A League of Authoritarian States? The Middle East and Autocratization in Eurasia

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PANEL 3:

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The last decade has witnessed the global rise of populist forces that threaten democracies through the undermining of formal institutions; the marginalization of vulnerable societal groups; and the erosion of informal norms of democracy. While trends in democratic backsliding – the state-led debilitation of political institutions sustaining an existing democracy – have been noted and carefully analyzed by scholars of comparative politics (e.g., Bermeo 2016; Foa and Mounk 2016; Levitsky and Ziblatt; Przeworski 2019), less attention has been paid to recent tendencies toward deliberalization within authoritarian regimes over the last decade.

Increasingly, autocracies no longer even maintain the pretense of competitive elections; in addition, consolidation of authoritarian power has become common. These trends are particularly salient within Eurasia. According to Freedom House, Eurasian countries have seen the largest declines of any region in the world in terms of maintenance of the rule of law and integrity of electoral processes. During the same period, Middle Eastern countries have witnessed large declines in associational rights and freedom of expression. Clear autocratic shifts have been observed in countries like Tunisia and Myanmar, but also extend to states with significant regional influence including Egypt, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey.

Heavyweights like Russia and China have also moved in a more authoritarian direction. The Russian government system went on a “semi-martial footing” on October 19 with executive orders for special legal regions in a number of areas close to the front line in the Russia-Ukraine War. On October 22 – the final day of the 20th Communist Party Congress in China – the public removal of Hu Jintao from the congress signaled a decline of factional balancing within the Chinese elite in favor of consolidated political power for Xi Jinping. It is also increasingly clear that autocrats are no longer isolated from one another, but rather, actively collaborating through support including economic aid and defense of allies in international organizations, like the UN Human Rights Council. This memo considers how growing autocratization in Eurasia – combined with increasing political influence in the Middle East for China and Russia – damage the prospects for political liberalization in the region.

1 Anna Gryzmsala-Busse, Frank Fukayama, Didi Kuo and Michael McFaul, “Global Populisms and their Challenges,” Freeman Spogli Institute, Stanford University, March 2020.
3 Freedom in the World 2022.
4 Freedom in the World 2022.
6 Rory Truex, “Hu Jintao’s Exist was Mysterious. Xi Jinping’s Power Play is Not,” The Atlantic, October 22 2022.
7 Freedom in the World 2022.
Growing Chinese Influence through “Sharp” Power Projection

The Middle East has observed an increasingly multipolar regional order as a result of growing Chinese and Russian influence alongside long-standing US and European interests. Recent years have seen the growth of economic and political ties between China and countries in the Middle East. These relations have been facilitated by Xi Jinping’s signature foreign policy venture, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) — a multi-trillion dollar Chinese infrastructure and economic investment program aimed at countries in the Middle East as well as Central, South, and Southeast Asia. Officially launched in 2013, the “One Belt, One Road” Initiative – later rebranded as the Belt and Road Initiative – has been hailed as a new Silk Road.

To a greater extent than previous Chinese foreign policy initiatives, the BRI has been viewed by scholars as a proactive foreign policy, in contrast to prior foreign policy efforts which were seen as non-interventionist (Miller 2011). Frankopan (2018, 114) argues that China’s first foray abroad involved $20 billion in investments across sub-Saharan Africa between 2000 and 2014 used to finance pipelines, power plants, roads and railways. While the BRI builds on experience China gained as a result of investment experience in Africa, the rhetoric surrounding the BRI has taken on a different tone. Chinese leaders have been keen to emphasize that the BRI represents a revival of trade and commercial ties across Eurasia that enjoyed important historical precedent.8

Middle Eastern countries have emerged as an important target for BRI investments. In the relatively wealthy Arabian Peninsula region, Chinese investment comes at a time when these states are seeking to reduce their hydrocarbon dependency and to diversify their economies as part of national development programs; China’s ventures in less wealthy countries – like Egypt and Syria – provide funding for risky and expensive infrastructure projects, including in post-conflict regions (Blaydes 2022).

