

# Regime Stability in the Middle East: An Analytical Model to Assess the Possibility of Regime Change

Amos Yadlin and Avner Golov



Memorandum **131**

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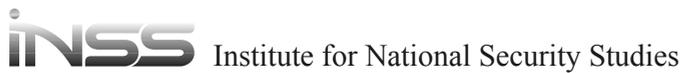
INCORPORATING THE JAFFEE TEL AVIV UNIVERSITY  
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# **Regime Stability in the Middle East:**

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Memorandum No. 131

December 2013

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## יציבות משטרים במזרח התיכון:

מודל לניתוח ולהערכת סיכוי לשינוי שלטוני

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עמוס ידלין ואבנר גולוב

Associate Editor: Shani E. Manor

Graphic design: Michal Semo-Kovetz, Yael Bieber

Printing: Elinir

Cover photo: Demonstrations in Tahrir Square, Cairo, February 2011.

Courtesy: Image Bank / Getty Images

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December 2013

ISBN: 978-965-7425-55-8

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## Executive Summary

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Many researchers and political commentators agree that the most recent wave of uprisings in Arab nations has changed the Middle East and will continue to do so. This wave, however, has not yet dramatically destabilized the regimes in Saudi Arabia and Iran, the two most important powers in the region. If a change within these countries occurs, it would represent a significant transformation in the nature of the region for the next few years. The future of Assad's regime in Syria has also not yet been sealed, and any attempt to foresee its survival or fall is fraught with difficulty.

The importance of the changes in the Arab world's regimes and the difficulty in predicting them indicate the need for a comprehensive, systematic model that will improve the ability to assess the probability of a regime's stability and analyze the potential for change. The model proposed herein grapples with this challenge and identifies the key factors that either stimulate or inhibit regime change, as well as the interactive dynamics between them.

According to the model presented here, forecasting the developments and results of uprisings in the Middle East must relate to internal, international, and economic arenas. It must also be weighted in relation to the factors likely to inhibit a political-revolutionary change, i.e., a minority government, a weak and divided opposition, traumatic collective memories, and the government's neutralization of modern media. The figure below presents the model.

While the model's results are expressed numerically in order to provide a better basis for comparison over time and between countries, the results primarily express a qualitative analysis of key factors that must be carefully and critically examined in order to estimate the probability of a regime change among the region's nations.

This study analyzes four case studies: Egypt prior to the January 2011 revolution, and the current situations in Syria, Saudi Arabia, and Iran –

### Probability of Governmental Stability: 0-100



important countries whose events will have an appreciable effect on the future of the entire region and beyond.

The model's analysis reveals the lack of regime stability in pre-revolutionary Egypt, where the probability for regime stability was somewhere between low and average (a score of 58 out of 100). It sheds light on the failure of academic and intelligence agencies in assessing the stability of the Mubarak regime. Using the model in light of what transpired in Egypt reveals the pre-revolutionary regime vulnerability and stresses the factors that were a potential threat to stability, primarily the army's lack of resolve to suppress the protests. The lesson from this analysis is that it was necessary to undertake an in-depth examination of this factor's effect on the regime's ability to confront and overcome the protests. Even if the prevailing conclusion had been the same, the analysis shows that, unlike assessments made by academics and intelligence personnel in January 2011, there was a

high probability that the protests would spread to the point of representing a clear and present danger to the regime's stability.

A model-based analysis also validates the assessment that the struggle in Syria is still deadlocked between the regime and opposition organizations: there is no critical mass for regime change, but the regime is also incapable of restoring stability. The model indicates that Syria is close to a turning point (a score of 58 out of 100), and that more internal (army loyalty) or external (international intervention) change is necessary to undermine the foundation of the regime's survivability. If a change does not occur in the situation's current circumstances, especially Assad's certainty that international intervention will not take place, this trend can be expected to remain in place and exacerbate Syria's civil war. It is important to note that the score in Syria's case at the time this essay was written is identical to the score of pre-revolutionary Egypt of January 2011. This finding indicates the fragility of the current situation in Syria and the possibility of a dramatic change occurring quickly.

The results of the proposed model's analysis confirms regime stability in Saudi Arabia (a score of 80 out of 100) and Iran (a score of 77 out of 100). These scores indicate a low probability of regime change occurring in either country in the near future due to the lack of a significant opposition that can leverage the local population's dissatisfaction. In both countries, the regime is its own worst enemy. If the Saudi royal household and the ayatollah regime in Tehran continue to maintain inner unity among their regimes, they are more likely to meet any future challenges expected to come their way. Their failure would inadvertently create a revolutionary momentum that would challenge the regime and require a reassessment of its stability. Economic deterioration and international pressure are more of a challenge to Iran than they are to Saudi Arabia, which results in Iran having a lower score than Saudi Arabia.

These insights allow us to look at the Middle East with a panoramic view and identify the current regional dynamics through the prism offered by the model, which examines the key factors that affect the existing dynamics and monitors the factors that might change them. The model thereby serves as a foundation for systematic thinking and discussion on the development of Middle East uprisings in the upcoming years and their implications for various regimes, with insight into profound ramifications for Israel's national security and policymaking.



## Preface

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The memorandum that follows is a translation of a study first published in Hebrew in March 2013. Since then the Middle East has continued to experience significant changes that demonstrate its continued volatility, and instability may well characterize the region for years to come. This regional upheaval invites a new examination of the model for assessing regime stability described in this memorandum, to test whether the parameters and methodology outlined before the most recent turmoil are validated by these changes, and if the model can help explain the developments of the past twenty months in the specific nations examined in this study.

Since this study was first published, the Muslim Brotherhood government in Egypt was toppled in a coup in which the military, led by General Abdel-Fatah el-Sisi, managed to harness the opposition of the liberal and secular elements to the Muslim Brotherhood and replace the government with military rule. Unlike in January 2011, the army put down the Muslim Brotherhood protests with a determined show of force, and it has since continued to work to reduce the organization's political power. The army's resolve not to allow the Muslim Brotherhood to continue to lead the nation, its tenacity in defending the military rule imposed on the country, and Sisi's ability to enlist the support of the moderates – or at least not arouse their opposition – are the key changes in explaining the difference between the results of the anti-Mubarak protests in 2011 and those of the anti-Sisi protests in 2013. This difference matches the conclusions of the model-based original analysis, which underscored that the military is the main bulwark defending the regime. The army's willingness to preserve the regime's stability even at the cost of firing on civilians is a key factor in maintaining regime stability, as is the army's ability to reduce antagonism by joining liberal elements in opposing the Muslim Brotherhood, the main political rival. It remains unclear whether the army and General el-Sisi will seek to entrench their senior position in Egyptian politics after the coming election and during the

process of formulating the new Egyptian constitution, a move expected to arouse Egyptian society. Clearer is the current regime's determination to act despite the disapproval of its Western allies, especially the United States administration, which has gone so far as to suspend part of its foreign aid to Egypt.

In Syria, Bashar al-Assad, helped by Hizbollah, has managed to oust rebels from several key locations on the Lebanese border and near Damascus and Homs. The model pointed to the importance of foreign intervention on behalf of the regime as a strengthening element, and Assad is in fact receiving Iranian help and Russian support, which generates momentum in his favor in his war on his enemies. Likewise supported by the model was the US decision to react to the regime's use of chemical weapons near Homs on August 21, 2013, which killed more than 1,500 Syrians. In light of a US military threat, the Russians launched a move to eliminate the Syrian chemical weapons arsenal in exchange for a promise by the United States that it would not attack.

This maneuver strengthens the model's conclusion that as long as the Syrian military continues to show loyalty to the regime, only a credible threat of international intervention can change the internal Syrian balance of power and force Assad to relax his policy. One 24-hour period of genuine Syrian and Russian concern about a US strike led Syria to agree to a process that is due to result in its surrender of its strategic weapons reserves. Nevertheless, the element of international intervention was not a game changer, as it did not force Assad to make more concessions and in practice enabled Assad remain in power.

Recent developments in Iran also validate the conclusions of the analysis from earlier this year. Unlike the 2009 election, the June 2013 election ended without significant turmoil, despite the pre-election hopes of many Western researchers and experts. The Iranian public's dissatisfaction with the economic situation and the destructive ramifications of the international sanctions was manifested in massive support for presidential candidate Rouhani, but did not change the regime. Indeed, the model posited that the Iranian regime enjoyed a level of stability that would see it through the election campaign despite the mounting public pressure, as long as it continued to enjoy the loyalty of the Revolutionary Guards and the Basij. In Iran, like in Syria and Egypt, the security establishment is a decisive element in the government's ability to maintain stability. It is still unclear

if Rouhani will manage to maneuver within the intra-Iranian political arena to use the leeway he received from Supreme Leader Khamenei and radicals at the top to bring an end to the sanctions. His ability or lack thereof will affect the balance of power within the Iranian regime and the relationship between the regime and Iranian society.

Saudi Arabia is the only nation of the four analyzed on the basis of the model not to have experienced a threat against its regime in the past year, despite attempts of liberal elements to amplify the protests, as exemplified by the protest by Saudi women against the cultural taboo on driving in the country. Given the regime's stability, it seems that a large portion of the analysis from early this year is still relevant, and the assessment that the regime enjoys a high degree of stability remains valid at the time of this writing. Nonetheless, one important element has undergone a change, namely Saudi Arabia's relationship with Washington. The administration's unwillingness to intervene in Syria and its willingness to reach a compromise with Iran about the latter's military nuclear program have increased the distrust between Riyadh and Washington and raised the level of tension between them, manifested in the Saudi declaration of willingness to give up its seat in the Security Council and statements by Saudi senior officials criticizing President Obama's Middle East policy. It is still too early to assess the depth of the crisis and the direction it could take. Even if the effect of the crisis on the kingdom's regime stability is currently very limited, it should be examined in the future in the case of a dramatic improvement or continued deterioration of relations.

The dynamic character of reality in this region behooves Israeli and Western decision makers to track changes and constantly update their assessments. The model described in this memorandum was constructed for precisely this purpose and has proven itself to be an important and helpful tool in achieving this goal.

Amos Yadlin and Avner Golov  
November 2013



## Introduction

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“Prediction is very difficult, especially regarding the future,” said the physicist and Nobel-laureate Nils Bohr in the beginning of the twentieth century. Nevertheless, we feel it is important to try to identify central parameters likely to help forecast future developments in the Middle East.<sup>1</sup>

More than two years after the uprising that swept the Middle Eastern nations began, it is possible to say that what once was the Arab Spring and was succeeded by a Sizzling Summer is currently becoming an Arab Winter, whose closing date is unclear. The main reason for pessimism surrounding the future of the region’s nations and regimes—at least in the foreseeable future—is the fact that the hope for a rapid, domino-effect blossoming of democracy in the Arab world, à la post-USSR, has been dashed. An interim stocktaking of events in the Middle East indicates that only four out of 22 Arab countries toppled an autocratic dictator (Libya, Egypt, Yemen, and Tunisia). Syria is in the midst of a civil war whose outcome is uncertain, which clearly indicates that the future of Bashar Assad’s regime is also uncertain. In Bahrain, the struggle is currently resolved with the regime still in place. In other Middle Eastern nations, the tension between the regime and the public with its popular protests did not form a critical mass to generate regime change or a significant political transformation.

