.

In Egypt, pro-Sissi media insist that no one outside the armed forces is qualified to take over as president, hinting that he will not be replaced. Unlike Nasser, who appointed eight vice presidents during his time in office, and Sadat, who had two, Mubarak refused to appoint a vice president throughout his 30-year rule, saying he would designate a person to the post only when he found a qualified individual. The uprising forced him to nominate someone just two weeks before his ouster in 2011.

Political corruption remains a critical barrier to change due to the absence of transparency and accountability and efforts by bureaucrats and politicians to misappropriate public funds. Anticorruption efforts are disingenuous, as laws are enacted but rarely implemented. It has become clear that establishing a democracy is virtually impossible. Military regimes destroyed nascent civil societies and blocked the

adoption of a social contract regulating the relationship between the state and citizens.

Without the political will to combat corruption in the public sector, countries in the region will continue to ignore the political rights of their people. The Arab region is witnessing systematic government repression of citizens who express their opinions, demonstrate or form civil society groups. Checks and balances remain fragile, as the system is incapable of addressing authoritarian tendencies.