Bianchi (2019, 3) argues that “part of China’s appeal in the non-Western world is that many people see it not as a superpower.” For less developed countries, China provides a model for growth that is accessible while at the same time less threatening than Western powers. Beyond that, as one analyst notes, “for less prosperous countries that may not meet conditions attached to ‘mainstream’ development initiatives from the west, China offers an attractive alternative.”9 China has also placed economic development, rather than political reform, front and center for its global engagements. This sentiment also extends to China’s involvement in the Middle East and is reflected, for example, in the statement of one Chinese official quoted as saying, “the root

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8 For example, at a keynote address at Kazakhstan’s Nazarbeyev University in September of 2013, Xi Jinping gave a speech entitled, “Promote People-to-People Friendship and Create a Better Future,” in which he emphasized the traditional friendship between China and Kazakhstan. Xi related the story of an imperial envoy sent to Central Asia tasked with encouraging friendly contacts between the Kazakh people and the Western Han Dynasty more than 2,000 years ago. In his address, Xi emphasized forms of historical cooperation that took place along the Silk Roads and two millennia of commercial exchange between the cultures. This idea of a linked Eurasian past and present has served as a common and persistent theme of Xi’s speeches and Chinese official press releases regarding the BRI.

9 Kanika Saigal, “Belt and Road: Middle East takes the slow road to China,” Euromoney, September 2017.
problems in the Middle East lie in development, and the only solution is also development.”\(^{10}\) The Chinese have also signaled their support for a global order that is more inclusive and less focused on generating dominance over other societies (Schweller and Pu 2011, 60), a factor many Arab countries may find appealing given the recent history of US military involvement in parts of the Middle East.

Chinese economic relations with Middle Eastern countries have generated opportunities for increasing repressive cooperation. A 2017 Egyptian-Chinese security memorandum laid the foundation for cooperation in combatting “terrorism” that has encouraged mutual support for forms of political repression (Blaydes 2022). Saudi-Chinese shared national security cooperation provide the basis for forms of coordination in the realm of “cultural security” (Xiaojun and Alsudairi 2021). BRI-affiliated states have also provided support for repression within China. In 2019, dozens of countries, including Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Oman, Bahrain, Egypt, and Algeria, signed a letter supporting China’s Xinjiang policies.\(^{11}\) This took place shortly after a number of European countries urged China to stop the arbitrary detention of Uyghurs. On a 2019 trip to Beijing, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman stated his support China’s right to engage in deradicalization measures in Xinjiang while also signing $28 billion worth of economic cooperation agreements.\(^{12}\)

**Impact of the Russia-Ukraine War on the Middle East**

While American politicians have tried to frame the conflict in Ukraine as a struggle between democracy and authoritarianism, neither Middle Eastern leaders nor publics have discussed the conflict in these terms. At the governmental level, most states have worked to maintain an appearance of neutrality. Citizen sentiment, on the other hand, tends to be more favorable toward Russia and Putin. To the extent that public discourse is anti-Russian, commentators draw parallels to the dangers of occupation (with reference to Palestine); the hypocrisy of the US position (given invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan); and concern for the suffering of the Ukrainian people (while drawing attention to the poor welcome of Muslim refugees in Europe).

For example, the Egyptian state has sought to forge a position of neutrality with regard to the Russian invasion of Ukraine with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs stressing need for dialogue and a diplomatic solution. Subsequent statements issued by Cairo have emphasized the importance of finding a peaceful end to the conflict while acknowledging the “root causes” of the crisis – a thinly veiled reference to NATO expansion as a provocation. The Egyptian position also reflects a distaste for the use of economic sanctions against Moscow. Kuwait, on the other hand, has been the Arab country most openly critical of Russia aggression in Ukraine. Following the

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\(^{10}\) Jonathan Fulton, “China’s Power in the Middle East is Rising: Here’s What we can Learn from the Recent Meeting between China and the United Arab Emirates,” *Washington Post*, August 9 2018.


invasion, Kuwait issued a statement affirming Ukraine’s sovereignty and stressing the need Ukrainian independence. Official Kuwait discourse also called for a de-escalation of violence. Kuwait supported a US-proposed resolution in the United Nations that sought to condemn Russian aggression. Kuwait’s position on this issue is not surprising given its historical experience as a victim of Iraqi aggression. Indeed, in its statement of co-sponsorship for the resolution, Kuwait referenced the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. Qatar also expressed support for Zelensky and opposition to Putin’s actions in Ukraine.

The position of Saudi Arabia is more complex. Riyadh is not anti-Ukraine, per se, but is currently positioned to be relatively pro-Russia (and leaning away from the US). Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) has offered to serve as a mediator in the Russia-Ukraine conflict. He also views cooperation with Putin as useful, particularly as part of their shared status as “OPEC+” countries. The October 5 decision by OPEC+ to sharply reduce output immediately led to a jump in energy costs. The White House responded with a statement that President Biden was “disappointed by the shortsighted decision by OPEC+ to cut production quotas while the global economy is dealing with the continued negative impact of Putin’s invasion of Ukraine.”