Nations that did manage to oust their dictators have elements of the old regime that continue to reverberate and exert their influence. Egypt is an instructive case. The army remains a strong factor and initially cooperated with the Muslim Brotherhood, which won the parliamentary and presidential elections. Nonetheless, disagreements over lines of authority and the essence of proposed reforms stand in the way of creating a stable democracy. Egypt and Tunisia are undergoing a revolutionary transformation, typified by the difficulty of shaping a new, stable regime. These nations, among others, face economic difficulties and significant law and order challenges, making stabilization of new governments difficult to achieve.

While every nation is *sui generis*, this essay will present and analyze the most influential factors affecting change in Middle Eastern countries. A model will be presented that can help assess the impact of various factors and responses to the question of regime stability probability (low, average, or high), and will deal with the question of which country is most likely to experience regime changes. The first case study is Egypt prior to the revolution in January 2011, which led to the toppling of President Mubarak and the victory of the Muslim Brotherhood in the national election. The purpose of this case study is to validate the model proposed herein and to demonstrate its inherent advantages as a decision-supporting tool. The model will subsequently be used to analyze the probability of current regime stability in Syria, Saudi Arabia and Iran – nations whose events have an appreciable effect on the future of the entire region and beyond.

# Chapter 1

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## The Model

### **The Parameters of the Model and the Principal Questions**

The parameters that have been identified as influencing the development of recent uprisings and revolutions in the Middle East are divided into four arenas: domestic, international, economic, and factors hindering regime change. The model is focused on questions whose answers indicate the parameters' contribution to the stability of the government in the specific country. Contributions that are positive for the regime will be marked in green, while negative contributions that endanger the leader's rule and encourage the creation of a critical mass for regime change will be marked in red. The various assessments will be weighted into an overall assessment that will determine the probability of governmental stability in the specific country. The numerical scores will be weighted according to the relative values of the various parameters, and will range from 0 (zero probability of preserving the leader's rule) to 100 (very high probability of preserving his rule). Scores between 0-40 should be seen as a low estimate of the leader's ability to maintaining the stability of his rule in the country, scores of 40-80 mean that there is a moderate possibility for governmental stability, and scores above 80 indicates a high probability of governmental stability in the country. Of course, a score should be seen as a value on an axis of increasing numbers, and not as an absolute number. In other words, while a score of 61 does indicate a medium probability of governmental stability, it indicates a lower probability than a score of 75 although they are both in the same category.

The model is based on Expert Choice methodology, which is intended to assist the decision maker in formulating a guided rationale for confronting new challenges. The situation's thorough analysis combines quantitative and

qualitative components. This method allows the decision maker to examine basic assumptions, bringing the points of contention to the surface. The thorough evaluation breaks down the challenges and their components, evaluates them separately, and reconnects them.<sup>2</sup> Among other things, this methodology seeks to improve the leader's decision making process in order to produce a reliable forecast of current trends. These two goals have crucial importance to those who deal with the wave of Arab uprisings and their impact on the process of formulating policy.

Those who are suspicious of quantitative models can view the proposed model as a conceptual framework that focuses on the relevant parameters in order to examine the probability of governmental stability in a given state. The parameters that make up the model can be given different values, although sensitivity analyses show that the final result would hardly change at all.<sup>3</sup> The model's purpose is to allow the decision maker to formulate policy on the basis of a systematic analysis of the regime stability in a given country.

The basic assumptions behind the determination of the parameters' numerical values should not be accepted without questions outright. Instead, the model allows for the leading parameters and their basic assumptions to be identified and examined in a precise and critical fashion. Since the model presents a contemporary snapshot, its various parameters need to be periodically examined to see whether they have undergone a significant change—in which case, it would be appropriate to conduct a new analysis. The assessment maintains its relevance as long as the conditions in which the analysis was conducted do not change dramatically. During times of crisis, when changes occur more frequently, the model should be updated according to the decision maker's needs.

### **The Domestic Arena (overall score: 30)**

***Loyalty and effectiveness of the military elite; populace fear of the security establishment (score: 18):*** Is the army loyal to the regime and the ruler, and to what extent is it prepared to defend them through the use of violent means? This parameter is important when addressing the question of whether an uprising will develop into a revolution. The first barrier for those seeking to lead a revolution is the army's loyalty to the leader and its willingness to fight for the regime by turning its weapons against the citizens involved in the uprising. This barrier may also be the last and decisive factor as the

obstacle of an army that has a deterring image could greatly limit the ability of the uprising's leaders to unite large masses of people.

A related question is whether the population itself fears the security apparatus and the army. In Egypt and Libya, for example, damage to the army's deterrent capability undermined the regime, while in Bahrain, military intervention ceased the protests. Furthermore, the military elite constitutes the protective wall closest to the leader. The uprisings in Egypt, Libya, and Syria have revealed different patterns of actions and reactions by the army in the face of rising widespread protest. A major factor in deciding the fate of an uprising is, then, the army's firm stance in defense of the regime's interests and strategic assets, as well as its preparedness to turn its weapons against civilians.

It is also important to examine the loyalty and effectiveness of the non-military state security forces, such as intelligence agencies and the police, as these forces have a close connection with the army. Nevertheless, this factor comes second to that of the army, which plays a central role in maintaining public order in Arab countries.<sup>4</sup>

***Legitimacy of the regime and the leader (score: 7):*** Are the regime and leader perceived as worthy, uncorrupt, and serving the national interests? When the regime and its leader enjoy legitimacy and are viewed in a positive manner by the public, the opposition is expected to accept the processes of correction and reformation while preserving order. Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and the Gulf emirates are classic examples of kingdoms in the Arab world whose rulers are not perceived as corrupt and whose regimes are deemed as preserving national interests. In these countries, the regime and the leader enjoy the sympathy of the people, thanks in part to the constructive dialogue the regime conducts with the population by means of traditional tribal mechanisms. This dialogue addresses the economic and social problems and leads to limited reforms, which makes it possible to douse the flames of potential uprisings.<sup>5</sup> The legitimacy that the Jordanian and Moroccan kings receive, for example, makes it difficult for their opponents to act against them, limiting demands to replace the government and undertake political reforms. When the legitimacy of the leader and the regime is undermined—as happened with Muammar Gaddafi in Libya—opponents will not settle for partial compromises, and at times will even try to topple the government.

An analysis of the legitimacy factor, however, should address the distinction between the regime and the leader. The events in Tunisia, for example, pointed to this distinction as the regime maintained at least partial legitimacy among the public, while President Ben Ali lost legitimacy. This made it possible to preserve the governmental institutions but forced the new political force—the Islamic a-Nahda (Awakening) Party—to compromise on various issues in order to stabilize the country’s political status.

***Importance of the religious elite and its support for the regime and the leader (score: 5):*** The countries studied here consist of traditional Islamic societies, which means the religious establishment’s support for the government is significant. Accordingly, is the *dawah* system in the country—the network of mosques, welfare, educational institutions, religious Islamic social support—compatible with the position of the religious establishment? And what is the political power of the *dawah* and of the religious establishment together and individually?

The power of the religious elites, which consists of the official religious establishment and the *dawah* system, and their relationship with the government vary between countries. When the religious establishment and the *dawah* system are coordinated and involved in the country’s domestic politics, they can be expected to have a greater influence on a popular uprising’s development and outcome.

Iran is an example of a country whose identity is nearly completely constructed from the interests of its religious elite and leadership. If the religious elite gives sweeping and overt support to the regime—as happens in the Gulf states—it is difficult for the opposition to gain legitimacy and expand its influence in the country. When some of the religious elite openly opposes the regime and channels the *dawah* system into a battle against it, however, this may serve as an important catalyst for opposition action. Although the Sunni religious establishment in Syria has continuously supported the Bashar al-Assad government since the uprising’s outbreak, many local Sunni leaders have used the mosque and *dawah* systems to voice their opposition to the regime. Locally, these leaders’ influence was much stronger than that of the official religious establishment.

Indeed, in many cases, the religious elite has piggybacked on the opposition forces. As seen in the cases of Libya, Syria, and Egypt, the

religious elite tends to join the force that drove the uprising at a later stage as opposed to initiating it by itself.

### **The International Arena (overall score: 20)**

***Support/hostility from the international community (score: 11):*** Do the geopolitical conditions prevent or support international intervention in the effort to affect the process of change? Will the intervention support the regime or its opponents?

Outside intervention is an important parameter for assessing the probability of regime change. International intervention has the power to add critical weight to the regime or its opponents. It is, therefore, one of the only parameters that can change the trend of the conflict.<sup>6</sup> First of all, the likelihood and the relevance of intervention must be examined. Syria is an example of a country that for a while enjoyed the outside protection of Russia against large-scale international intervention: Moscow prevented the imposition of international sanctions on Syria, provided the regime with protection against condemnation in the UN Security Council, and armed Assad's troops.

The kind of intervention and its potential impact on the balance of power between the regime and its opponents must be looked at as well. While in Libya's case international intervention included European military intervention, a discussion relevant to Syria is limited at this point due to the arming of the opposition along with the possibility of imposing sanctions and the threat of international isolation. This combination of factors, in addition to others that will be described below, demonstrates the complexity of international intervention and its possible impact on the balance of power in a country where an uprising has broken out.

***Regional support/hostility (score: 9):*** Are neighboring states that enjoy the status of regional powers prepared to intervene and use hard or soft power in order to aid or suppress the uprising?

Beyond the possibility of broad international intervention, the intervention of nearby regional powers could dramatically affect the balance of power between the regime and its opponents as well. Saudi Arabia's intervention in suppressing the riots was decisive in stopping the Arab Spring from reaching Bahrain. Iran's aid to the Assad regime and the possibility of Turkish action against it indicate the influential and central role of regional

powers in the domestic politics of countries. Since regional powers have the ability to decide the fate of uprisings in neighboring states, their interests, considerations, and capabilities concerning actions must be examined carefully. On this basis, we can assess the impact of these interests and capabilities on the balance of power between the regime and its opposition.

### **The Economic Arena (overall score: 25)**

***Macroeconomic situation (score: 10):*** What is the economic situation in the country, and is the economy sustainable?

Many studies have discussed the importance of the economic factor in predicting uprisings.<sup>7</sup> While the traditional approach sees a country's macroeconomic situation as an essential condition for the outbreak of a popular uprising, new studies point to situations where no uprising was ignited in spite of highly problematic economic situations, as in the case of North Korea. Other cases in which the economic factor was of secondary importance (such as in Libya, which has oil wealth) have also been mentioned. Given the debate on the topic, this model distinguishes between three parameters relating to the economy and its ability to predict the outbreak of an uprising in the Middle East.

The suppression of what could have developed into a popular uprising in the Gulf states showed that an intelligent use of money can stop a developing trend. The Gulf regimes responded to regional developments and managed to stem the tide by raising the salaries of government employees, giving financial assistance for higher education, providing affordable housing, and opening new businesses for their citizens to work in.<sup>8</sup> In contrast, the Jordanian regime, which must contend with economic distress and which is dependent on foreign aid, has encountered difficulties in preventing the first signs of the uprising. The lesson here is that a strong economy, energy resources (oil and gas), and large foreign currency reserves can serve as the regime's means of survival, as it faces rising population protests.

***Loyalty and importance of the economic elite (score: 7):*** Does the country's economic elite demonstrate loyalty to the regime?

In Egypt and Saudi Arabia, the elite is small in numbers and does not play a role in the government. It is external to the regime, which means the regime is not dependent on it. In Syria and Jordan, the elite is also external to the regime but it does have great influence on the national economy. The

importance of the economic elite's loyalty to the stability of the regime can be seen in the Syrian case, where the elite plays a central role in national economy.<sup>9</sup> For over a year after the outbreak of the Syrian uprising, the disturbances did not spread to the neighborhoods of the economic elite in Damascus and Aleppo. The spread of the protests into these neighborhoods indicated a turning point in the balance of power in Syria. The open and widespread repudiation of the Assad regime by Syria's economic elite will be one of the signs that the regime's fall is imminent.

***Awareness of socio-economic disparities among the middle class and the weaker strata of society (score: 8):*** Can corruption and social disparities and tensions between the wealthy and the rest of society be contained?

Unlike the macroeconomic issue, which is objective and relates to the country as a whole, awareness of the situation and the ability to contain and accept it are indices that reflect subjective assessments of citizens as individuals. In many cases, high food prices and a lack of jobs for the younger population in Arab states were the leading reason for the uprisings. Dissatisfied government workers, who are supposed to defend the regime from the challenges of the uprising, could make the task of dealing with the opposition very difficult. Awareness of social disparities was the main factor that set off the uprisings in Egypt and Yemen. Although the Egyptian protests took on a different character over time and focused on issues of civil rights as the main reason for the uprising, it was the dissatisfaction of young people and the middle class with economic disparities that ignited the protests. The aid given by the Gulf states to the weaker strata of society is an example of making use of economic capabilities as a way to cope with an awareness of disparities and with the protests against them. This factor is closely connected to the state's loss of control over the media, as will be described below.

### **Factors Hindering Regime Change (overall score: 25)**

***Weakness of the opposition (score: 8):*** Is there a unified and organized opposition to the regime? What is its strength compared to that of the regime?

The uprisings in the Arab world indicate that assessing a profile of the opposition helps predict the chances of a regime's stability and survival. Uprisings that were led by a strong, broad, and united opposition presented a significant challenge to the regime over time, and also enjoyed outside

support and legitimacy. In contrast, uprisings that were not led by an “established opposition” posed a more limited challenge to the regime. The broad opposition in Egypt, which began as a popular movement of liberal, secular young people, succeeded in creating momentum for the regime’s opposition. The Muslim Brotherhood’s participation in the mass protests expanded the opposition movement, and the struggle continued even after the Egyptian elections of June 2012 and the Muslim Brotherhood victory. The power of the liberal opposition that sparked the protests and its role in Egyptian politics, however, has been reduced. The discussion about the possibility and the manner of Western intervention in Syria’s civil war also emphasizes this point. Opponents of intervention argue that unlike the case in Libya, where the opposition was organized and could restore the calm in the country by taking reins of government after the fall of the regime, the Syrian opposition is divided among many elements, which makes it difficult for the international community to support the struggle against the Assad regime. Since this factor could intensify the momentum created by other conditions or pose a significant obstacle to those seeking to promote a revolution, it receives the highest score among the list of inhibiting factors.

***Minority rule (score: 7):*** Is the government controlled by an elite group of the ethnic majority or is it in the hands of an ethnic minority?

An examination of uprisings in the Arab world indicates that the governments in Tunisia and Egypt, the first countries in which the uprisings led to regime change, was in the hands of groups representing the ethnic and religious majority. In Yemen, however, the government was based on the support of the minority Shiite Zaidi population, a group that makes up nearly half of the population. In contrast, Assad’s determination to repel the opposition’s attacks, along with the international community’s fear of violence that will erupt in Syria if the regime falls, indicates the concern that members of other ethnic groups would seek revenge against the Alawites. The hostility between the tribes in Libya was also one of the reasons that Gaddafi held tightly to power. Regime supporters who are a minority tend to fear that if their regime falls, they will have to comply with a great loss of their social and economic standings. Minorities that hold power also worry a campaign would be launched against them as revenge for the violence used by the regime to suppress the protests. Hence, a minority group is likely to hold more tightly to the reins of power, as in the case of Syria, than regimes

for which the cost of compromise is lower, as in Egypt and Tunisia. Due to the contribution of this factor to the regime's determination of suppressing uprisings in the country, it receives a relatively high score among the factors hindering regime change.

***The government's handling of modern media and communications (score: 5):*** Does the regime manage to cope effectively with the media?

Middle Eastern regimes that confronted the popular protests have also had to contend with the protesters' use of modern media tools, such as the internet, social media, and satellite television channels. Social networking sites have been used to convey messages and organize huge demonstrations, and several scholars even referred to the wave of uprisings as "the Facebook Revolution."<sup>10</sup> Others believe that it was the satellite channels that lessened the population's fear of the regime's response as they presented the corruption of the regimes and disseminated pictures of the protests in Arab countries. In countries where the regime failed to neutralize these influences, the media assisted in sparking and spreading the protests, as well as in disseminating pictures of the suppression to the West in order to mobilize support for the struggle, like in the cases of Egypt and in Tunisia. Despite the common claim that Middle Eastern regimes did not conduct an effective struggle through modern media, however, the regimes in Tehran, Riyadh, and Damascus—at least in the first stages of the uprisings—were able to significantly neutralize the impact of social networking sites and harness them for purposes of information gathering, propaganda, and deception.

***Traumatic national events (score: 5):*** Has the latest generation, and in particular the generation involved in the uprisings, experienced formative traumatic events?

A people or an ethnic group that has the collective memory of events such as civil wars, massacres by the regime, or social chaos will hesitate to support an uprising that could lead to similar results. The more destructive and recent these results are, the greater the reservations about supporting an uprising and a regime change. The Lebanese, Iraqi, Palestinian, Sudanese, and Algerian collective memory of bloody and destructive civil wars at least partially explains the lack of motivation to support another uprising and the low levels of legitimacy enjoyed by opposition leaders who seek to lead a move in this direction.<sup>11</sup>

**Figure 1: Probability of Governmental Stability: Score 0-100**



In conclusion, predictions on the development of Middle Eastern uprisings can be based on an evaluation of domestic, international, and economic arenas, and assessments of these elements against factors that could hinder a political revolutionary change like those of minority rule, divided opposition, collective memory of traumatic events, and the neutralization of modern media by the government. Figure 1 describes the structure of the model.

The applicability of the model will be examined by means of an analysis of four case studies: an historical examination of conditions in Egypt on the eve of the January 25, 2011 revolution, which led to President Mubarak's ouster and the regime change, Syria's civil war, and the relative governmental stability of Saudi Arabia and Iran, even though the seeds of social protests there could still develop into sweeping uprisings.

These analyses complement earlier research conducted at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy in 2011, which was intended to examine and develop the model through an analysis of four case studies: Egypt, which was then in an advanced stage of a process of change—and indeed, the model indicated that it was ripe for change; Saudi Arabia, which at the time appeared to be next in line for change although the model predicted stability; and Libya and Syria, which presented complex and equivocal pictures that were not unambiguous. At an advanced stage of the model’s development, while refining and updating parameters to be examined, the case of Egypt was reviewed.



## Chapter 2

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### Case Study: Egypt on the Eve of the Revolution (January 2011)

Why did most assessments on the eve of the January 25 revolution in Egypt fail to foresee Mubarak's fall and the Muslim Brotherhood takeover of the parliament and presidency? Would the proposed model have prompted a better understanding of the situation in Egypt? This chapter's purpose is twofold: it aims both to examine the proposed model and give it theoretical validity, and to show the model's potential use in future decision making while examining the points of failure in retrospect. This chapter also demonstrates how much such a model was lacking at the start of the events in Egypt, and points to its importance in the analysis of future events. Using the model, the chapter then assesses the regime's stability as it was perceived by experts prior to the revolution in retrospect and attempts to find the reasons for the mistaken evaluation of the Mubarak regime's stability.

#### **The Domestic Arena**

***Loyalty and effectiveness of the military elite; populace fear of the security establishment:*** In late 2010 and early 2011, the prevalent intelligence analysis and the assessment of academics was that the Egyptian military – which has a monopoly over the use of force and is the country's strongest organization – was determined to preserve the military regime headed by President Mubarak.<sup>12</sup> A former senior general and representative of the country's military elite in the presidency was the basis for the military's power in Egypt. The army's loyalty, therefore, was not in doubt, nor was its determination to use force in order to ensure the continuation of the Mubarak regime. Since in the past the military had proven its determination to suppress the opposition in order to maintain the regime's stability, it did not appear that the events of the uprising in Egypt would be treated

differently. This assessment was clearly mistaken, and was a key component in the failure to assess the change that followed the protests in Egypt in January 2011. Conversely, the failure demonstrates the essential need for a correct assessment of this factor, as will be discussed at the end of this chapter.

Many feared the army's response to the anti-government protests in Tahrir Square due to the fact that the Egyptian public has experienced years of military repression. Alienated by the neglect of the Mubarak regime, the young generations felt they had nothing to lose and led the protests, imbued with the drive to bring about social change in Egypt. In this situation, the army's deterrent power was eroded and put to the test. The conventional wisdom in January 2011 was that the regime would demonstrate its resolution in suppressing the riots, and it was assumed that fear would be maintained among the populace. Yet when this failed to materialize, the courage to resist the army and speak out against the regime increased. The more time passed and the army failed to respond, the more the demonstrators' fear dissipated and the calls to topple the regime increased. Such a development, however, was not assessed as likely when events in Egypt only begun.

*Score: Loyalty and effectiveness of the military elite; populace fear of the security establishment: 17 out of 18*

***Legitimacy of the regime and the leader:*** In the last decade of his presidency, Mubarak lost the legitimacy and the respect he enjoyed during the first 20 years of his rule. A former fighter pilot, air force commander, and hero of the 1973 war against Israel, Mubarak's first years of presidency portrayed him as a revered and moderate leader who is representing Egypt's national interests. The military government enjoyed the president's legitimacy and was deemed the organization that guarded the country and promoted its interests. In recent years, however, extensive corruption was revealed, especially involving Mubarak's family and senior military figures, such as the election fraud (2005), where the army and Mubarak attempted to bequeath the presidency to Mubarak's son, Gamal. In addition, the policy of the army under Mubarak was roundly criticized by various elements of the opposition and led by the Muslim Brotherhood as pro-Western and supportive of Israel. The opposition claimed that instead of promoting Egyptian interests, Mubarak and the army were acting as Western puppets, inflicting serious damage on the honor of the Egyptian nation that considers

itself an independent power and regional leader. Liberals also criticized the government's policy, because the president was perceived as a suppressor of human rights and the military was seen as an organization that could not spearhead liberal reforms in the country. On the eve of the revolution, the legitimacy of the government and the military under Mubarak's leadership was completely eroded among large parts of the Egyptian populace that was afraid to express its opposition. Only when the barriers of fear collapsed was this opposition expressed through protest. Those analyzing Egypt prior to the revolution clearly were not able to diagnose and evaluate the extent of the erosion of the Mubarak regime's legitimacy.