Some democrats in Congress also called for a re-examination of ties with Saudi Arabia, with New Jersey Democratic Tom Malinowski saying that “there’s no question that MBS...shares Putin’s worldview more than he shares ours.” Although the Saudi position falls short of a clear political alliance between Riyadh and Moscow, there is a sense that Saudi-Russian ties have grown stronger in recent years with Riyadh’s increasing political isolation.

The UAE has positioned itself similarly to Saudi Arabia, though perhaps is a little less publicly pro-Russia despite the arrival of Russian oligarchs in Dubai since the start of the Russia-Ukraine War. This has led commentators to suggest that “on balance, the GCC states effectively sided with the Kremlin, which enabled the Putin regime to refill its coffers and to limit the impact of U.S. and EU sanctions.”

From an elite opinion perspective, regional commentators have tended to argue that Russia has valid security concerns; that NATO triggered Russian aggression; and that the US is to blame for the current conflict. Considerable attention has focused on the idea that the US regularly intervenes in other countries with little accountability. How have Arab publics, more generally, responded to the conflict? According to an Arab News-YouGov poll (a survey of almost 8,000 people, April 26-May 4), the majority of respondents across the region did not show much interest in subject of the war in Ukraine. To the extent that Arab publics are posting their opinions on social media, comments tend to be pro-Russian, pro-Putin, and anti-American. Some, but not all, commentators also express sympathy for the Ukrainian people. Many accuse the US of having triggered the war by making false promises to Zelensky.

13 White House, October 5 2022.
14 Deirdre Walsh, National Public Radio, October 6 2022.
The Russia-Ukraine War has also created challenging economic circumstances for countries in the Middle East. While oil exporters like Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Libya, and Algeria may see fiscal balance improvements and higher growth given global demand for oil, non-oil and gas exporting countries are in a tough situation. Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen are also already struggling with food insecurity and are likely to be impacted by food shocks. According to an Arab Barometer survey conducted of 23,000 individuals between October 2021 and April 2022, large percentages of respondents across the Arab region ran out of food in the previous week and could not afford to purchase more. 69 percent of respondents in Egypt ran out of food, 63 percent in Sudan, 57 percent in Iraq, 55 percent in Tunisia, and 48 percent of respondents in both Lebanon and Jordan ran out of food in the week prior. Non-oil exporting countries are also expected to struggle with maintaining subsidized fuel in an environment of increasing energy costs.

Conclusions

Existing scholarship emphasizes the importance of a democracy-favorable international system when considering the potential for increases in income to translate into democratic change (e.g., Boix 2011). In just the last ten years, however, the world has witnessed a significant deterioration of freedom of expression alongside increased repression of civil society even in already autocratic regimes.17 US retrenchment in the Middle East means that Middle Eastern autocracies are increasingly impacted by Eurasian political and economic trends, particularly with the growing influence of both China and Russia.

To what extent might China and Russia impact the future of political liberalization in the Middle East? Putin has long sought to rebuild Russian influence in the Middle East, reaching out to all major actors, including (but not limited to) anti-Western regimes in Iran and Syria. On the other hand, analysis of data from the Arab Barometer and other Arab public-opinion sources suggest that Russia is not particularly popular among Arab publics, especially relative to either China or Turkey. Arab respondents see China as bringing investments and infrastructure; on the other hand, Russia cannot deliver on these dimensions and may be viewed as bringing problems, not solutions.

A prominent Chinese scholar of the Middle East at Peking University, Bingbing Wu, has suggested that neither the US nor Europe, or even Russia, are capable of helping the Middle East to establish a “functioning regional cooperation mechanism,” thus opening the door for China to play a more prominent role in West Asia. While the US and Europe have financial resources to exert influence, each lacks the political will to engage more deeply. On the other hand, Russia’s economic clout is ultimately limited when it comes to seeking influence in the MENA region. Regardless of how the conflict in Ukraine ultimately resolves, China seems positioned to grow its footprint in the Middle East at the expense of the US, Europe, and Russia.

17 Autocratization Changing Nature? V-Dem Institute, Democracy Report 2022
Bibliography


Since 2002, the Center on Democracy, Development and the Rule of Law (CDDRL) at Stanford University has collaborated widely with academics, policymakers and practitioners around the world to advance knowledge about the conditions for and interactions among democracy, broad-based economic development, human rights, and the rule of law.

CDDRL bridges the worlds of scholarship and practice to understand and foster the conditions for effective representative governance, promote balanced and sustainable economic growth, and establish the rule of law. Our faculty, researchers, and students analyze the ways in which democracy and development are challenged by authoritarian resurgence, misinformation, and the perils of a changing climate.

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