*Score: Legitimacy of the regime and the leader: 3 out of 7*

***Importance of the religious elite and its support for the regime and the leader:*** Despite the secular nature of the regime, the religious element is significant among Egyptian citizens, particularly in rural areas of the country. Before the revolution, the religious establishment in Egypt included two elements: the official establishment, based at al-Azhar University, which expressed public support for the regime, and the local clerics in the country's mosques, who for the most part were cautious about publicly expressing opposition to the regime. At first, those who opposed the regime, mainly the Muslim Brotherhood and Salafists, acted under the radar for fears of persecution by the regime. Once the army responded to the protests in a weak way, however, regime opponents became more vocal to the point of making explicit calls to topple the regime. This rapid change, which occurred within several weeks, was not foreseen in early 2011 when the protests erupted.

*Score: Importance of the religious elite and its support for the regime and the leader: 3 out of 5*

## **The International Arena**

***Support/hostility from the international community:*** The common assessment prior to the Egyptian protests was that geopolitical conditions would prevent international intervention. On one side of the barricades was the Egyptian military, a US ally, while on the other side were protesters calling for liberal reforms. These calls were supported by the West, and so it appeared that the Arab world, which had vested interests in the struggle, would watch the events in Egypt from the sidelines without any dramatic intervention on its part. And, indeed, at the start of the events in Egypt

the international community did not intervene, with the exception of US President Barack Obama, who surprised many by calling on Mubarak to resign and demanding that the army promote democratic reforms. It is difficult to assess to what extent Obama's "soft" intervention was a decisive factor but it clearly did affect the shaping of events, even if in a limited fashion. This development created a different reality than what was originally assessed, namely, that the absence of international intervention would help the regime maintain its stability.

*Score: Support/hostility from the international community: 8 out of 11*

***Regional support/hostility:*** When the protests broke, it was assessed that regional powers such as Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Iran, as well as Egypt's neighbors would refrain from publicly intervening in the events. This assessment was correct until the US turned its back on Mubarak, which in turn prompted more calls in support of the protests and in favor of toppling Mubarak.<sup>13</sup> Ultimately, however, these calls did not constitute a significant factor in shaping the events in Egypt.

*Score: Regional support/hostility: 8 out of 9*

## **The Economic Arena**

***Macroeconomic situation:*** The economic situation in Egypt prior to the revolution was not good, despite the average annual growth of over 5.4 percent in the country's GDP since 2007. According to international organizations, over 20 percent of the country suffered from unemployment, a figure that is double the official statistic published by the regime.<sup>14</sup> Although Egypt's GDP is higher compared to that of African countries (\$6,200 per capita in 2010), it is low in comparison with the wealthy Gulf states that constitute a key Egyptian trading market.<sup>15</sup> Consequently, many Egyptian university graduates were forced to leave the country in search of reasonable salaries, while those remaining in Egypt struggled to find employment or worked for low wages. Despite various attempts, the regime was unsuccessful in lowering the high inflation (8.12 percent in 2010) and in raising revenues from foreign investments or from tourism. On the eve of the revolution, the macroeconomic situation in Egypt was therefore quite problematic, especially for the younger educated generation that struggled to find work. This generation was also the sector leading the protests in Tahrir Square.

*Score: Macroeconomic situation: 3 out of 10*

***Loyalty and importance of the economic elite:*** Egypt's economic elite is distinguished from its middle class. Traditionally, the economic elite in Egypt comprises mainly those close to the army, who, as such, were loyal to the Mubarak regime. The Egyptian middle class, however, includes businessmen, merchants, and entrepreneurs, who have been exposed to the corruption of the Mubarak regime and the military. As such, it was the young people from the middle class who led the protests against the regime. After the army showed reluctance to use force to suppress the protests, Egypt's wealthy economic elite remained silent and did not play a major role in shaping the events, even though in early 2011 they were expected to show greater support for the regime.

*Score: Loyalty and importance of the economic elite: 4 out of 7*

***Awareness of socio-economic disparities among the middle class and the weaker strata of society:*** In January 2011, the gap between the upper, middle, and lower classes in Egypt was very wide. The growth in GDP during the last few years of the Mubarak regime was felt mainly by the country's elite and did not affect 40 percent of Egypt's citizens, who earned about \$2 a day.<sup>16</sup> These disparities did not go unnoticed by the Egyptian public and were the main factor igniting the riots in the country. In January 2011, the social disparities in Egypt reached a point where they could not be contained.

*Score: Awareness of socio-economic disparities among the middle class and the weaker strata of society: 2 out of 8*

## **Factors Hindering Regime Change**

***Weakness of the opposition:*** Even before the outbreak of the riots in Egypt, it was clear that the opposition to Mubarak's rule was led by two main elements. One was the Muslim Brotherhood and its conservative religious ideology, which saw the secular government as an infidel regime perpetuating Western dominance in Egypt. The second element comprised liberal organizations, which included left wing supporters, the young generation, secular individuals, and Egyptian democrats, who accused the regime of not leading liberal democratic reforms or granting human rights to the population. At the start of the protests, the strength of the "liberal threat" was assessed as insignificant, while the Muslim Brotherhood supporters were perceived as the greatest threat to the country's military government. The fear that the Muslim Brotherhood would gain political

power and threaten the regime was not a new one – throughout the years, many Egyptian presidents persecuted the movement’s leaders and banned them from engaging in political activities. The political power of the Muslim Brotherhood was realized when they succeeded in leveraging the uprisings in Egypt to receive permission to establish a political organization, which ultimately also achieved a majority in the Egyptian parliament and a victory in the presidential elections. The assessment of the liberals’ power proved to be a mistake, however, as the element that almost independently led to Mubarak’s fall. Unintentionally and ironically, the liberals’ success paved the way for the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood.

*Score: Weakness of the opposition: 4 out of 8*

**Minority rule:** Egypt was not ruled by an ethnic or religious minority, and therefore the change in power was not expected to lead to a civil war or to a broad and murderous attack on the previous government and its supporters. At the start of the events in Egypt, the minority element was therefore not assessed as a change that could hinder the regime's status, and ultimately this assessment proved correct. Not fearing the loss of power or revenge, the army adopted a conciliatory policy that led to the revolution’s success without the necessity of replacing its military elite. The army in Egypt is still perceived as an institution with a national role that should be maintained.

*Score: Minority rule: 2 out of 7*

**The government’s handling of modern media and communications:** The Egyptian government was not known for its technological capabilities or its fast response. As long as Mubarak’s standing was strong, he was not required to contend with challenges in the media realm, and therefore, he did not have much experience in operating against modern media. Accordingly, his ability to contend with the strength and impact of the media during the protests was limited. The broad television coverage, which reached almost every home in Egypt, and the activity on social network sites that served as a platform for organizing the anti-government protests, hastened the process of Mubarak’s fall.

*Score: The government’s handling of modern media and communications: 2 out of 5*

***Traumatic national events:*** Since Gamal Abdel Nasser rose to power in 1954, the country has enjoyed internal stability. Long dominated by the rule of force, Egypt did not deteriorate into domestic wars even after Anwar Sadat's assassination. The Egyptian people did not have collective memories of traumatic national events, and were therefore not deterred from opposing a regime change. After the barrier of fear collapsed, there was no factor discouraging the protesters. Within a number of days, the same Egyptian public that for years had not dared to speak out publicly against the regime, heard condemnations and criticism of Mubarak on a previously unknown scale and intensity.

*Score: Traumatic national events: 2 out of 5*

## **Conclusion**

Figure 2 summarizes the likelihood of a regime change in Egypt on the eve of the January 25 revolution. The analysis reveals that the probability of governmental stability was between low and medium (a score of 58 on a scale of 0-100), placing the regime in a sensitive situation. In other words, the model indicates that the likelihood of the Egyptian army's undermining Mubarak's rule was not low, even though the Western perception was that the army was extremely loyal to Mubarak. The model demonstrates the economic threat to the regime (a score of 9 out of 25), which from the outset was the main incentive fueling the protests. The model also reveals Mubarak's dependence on the domestic arena, and in particular, the deterrent power of the army. Since the influence of factors hindering governmental change is limited (10 out of 25), the army was the only significant barrier between the regime and the opposition protests. Thus even with the common perception in early 2011, it was possible to assume that if the army would not act resolutely to suppress the protests, they were likely to spread quickly and threaten the Mubarak regime.

## ***In Retrospect: Eve of the Outbreak of the 2011 Revolution***

Figure 3 presents a retrospective analysis of the governmental stability in Egypt on the eve of the 2011 revolution, revealing two main flaws in the common perception of the Mubarak regime's stability. The main shortcoming was the mistaken assessment of the army's determination to suppress the protests (17 out of 18). In practice, the Egyptian army displayed little willingness to use force and firearms against the demonstrators to

**Figure 2. Probability of Governmental Stability in Egypt on the Eve of the Revolution: 58**



protect the stability of the regime (a score of 5 out of 18). The army's lack of determination had a direct impact on shaping the overall balance of forces. It caused the score to drop from 58 to 46 out of 100. This change indicated a low probability of governmental stability and a high probability of regime change in Egypt. The lack of determination on the part of the military also had an indirect impact – a change in the Egyptian dynamic and the responses to the protests by other actors inside and outside the country.

A second failure can be seen in the assessment of the US response, which asserted that the international community would serve the Egyptian regime by refraining from intervening in Egypt's domestic events. In reality, however, the American intervention hurt the regime by supporting the protests (a score of 4 out of 11). Taking advantage of the Egyptian

**Figure 3. In Retrospect: Probability of Governmental Stability in Egypt on the Eve of the Revolution: 42**

regime's dependence on American aid, Washington pressured the regime to persuade the president to resign and promote democratic reforms, which impinged on the military's political power and prevented it from violently suppressing the protests. Together with the influence of the army's loyalty and effectiveness, the Mubarak regime was undermined, and the US position, in conjunction with other factors mentioned above, posed a real threat to the regime (a score of 42 out of 100).

A retrospective analysis of the Egyptian case strengthens the validity of the proposed model and demonstrates how it can explain the probability of regime stability even in the absence of information on precise dynamics between the regime and its opponents. The model includes decisive factors, critically examines them, and evaluates the basic assumptions behind the existing approach. In order to identify fundamental change in the conditions

and in the potential of upsetting regime stability, this examination must be performed periodically. The model reveals the sensitivity of the Egyptian regime on the eve of the revolution and emphasizes the factors that constituted a potential threat to the regime's stability, mainly the army's determination to suppress the protests and the regime's dependency on the army and the US government. What emerges from this analysis is that there was a need to thoroughly examine these two factors' influence on the regime's ability to overcome the protests in the country. Even if the existing conclusion had remained, the analysis would have revealed the likelihood of a scenario where the protests would become a real threat to the stability of the regime.

## Chapter 3

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### Case Study: Syria

Syria is the most important country where the turmoil in the Arab world is still underway, and it is not yet clear what the fate of Bashar al-Assad's regime will be. Although the demise of the regime has been predicted more than once, an analysis of the Syrian case on the basis of the model indicates high scores for elements that are helping the regime survive, as well as for those likely to herald its collapse.

#### **The Domestic Arena**

***Loyalty and effectiveness of the military elite; populace fear of the security establishment:*** In the first year of the demonstrations and the armed rebellion, the Syrian security forces, and in particular the army, proved almost completely loyal to the government. The army operated with full force, preventing the rebels from seizing regime assets such as government offices and television stations, military and security bases banks, and so on. The army's tough response is presumably what transformed the opposition from non-violent protests to violent uprisings. Although suffering a few cases of desertion, the army has obeyed the regime's orders, acting violently and decisively as it carried out arrests, surrounded rebellious cities, and destroyed neighborhoods in which struggles and widespread killing of demonstrators and insurgents had taken place. Over time, the number of desertions grew and even included desertions of senior military figures. If this trend continues, it could deprive the regime of critical support and thereby jeopardize its continued rule. However, at that point, Hizbollah and the *shabiha* (an Alawite militia) began to fill the ranks.

The Syrian army has lost its deterrent power in many of the country's provinces, which are now controlled by regime opponents or serve as strongholds for them. Nevertheless, in large parts of Damascus and Aleppo,

fear of the army and its apparatuses is still evident, which allows Assad to retain major government assets that are concentrated in those cities.

*Score: Loyalty and effectiveness of the military elite; populace fear of the security establishment: 13 out of 18*

***Legitimacy of the regime and the leader:*** In the first stages of the uprising, Assad himself was perceived as a legitimate and honest president whose close associates were corrupt. The regime's cruelty in suppressing the protests by killing tens of thousands of people, including women and children, punctured Assad's legitimacy and undermined the image of his close associates. From a regime that was known as the guardian of the Alawite community in Syria and over the years prevented social chaos and promoted national interests, the Assad regime became known as a regime that failed to stop the death and destruction in Syria.

*Score: Legitimacy of the regime and the leader: 2 out of 7*

***Importance of the religious elite and its support for the regime and the leader:*** The strength of the Islamic educational system, which opposes the official religious establishment, is significant. The infrastructure of mosques, welfare, and religious education helps the Syrian opposition expand its resistance to the regime as religious leaders openly express their opposition to the regime and Friday prayers include anti-regime incitement. These infrastructures strengthen the opposition greatly. The mosques that serve as centers for the opposition are also points of departure for mass demonstrations, although their impact is limited as they serve the opposition, which has a secular character.

*Score: Importance of the religious elite and its support for the regime and the leader: 2 out of 5*

## **The International Arena**

***Support/hostility from the international community.*** During the time this memorandum is written, the geopolitical aspects of the Syrian crisis deter international intervention and, therefore, aid the stability of the regime. Russia, whose interests in the Middle East are served by the Assad regime, is working with China to prevent international action against Assad while arming the Syrian military. The Arab League, after receiving much criticism for calling on Western intervention in Libya, is not expected to call for this

kind of intervention in Syria. The US administration is not eager to enter another Middle Eastern conflict and fears sparking tension with Russia. It appears, then, that in spite of the pressure on European states and the United States from regime opponents to help stop the slaughter, under current conditions no significant international military action will be taken to affect the balance of power between the Assad regime and the opposition.

*Score: Support/hostility from the international community: 8 out of 11*

**Regional support/hostility:** Neighboring states with the status of regional powers have not shown willingness to intervene in Syria or to use hard or soft power against the regime or the rebels. Turkey, for example, is ambitiously trying to expand its regional influence and stop the murder of Sunnis in Syria but it fears a diplomatic or economic conflict with its two largest suppliers of energy, Russia and Iran. On the other hand, Turkey also fears that if Assad falls, there will be increased tensions with Kurdish terrorist groups. Since Turkey's foreign relations are based on an approach of "zero problems" with its neighbors and the use of force as a last resort,<sup>17</sup> it would appear that unless the United States takes the lead in an operation in Syria, Turkey will refrain from taking action. While Saudi Arabia and Qatar support the opposition with money and weapons, they have also refrained from direct intervention in Syria.

For its part, Iran functions as Assad's ally and is determined to prevent his fall. It provides the Assad regime with financial aid, circumvention of sanctions on oil imports, weapons, and assistance by the Revolutionary Guards in suppressing the mass protests. The presence of the Lebanese Hizbollah in clashes between the Syrian army and opposition forces is also connected to Iran. While Turkey, the regional power that opposes Assad, fears intervening in Syria, Iran supports Assad and has backed him openly and extensively through the civil war.

*Score: Regional support/hostility: 7 out of 9*

## The Economic Arena

**Macroeconomic situation:** The economic situation in Syria is poor. Food prices are rising, unemployment rates are high, inflation of the Syrian currency is increasing, foreign investment has stopped, foreign currency is often smuggled out of the country, and tourism has ceased. As a result, the Syrian economy is on the brink of disaster. The value of the Syrian

currency has fallen by 45 percent since the uprising began and trading on the Syrian stock market has dropped by at least 40 percent.<sup>18</sup> The scope of the destruction, the loss of Assad's ability to govern large parts of the country, and the international sanctions imposed on Syria exacerbate the precarious economic situation. Even the Iranian financial support cannot prevent the economic collapse. The fact that 40 percent of the Syrian population lives in rural villages and works in agriculture, however, could help Syria survive an economic collapse.

*Score: Macroeconomic situation: 3 out of 10*

***Loyalty and importance of the economic elite:*** The Syrian regime has long been dependent on the economic elite and the middle class, who traditionally support the regime and enjoy monopolies over significant parts of the economy. In the first year of the uprising, the riots did not spread to Damascus or Aleppo, the strongholds of the economic elite, but over time, the opposition has seeped into parts of this population. Should the middle class and the economic elite join the Syrian opposition en masse, it could signal the end of the regime.

*Score: Loyalty and importance of the economic elite: 4 out of 7*

***Awareness of socio-economic disparities among the middle class and the weaker strata of society:*** In Syrian society there is a considerable gap between the center of the country and the peripheral areas. Those who are close to the government have benefited from the privatization carried out by the Assad regime, while those who are not close to the regime suffer from the rise in food and gas prices and the regime's corruption. These disparities were a major factor behind the riots in the outlying areas of the country. The economic issue is becoming more significant given the increase of ethnic tensions, which divide the opposition from close associates of the regime. Due to the country's economic situation, Assad's loss of control of large areas in the periphery, and the expanded circle of violence and hatred, it is difficult to see how Syria's social rifts can be contained. The strength of this factor, which works against the stability of the regime, is likely to increase.

*Score: Awareness of socio-economic disparities among the middle class and the weaker strata of society: 2 out of 7*

## Factors Hindering Regime Change

***Weakness of the opposition:*** One of the main claims of those opposing Western intervention in Syria is that the Syrian opposition is divided and the character of its constituent forces is unclear.<sup>19</sup> The opposition has failed to produce a leadership that could replace the Assad government, and the areas in Syria that are controlled by the regime's opponents are not well defined. Although stability in the country has been undermined, at this point of the struggle the Syrian opposition lacks the power to lead a change in the government without outside support. The support received by the opposition, however, is limited and does not include international military intervention.

*Score: Weakness of the opposition: 5 out of 8*

***Minority rule:*** Syria is a classic case in which an ethnic minority, the Alawites, is a major actor in the government. As expected by the model, Assad and his associates are determined to preserve the control of the government by any means possible, especially given the heavy price they will pay if the regime falls. Assad is also expected to fight for the regime's survival in the future.

*Score: Minority rule: 7 out of 7*

***The government's handling of modern media and communications:*** At the start of the conflict, the regime attempted to neutralize the media and social network sites, but it was unable to prevent completely the spread of photographs of the clashes or distribution of instructions to activists from outside the country. Unlike the 1982 massacre in Hama, of which there was no photographic evidence, the events starting in 2011 were well documented and damaged the regime's legitimacy both domestically and abroad. Al-Jazeera has contributed much to infuse the demonstrations with ongoing momentum through its coverage of the events and its open support for the opposition. The weaker the regime's control was in outlying areas, the less able it was to neutralize the media and channel it to its benefit. The influence of this change-inhibiting factor is, therefore, weak.

*Score: The government's handling of modern media and communications: 2 out of 5*

***Traumatic national events:*** Syrian society is conscious of three difficult experiences: the extreme political instability that preceded the rise to power

of the Assad family regime; the Hama massacre of 1982; and fear of a civil war along the lines of the conflicts in Lebanon and Iraq, at times with Syria's encouragement. Nevertheless, the younger generation has not experienced these events personally, and therefore has a limited understanding of them. The pictures from the uprising in Egypt and the internal struggle in neighboring Iraq have also added to the reluctance to engage in a civil war.

*Score: Traumatic national events: 3 out of 5*

## Conclusion

Figure 4 summarizes the probability of a governmental change in Syria according to the proposed model. It indicates that Syria is in a sort of stalemate between the regime and the opposition: there is no critical mass for regime change but the government cannot restore stability. The model shows that Syria is close to a turning point (a score of 58 on a scale of 0-100), but that a change is needed either internally (loss of the loyalty of the army) or externally (international intervention) to undermine the basis for the regime's survival. The score for the Syrian case at the time this memorandum was written is identical to the results of the Egyptian regime analysis on the eve of the January 2011 revolution. This means that the Syrian situation at this point is not stable and is liable to change dramatically as soon as the balance of power is tipped to one side or another.

The situation in Syria was divided into arenas and analyzed accordingly. In the domestic arena, Assad's situation is complex and ambivalent (a score of 17 out of 30): The security forces maintain their loyalty to the regime, but Assad's legitimacy is undermined. In the international arena, Assad enjoys the protection of two powers, but it appears that there is little chance of intervention by Western countries or the Arab world (a score of 15 out of 20). Economically, the Assad regime is in dire straits (a score of 9 out of 25) but the importance of factors hindering regime change – especially the determination of the minority government and a weak and divided opposition – heightens the probability that Assad will cling to power as long as none of these conditions change dramatically (a score of 17 out of 25). The analysis indicates that the strength and determination of the army continue. It also shows that the Russian political support and Iranian economic aid allow President Assad to retain power, especially considering the limited international support for the opposition. Only a dramatic change in support will allow the trend to change.

**Figure 4: Probability of Governmental Stability in Syria: 58**





## Chapter 4

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### Case Study: Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia is a significant Middle Eastern superpower: it is considered the world's largest exporter of oil and the leading country in the Muslim world, home to the holy cities of Mecca and Medina. Its royal house, however, has suffered greatly – since 2011, King Abdullah's two heirs to the throne died of an illness, leaving the kingdom's leadership with only senior members of the royal family who are elderly and sick. Indeed, since the 1980s, there have been assessments that the Saudi government is prone to turbulence.

Out of fear that the Middle East riots would spread into its territory, the Saudi kingdom, a bastion of conservatism, has led the camp resisting the trends of the Arab Spring. The regime granted asylum to the deposed Tunisian president, expressed support for Mubarak and Yemeni President Saleh, and intervened in Bahrain by dispatching military forces to stop the uprising.

#### **The Domestic Arena**

***Loyalty and effectiveness of the military elite; populace fear of the security establishment:*** The Saudi army, which traditionally had a tribal basis, functions as an integral part of the regime, providing it with support and catering to the king, who is the commander of the armed forces. Some of the National Guard's commanders are integrated as a part of the top military brass, which strengthens the royal house's grip on the army and insures the loyalty of the top military brass to the king. During the time this memorandum is written, the geopolitical aspects of the Syrian crisis deter international intervention and, therefore, aid the stability of the regime. The National Guard, is supervised directly by the chain of command to the royal house, and its commander is the king's son. Though it is the regime's policy to refrain from using force publically, in recent decades the Saudi

intelligence and security forces have performed violent interrogations and arrests to demonstrate their loyalty and devotion to the regime. This was clearly seen in the 1979 takeover of the Grand Mosque in Mecca, as well as during the 2011 Shiite unrest in the northeastern part of the country, which included firing at civilians.

The majority of the Saudi population is afraid of arrests and interrogations, which are used against those who are accused of criticizing the regime and serve as a barrier to public protests. Following the swift and resolute suppression of the Shiite uprising in October 2011, the Shiite minority is more afraid of violent repressions than Saudi Arabia's Sunni citizens.

*Score: Loyalty and effectiveness of the military elite; populace fear of the security establishment: 16 out of 18*

***Legitimacy of the regime and the leader:*** The Saudi king and his royal house – the House of Saud – are perceived as protectors of national interests. They see to it that the country's economy is strong enough to prevent protests, while constantly strengthening the kingdom's regional standing as the Arab and Sunni leader of the Islamic world. The king and his regime are considered the guardians of the holy places and function as the religious authorities in the kingdom. They enjoy broad legitimacy as a result of the regime's conduct toward its citizens. The tribal structure of Saudi society allows the royal house to maintain strong ties with its subjects: the princes of the kingdom deliberate with the heads of the tribes in the Majlis, the legislative body established in early 1990s, and frequently visit the tribes themselves.<sup>20</sup> Meetings with local leaders and subjects are part of the Saudi political culture, like in the case of Foreign Minister Abdul-Aziz, who devotes part of his time to visit with hospitalized subjects.<sup>21</sup> Although half of the Majlis representatives were chosen by the royal house and this institution does not have real power, it enables Saudis to let off steam by engaging in a dialogue with the regime and expressing their criticisms within defined and limited boundaries. The relationship between the royal house and the local leaders and citizens allows the House of Saud to get a sense of public sentiment and to respond rapidly to changes that could threaten the regime. These mechanisms also enabled the royal house to identify the start of the uprising of October 2011 and to suppress it quickly by providing economic benefits in the amount of \$135 billion.

*Score: Legitimacy of the regime and the leader: 6 out of 7*

***Importance of the religious elite and its support for the regime and the leader:*** The religious elite in Saudi Arabia wields significant power. Saudi Arabia is a devout Wahhabi Muslim society, religious legitimacy is highly important, and the country's religious establishment effectively controls the *dawah* system. The royal house and the official religious establishment have succeeded in forming an alliance that ensures the interests of both: the regime backs up the religious establishment's interpretation and legislation of laws, and maintains its power against opponents, namely, the unofficial religious establishment. In return, the religious establishment recognizes the religious authority of the royal house and its status as the guardian of the holy places, and publishes *fatwas* (religious edicts) that express support for the royal house's policies even when they are perceived by the public as problematic and controversial. For example, senior Sheikh Bin Baz published a *fatwa* in the name of the Ulema, the council of religious scholars, which supported the royal house's decision to allow American soldiers to camp in Saudi Arabia before the invasion of Iraq in 1991.<sup>22</sup> This decision was roundly criticized by Muslim religious scholars and leaders who argued that it contradicted the principle of the royal house protecting Mecca and Medina from foreign occupation, a task that should not be performed by non-Muslim troops. The royal house's decision to allow Western troops to attack Iraq and occupy sacred Muslim land (*dar al-Islam*) was also condemned by many of the regime's opponents. The Ulema's *fatwa* served as a major justification for the government in confronting the harsh criticism at home and abroad. Another example can be seen through the Arab Spring events of May 2012, when the grand mufti of Saudi Arabia came out openly against the uprisings in Arab countries, calling them a "sin" that leads to chaos and instability.<sup>23</sup>

The non-established religious elite has grown stronger in the past decade as well. This is a result of the royal house's pro-Western policy and the legitimacy it receives from the official religious establishment. Part of the official *dawah* system in the country is used to convey anti-government content. The royal house works to contain the opposition by means of dialogue and by including unofficial religious figures in its establishment. Indeed, though the alliance between the official religious establishment and the royal house is strong, tension has risen in recent years as a result of the reforms the regime seeks to promote to preserve its stability. The regional challenges and the increased tension will eventually force the royal house

to coordinate more closely with the country's religious elite in order to maintain its legitimacy.<sup>24</sup>

*Score: Importance of the religious elite and its support for the regime and the leader: 4 out of 5*

## **The International Arena**

***Support/hostility from the international community:*** The economic importance of Saudi Arabia increased during July 2012, when the country's oil replaced Iranian oil, which was no longer exported due to the sanctions imposed on Iran by Western countries. As the largest supplier of oil in the world, Saudi Arabia's economic importance is likely to prevent international intervention of any sort in its borders, even if the regime takes actions against its opponents. The US administration, which called for Mubarak to resign against the backdrop of the popular anti-regime protests in Egypt, gave its tacit consent to Saudi Arabian soldiers to suppress the February 2011 protests in Bahrain. Even when Western governments call publically for regime change in the Middle East, Saudi Arabia is not mentioned.

*Score: Support/hostility from the international community: 10 out of 11*

***Regional support/hostility:*** Iran is relevant to this discussion as it seeks to foment upheaval in the Saudi kingdom's government, and the tension between the two countries reflects competition in several areas. Both Iran and Saudi Arabia compete over economic interests such the oil market and control over trade routes to Europe and Asia. They also compete for regional hegemony: the Saudi Sunni-Wahhabi regime seeks to preserve its dominance in the Gulf and expand its influence in the region by exporting the Wahhabi ideology to other countries, while the Iranian regime, which exports the Shiite revolution, is working to chip away at Saudi dominance in the Gulf and expand its influence in the region. The competition between the two countries is charged with ideological tensions, historic hatred between Sunnis and Shiites, and the Saudi fear of an uprising by the Shiite minority that is mostly concentrated in northeastern oil-rich region of the kingdom. In recent years, the tension between Iran and Saudi Arabia has grown with the Saudi regime promotion of international campaign against Iran's military nuclear program.<sup>25</sup> The Saudi regime openly warned Tehran against encouraging a Shiite uprising in its kingdom and intervening in the affairs of the Gulf states. In addition, there is a claim that the Saudi demand

to “strengthen” the Gulf Cooperation Council is intended to cope with Iran’s increasing influence in the region.<sup>26</sup>

Iran will likely continue to promote governmental change in Saudi Arabia. However, it can also be expected that as long as Iran does not implement its plan to develop military nuclear capabilities, its efforts against Saudi Arabia will be low key and limited in scope. As Iran is already under much international criticism due to its nuclear program and defense of the Assad regime, it tries to avoid further criticism and is therefore extremely cautious in its attempt to intervene in Saudi events.

*Score: Regional support/hostility: 7 out of 9*

## **The Economic Arena**

***Macroeconomic situation:*** Saudi Arabia’s economy is based on oil reserves that are among the largest in the world. The country has enjoyed a continuous rise in oil prices and, since the 1970s, has adopted a policy of investing its profits responsibly by increasing its foreign currency reserves and technological investments at home. In addition, the regime has begun to regulate the oil industry in order to guarantee its reserves and their price will be maintained over time. The annual Saudi per capita GDP (\$5,240) shows the resilience of the country’s economy but also indicates the unequal distribution of the Saudi profits from its oil industry, as its GDP is not impressive compared to that of Bahrain, Qatar, Kuwait, and the United Arab Emirates.<sup>27</sup> Saudi Arabia’s weight in global economy, its foreign currency reserves, oil, and responsible behavior in the oil market ensure the country’s stability, and functions as significant anchors for the regime. Harm to the oil industry could, however, be expected to cause significant damage to the Saudi economy and the regime’s ability to stop the calls for protests.

*Score: Macroeconomic situation: 9 out of 10*

***Loyalty and importance of the economic elite:*** The kingdom’s ruling elite, which is close to the royal house, is also the economic elite, with its members being the main beneficiaries of the oil industry state revenues. Although in recent years business owners not closely connected with the royal house were permitted to develop financial interests and accumulate private capital, the kingdom lacks a large and strong middle class. While a trend toward expansion of the middle class will likely continue, forcing the royal house to consider those with private economic interests, the convergent interests

between the House of Saud and most of the economic elite ensures that this elite will likely support the regime in the foreseeable future as well.

*Score: Loyalty and importance of the economic elite: 6 out of 7*

***Awareness of socio-economic disparities among the middle class and the weaker strata of society:*** Issues of socio-economic disparities and institutional corruption posed a challenge to the Saudi kingdom during 2011, when civil-liberal criticism and fears of uprisings arose. The Saudi king announced a \$135 billion rehabilitation and development project to improve the standard of living of all Saudi citizens,<sup>28</sup> a response that weakened both the call for an uprising and the fear of protest movements in the country. Further compromises and reforms, including political, will likely be made by the royal house<sup>29</sup> in response to calls to reduce the disparities between close associates of the regime and other citizens, but due to the strong Saudi economy, these tensions will likely be contained in the coming years as well.

*Score: Awareness of socio-economic disparities among the middle class and the weaker strata of society: 5 out of 8*

## **Factors Hindering Regime Change**

***Weakness of the Opposition:*** The opposition to the regime is made up of three main forces: the liberals, who seek to promote political reforms; the radicals, who oppose the political compromises the royal house shows the West on both domestic issues and foreign affairs; and the Shiite minority. The compromises the royal house suggested to these forces lack in substance.<sup>30</sup> Nevertheless, the suppression of opponents, along with the allocation of economic resources for purposes of alleviating tensions, is useful for preserving the standing of the regime and weakening opposition elements. Thus, in Saudi Arabia today there is no force that is sufficiently broad, strong, or united enough to challenge the royal house and the stability of its rule. This change-inhibiting factor has tremendous significance, which is expressed in the high score it receives.

*Score: Weakness of the opposition: 6 of 8*

***Minority rule:*** The governing religious and ethnic elite in Saudi Arabia is Sunni Arab, reflecting the Saudi society that is relatively ethnically homogenous and dominated by this sector. According to various estimates, the House of Saud numbers some 15,000 members, and can therefore be

expected to show great resolve in the face of a threat by another tribe. The Shiite minority, which numbers about 10 percent of the country's residents, represents the main source of instability in the kingdom, and as such, has been persecuted by the royal house from its earliest days. Today, the Saudi regime manages to keep the tension below the threshold and prevent an outbreak: it combines the improvement of the population's economic situation with complete intolerance of any domestic subversion, demonstration, or armed operation. The Saudi intervention in suppressing the Shiite riots in Bahrain only reinforced the message. Although it would appear that the Saudi regime's homogeneity makes this inhibiting factor irrelevant, the determination of the House of Saud to defend its rule from the Shiite minority is expected to serve as a factor hindering change, even if only in a limited fashion.

*Score: Minority rule: 5 out of 7*

***The government's handling of modern media and communications:***

The great challenge for the royal house in the realm of modern media is television networks, especially al-Jazeera, which is managed by the emir of Qatar. Traditionally, the Qatari government encourages an adversarial policy toward the Saudi royal house, which is the source of ongoing tension between the two countries. After the outbreak of uprisings in Arab states, however, both countries defined their converging interests, and the media coverage of Saudi Arabia was adapted to the demands of the Saudi royal house. The house of Saud has independent media outlets that are no less popular than al-Jazeera, such as al-Arabiya and a-Sharq al-Awsat.

In addition, the Saudi security apparatuses are skilled in monitoring and blocking the internet. Though this monitoring is not sufficient enough to completely block all undermining messages coming from outside the country, it contributes to the stability of the regime.

*Score: The government's handling of modern media and communications: 3 out of 5*

***Traumatic national events:*** Saudi society has experienced three significant events in recent decades. The first was the struggle that took place within the royal house between King Ibn Saud's sons, Saud and Faisal, which caused a rift in the royal family and led Saudi Arabia to economic and social collapse, beginning in the 1950s and continuing until 1964. The second event was

the November 1979 takeover of the al-Haram Mosque in Mecca by rebels influenced by the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, which took two weeks and spawned the Shiite disturbances in the eastern province of the kingdom. Both these revolts were put down with a violent and firm military force of about 20,000 soldiers, which aroused much public criticism. Finally, Saudi society experienced a number of terrorist attacks carried out by al-Qaeda between in flagrant defiance of the royal house. These events demonstrated the royal house's vulnerability but also showed its determination to suppress attempts at insurrection. In the Saudi case, these traumatic national events are a factor hindering change.

*Score: Traumatic national events: 4 out of 5*

## Conclusion

An analysis of the probability of regime change in Saudi Arabia indicates a high level of stability in the kingdom (a score of 80 out of 100). Under current conditions, the Saudi regime enjoys stability domestically (26 out of 30), internationally (17 out of 20), and economically (20 out of 25). In the analysis of factors hindering change, Saudi Arabia also tends toward stability (17 out of 26).

The analysis shows that the regime faces three challenges, which could affect it tremendously if they grow stronger. Economically, the regime must make more equitable use of the country's profits from the oil industry in order to ensure economic stability and to reduce disparities, lest its stability be affected. Socially, if a Shiite uprising erupts fueled by Iranian support, the royal house's vulnerability might be exposed. This type of revolt could also serve as an inspiration for an uprising by Sunni opponents of the regime. Finally, the royal house is expected to handle the social-political challenge by becoming more politically flexible and formulating a compromise with liberal as well as radical forces. At the same time, the regime will have to find a response to King Abdullah's shaky health and to the challenge posed by the younger generation of the royal house, which lacks practical political experience.<sup>31</sup>

Under these circumstances, the essential conditions for the stability of the royal house are its unity and determination, as well as the effort of the royal family's sons to avoid conflicts and succession struggles.

**Figure 5: Probability of Governmental Stability in Saudi Arabia: 80**





## Chapter 5

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### Case Study: Iran

The Arab Spring began in Tehran in 2009. Mass demonstrations erupted due to dissatisfaction with the regime over the falsification of election results that returned Ahmadinejad for a second term as president. These protests were efficiently suppressed by the regime, and while the smoke of protest and uprising continued to smolder, the regime has been able to foil the threat of another upheaval.

An examination of Iran's stability is important due to its strategic significance in the Middle East, aspiration for regional hegemony, and nuclear program that poses a particular threat to the international community. From Israel's point of view, a regime change in Iran and the rise of a pragmatic regime to power are both very important, especially given Iran's ambition to complete its military nuclear program. An examination of the possibility of regime change in Iran is crucial to Israel's decision making that is currently confronting the prospects of bombing Iran or living with a nuclear Iran.

#### **The Domestic Arena**

*Loyalty and effectiveness of the military elite; populace fear of the security establishment:* In the event of an uprising against the Iranian regime, the significant organization leading the uprisings will be the Revolutionary Guards (Pasdaran), which formed in 1979 after the Islamic Revolution. The Revolutionary Guards were established alongside the army with the purpose of protecting the Supreme Leader and the regime from threats inside the country (as opposed to the army, whose goal is to protect the country from its external enemies). Over the years, the Revolutionary Guards have proven their loyalty to the government, as well as their willingness to suppress uprisings, even by means of firing at demonstrators. In 2009, for example, the Revolutionary Guards put down the popular protests led by the Green

Movement in response to the falsification of the election results. In 2011, the organization's leadership proved its loyalty to Ayatollah Khamenei by supporting him during his struggle with President Ahmadinejad. Relevant in this context is the Basij, a militia subordinate to the Revolutionary Guards that is entrusted with maintaining law and order within the country. The Basij was established by the regime and its commanders are appointed by the regime. The organization played a major role in suppressing the 2009 protests using violent means to prove its determination to protect the regime. Figures from Human Rights Watch show that since the attempted 2009 uprising, repression in Iran has increased and the number of executions has risen.<sup>32</sup> In fact, Iran is currently considered the state with the largest number of executions in the world relative to the size of its population. In addition, the number of regime opponents arrested and those suspected of opposing the regime has increased.

Recently, dissatisfaction with the political and economic conduct of the Revolutionary Guards leadership has been heard in the ranks of the organization. While these voices are relatively weak and do not represent the strong connection the Iranian leadership has with the Basij and the Revolutionary Guards, they demonstrate that even in these large organizations, with their millions of members, internal disputes may break out. These conflicts of interests may lead to increased internal tensions, which could cause upheaval in the two security organizations.

The fear of the security apparatuses helps sustain the regime, indicated through the 2009 protests and the Green Movement's inability to gain momentum despite the difficult economic situation in Iran. The fear of the populace is a significant factor preventing the uprising's renewal, which contributes to the stability of the regime.

*Score: Loyalty and effectiveness of the military elite; populace fear of the security establishment: 17 out of 18*

***Legitimacy of the regime and the leader:*** Iran is an example of a case where there is hardly any distinction between the leader and the regime, and consequently the image of the regime is the sole factor regarding the legitimacy of the two. On the one hand, the rule of the ayatollahs is considered highly legitimate among the large majority of the Iranian population that has a connection to religion, and it is seen as promoting national interests. On the other hand, the religious extremism manifested in the country's laws

harms its legitimacy in the eyes of the secular society and among religious minorities who oppose the regime. Some argue that the relatively high voter turnout of the 2009 presidential elections reflected the willingness of many Iranians to accept the rules of the game set by the regime. This is the reason why the falsification of election results caused a feeling that the regime had violated the rules it itself had set. Since 2009, there has been a steep decline in voter turnout, evidence of the erosion of the entire system's legitimacy.<sup>33</sup>

The regime's legitimacy has also been damaged by its corrupt image. Public criticism focuses on the advancement of the relatives and close associates of the leaders and their ability to profit from the country's industries. This widespread phenomenon has been called *Akazadhgan* especially when it refers to the children of officials who accumulate wealth and power by virtue of their parents' senior position. Supreme Leader Khamenei is not perceived as personally corrupt, but he has not been able to position himself as a leader with religious authority or personal prestige like his predecessor, Khomeini. His blatant and open interference in interfactional politics harms his standing as a leader who is supposed to express the national interests of Iran and its entire population.

*Score: Legitimacy of the regime and the leader: 3 out of 7*

***Importance of the religious elite and its support for the regime and the leader:*** Iran's political structure is a classic case of a religious elite rule. By virtue of its position, this elite also controls the mosques and the educational system. Most senior clerics are identified with the regime, and there are few clerics who dare to speak openly against it. Indeed, most clerics seek to avoid political involvement, resulting in the religious system servicing the stability for the regime. Nevertheless, over time, the image of the religious elite has been eroded, and its closeness to the establishment has led to a sense of aversion to it, especially among the urban population.

*Score: Importance of the religious elite and its support for the regime and the leader: 5 out of 5*

## **The International Arena**

***Support/hostility from the international community:*** An analysis of the international response to events in Syria invites an assessment of the response that can be anticipated should an uprising develop in Iran. Russia and China can be expected to oppose an operation that would threaten the

stability of the Iranian regime due to their desire to preserve their interests, which rely on their relationship with Tehran. If the Assad regime collapses, Iran would remain Russia's main ally in the Middle East, which suggests that Russia's determination to defend its stronghold in Iran by diplomatic and military means would grow. This determination would likely be met by Western hesitation and vacillation, particularly from the US administration, for two reasons. First, the US administration would fear that Western support would hurt the Iranian opposition's legitimacy and portray it as betraying its country. Then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton addressed this argument during the uprising in 2009 when she said Washington had received clear messages warning against American expressions of support for opposition activity.<sup>34</sup> Second, Washington is expected to avoid clashes with Iran or Syria due to its reluctance to engage in another front in the Middle East. The lessons from US military intervention in Iraq and Afghanistan, the economic crisis in the United States, and Iran's military strength will deter decision makers from taking military actions against Iran. Even if there is a strike against Iranian nuclear facilities, it will likely be a limited, pinpoint strike that would not harm the regime's institutions. In such a scenario, an attack could even strengthen the Iranian people's support for the regime, and thus international intervention in the case of Iran could mainly help maintain the regime's stability.

*Score: Support/hostility from the international community: 10 out of 11*

**Regional support/hostility:** The Iranian regime is not expected to confront significant attempts at intervention by neighboring countries, including Saudi Arabia. While an analysis of the situation in Saudi Arabia shows that a Shiite uprising in the kingdom could be supported by Iran, the Shiite-Iranian opposition would likely refrain from relying on Sunni assistance from the Saudi regime, as it would damage its image and provide legitimacy for anti-regime activities. This assessment also holds true for Turkish aid, especially considering that Sunni Turks are not expected to initiate meaningful intervention in order to contribute to activity by the Iranian opposition. Turkey is not eager to intervene in the Syrian uprising even though it is threatened by the events in the country, and so Turkey is not expected to pose as a significant element in a future uprising in Iran. This factor also contributes the preservation of stability in the existing Iranian government.

*Score: Regional support/hostility: 9 out of 9*

## **The Economic Arena**

***Macroeconomic situation:*** Iran’s economic situation is not good, and it continues to deteriorate as a result of international sanctions, which mainly harm the oil industry and the financial system. The Iranian rial has lost more than 50 percent of its value in the past year. Unofficial figures indicate double digit inflation, and unemployment among young Iranians is estimated at more than 20 percent.<sup>35</sup> The per capita GDP – some \$13,000 – is also stagnant. In the past two years, the regime has reduced subsidies and the allocation of resources for social welfare, albeit while giving generous compensation to society’s weaker strata. As a result, wasteful consumption has been reduced, as well as the deficit in the balance of payments, but the middle class has been hurt badly. Hence, the economic situation could lead to unrest that would undermine governmental stability. Nevertheless, even after the international sanctions entered into effect, the regime’s revenues from the oil industry remained high, and Iran’s foreign currency reserves, although eroded, allow the regime to avoid a sharper deterioration in its economic situation. Additional international sanctions, such as a reduction in imports of Iranian oil, maintenance of world oil prices’ stability, and actions the regime takes on the basis of these developments will become critical factors in maintaining its ability to provide a solution to the economic challenge.

*Score: Macroeconomic situation: 5 out of 10*

***Loyalty and importance of the economic elite:*** The major sector of the Iranian economy is in the public sector, which is managed by close associates of the regime and is dependent on them. Most financial companies in the country are controlled by the government, whether through the Revolutionary Guards, which in recent years have expanded their economic power at the expense of private businesses, or by means of investment in *bonyad* funds. These funds, which are under the direct command of the Supreme Leader and, according to Western estimates, control some 30 percent of the national economy, are unique to Iran.<sup>36</sup> The economic elite, made up of the “bazaar” representation of private sector, is limited in size and power, and thus did not play a major role in the 2009 uprisings. In recent months, however, as the international sanctions have increasingly harmed Iran’s economy, there

have been several signs of dissatisfaction among this group. Despite these signs, the economic elite is expected to continue to demonstrate loyalty to the regime due to their mutual dependence on each other. In other words, even though the influence of the economic elite is limited, it can be expected to serve as a factor hindering political change in the country.

*Score: Loyalty and importance of the economic elite: 4 out of 7*

***Awareness of socio-economic disparities among the middle class and the weaker strata of society:*** The lower classes in Iran are the regime's base of support. More than in other Middle East societies, however, it is the middle class that is the leading candidate for spearheading popular protests and uprisings. A significant portion of the middle class is secular and opposes the *sharia* law imposed by the regime, and is also frustrated by the economic situation and government's corruption. Thus, the middle class, which led the wave of the 2009 protests, can be expected to ignite the next wave of uprisings that could undermine the stability of the regime. In the past year, the regime has attempted to dispel these tensions by distinguishing between the Ahmadinejad government and the other parts of the regime, and by blaming the government for the failed economic and social policies, a strategy that has kept the level of dissatisfaction in the middle class under the threshold of an uprising. Further economic deterioration, however, and a lack of a satisfactory policy from the regime after Ahmadinejad and his government are replaced will continue to feed the tension among the middle class and create concern for the regime regarding new uprisings.

*Score: Awareness of socio-economic disparities among the middle class and the weaker strata of society: 3 out of 7*

## **Factors Hindering Regime Change**

***Weakness of the opposition:*** The Iranian opposition lacks a defined leadership and is not significant. In the 2009 uprising, the Green Movement's leaders were Mehdi Karroubi and former Prime Minister Mir Hossein Mousavi, who are both a part of the current regime and oppose the government of Ahmadinejad in particular but support the government of the ayatollahs in general. There was a failure to recruit a broad coalition of organizations for joint coordinated action, which also limited the chances of the protests' expansion. Many organizations, including workers' organizations that identify with the secular middle class, prefer to remain neutral. Therefore,

it is hard to see how the Iranian opposition could lead a meaningful political change. A spontaneous awakening of the middle class could improve the conditions for the development of a decisive uprising, but in the current circumstances, the state of the opposition constitutes a factor hindering change.

*Score: Weakness of the opposition: 6 out of 8*

**Minority rule:** The ruling group in Iran is mostly Persian Shiite, representing the ethnic majority of the country. There is a representation of the ethnic minorities, such as the numerically significant Azeri minority, which comprises about one quarter of Iran's citizens. The social tensions in Iran reflect religious-ideological rivalry, and the secular forces are a source of concern for the regime. Furthermore, the stratum of ayatollahs is isolated, and unlike the Shah, who fled to the West after the Islamic Revolution of 1979, has nowhere to go, which is why the ayatollahs are determined to maintain their grip on the country's government. An example is the willingness of the Iranian regime to face the difficult international sanctions and diplomatic pressures without surrendering to the demands to stop the military nuclear program. In other words, the centrality of religious identity in Iran turns this factor into one that hinders meaningful regime change.

*Score: Minority rule: 6 out of 7*

**The government's handling of modern media and communications:** As was shown by its response to the 2009 uprisings, the regime knew how to handle opposition activity on social networking sites. Intelligent use of disinformation, media manipulation, and blockage of websites and of external servers allowed the regime to disrupt opposition activity.

Similar to China, Iran is planning to increase its control of the internet by disconnecting from the World Wide Web and creating a closed Iranian intranet system. Though the regime has not been as effective in the area of satellite television, the influence of outside satellite channels such as al-Jazeera is minimal. For this reason, modern media, at least for now, does not threaten the stability of the regime.

*Score: The government's handling of modern media and communications: 4 out of 5*

**Figure 6: Probability of Governmental Stability in Iran: 77**

**Traumatic national events:** Three formative events have been recorded in Iran's history in recent decades. The first event is the 1979 Islamic Revolution, which toppled the Shah and cleared the way for a government of repression. The new regime did not provide answers to the problems Iranian liberals sought to solve, and the liberals therefore have been skeptical of another revolution leading the country toward a desired change. The second event that is etched in the Iranian national memory as a trauma is the Iran-Iraq War of the 1980s. Lasting approximately eight years, this war left resentment toward other Arab countries that maintained support for Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein even after he attacked Iran with chemical weapons. In certain circles, the Western assistance Hussein received in attacking Iranian citizens increased suspicion toward the West. This war also left memories of destruction and devastation that reinforce fears of social chaos in a time of revolution, which would undoubtedly be met with

determined attempts by the government to suppress the uprisings. The third event is of the Green Movement's failure in leading the 2009 uprising aimed at creating political change. The violent and resolute suppression of the protests also fuel fears of a broad popular uprising. These three historical events, which are rooted in the memory of the latest generation, are a factor hindering meaningful change.

*Score: Traumatic national events: 5 out of 5*

## **Conclusion**

Figure 6 presents an analysis of governmental stability in Iran and reveals that under the current circumstances, the probability of upheaval is not high (a score of 77 out of 100). The Iranian regime enjoys stability domestically (25 out of 30) and internationally (19 out of 20). Although the regime's greatest challenge is to maintain economic stability in the face of the international sanctions (12 out of 25), the high scores of factors hindering change show the difficulty that can be expected in creating the momentum for an uprising (21 out of 25).

Beyond the numerical figures, this analysis offers major insights concerning the possibility of governmental change in Iran. More than in the previous cases, the fate of an Iranian uprising will be determined by the masses that are not organized in an institutionalized opposition. The geostrategic situation of Iran reduces the possibility of the opposition receiving significant outside assistance. At the same time, the probability that an institutionalized opposition will be formed against a determined regime is remote. Additional factors that hinder the prospect of a meaningful change occurring in Iran will make the provocation of a sweeping popular uprising difficult. These findings cast a significant doubt on the validity of the claim that it is possible to rely on governmental change as a factor that could transform Iran's approach toward its nuclear program.

The analysis illustrates the tension that has developed in the economic arena and that fuels the problematic image of the Iranian regime. Those who seek to tighten the sanctions against Tehran could increase the tension further to the point of eruption, and thereby change the conditions in other arenas. Currently, however, it appears that there is a low probability of a momentum for a revolution.



## Conclusion

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### Assessment of Regime Stability

Many experts and commentators agree that the recent wave of uprisings in Arab countries has changed the face of the Middle East and will continue to do so. One cannot foresee how this change will evolve, as even Assad's regime in Syria is still in control, and attempts to predict its survival or fall have thus far failed. Similarly, this wave has yet to manifest in the two most important regional powers – Saudi Arabia and Iran. Such a change, if and when it takes place, would constitute a significant turnaround in the shaping of the entire region.

In this dynamic environment, there is a need for a model that will attempt to improve the ability to assess the likelihood of regime stability and analyze the potential for change in key countries. This is achieved by the examination of major factors that encourage or hinder governmental change and the dynamics between them. The model proposed in this essay tackles this challenge. When putting this model into use, the results are expressed in a numerical form and provide a better basis for comparison over time and between countries. The model's results primarily express a qualitative analysis of key factors that must be meticulously examined with a critical eye by anyone seeking to study the opportunity for governmental change in various countries in the region.

The analysis based on the model reveals the lack of stability of the Egyptian regime prior to the revolution and examines the failure by academics and intelligence personnel in assessing the regime's stability. The results validate the trend toward a lack of a decisive victory in Syria and regime stability in Saudi Arabia and Iran. Assad has not succeeded in formulating and implementing a strategy to suppress the rebellion in his country, while the Syrian opposition, with its various organizations, has not succeeded in creating a critical mass that would lead to governmental

change. In the absence of change in current conditions, and particularly due to Assad's security against international action, this trend is expected to continue and to exacerbate the country's civil war. The model reveals that the opportunities for governmental changes in Saudi Arabia and in Iran in the near future are low in spite of the conjectures by various scholars. The main reason for this is the lack of a significant opposition that can leverage the local populace's dissatisfaction. In these two countries, the government is its own worst enemy. If the Saudi monarchy and the Iranian ayatollah regime succeed in maintaining internal unity, they can be expected to meet other challenges in the near future. If unity is not maintained however, a revolutionary momentum may be created that would change the conditions in Saudi Arabia and Iran and would allow for uprisings to challenge the government. In this case, a new assessment of regime stability would be necessary. Of course, the factors of economic deterioration and international pressure are more challenging to Iran than to Saudi Arabia.

These insights afford an overview of the Middle East and make it possible to identify regional dynamics in early 2013. This model seeks to highlight the major factors affecting the existing dynamics and follow the elements that could change these dynamics. The model will thus serve as a foundation for a discussion on both the development of uprisings in the Middle East in the coming years and the ramifications for the stability of the regimes, as well as the impacts these events have on Israel and its policy.

## Notes

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- 1 A previous version of this essay was written by Amos Yadlin when he served as a Research Fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. The authors would like to thank Raz Zimmt, Meir Litvak, and Eyal Zisser for their helpful comments.
- 2 For further reading, see the website of the company that developed this system: <http://expertchoice.com/how-our-software-helps/>.
- 3 For example, raising the value of certain factors, such as that of the leader and the regime's legitimacy, or that of the opposition's strength (between 7 and 10), and lowering the value of the macroeconomic situation (between 6 and 10) and the regime's handling of modern media (between 4 and 7).
- 4 Various studies indicate that the loyalty of security forces to the ruler and their willingness to use force to preserve his rule are major factors in preserving governments in general and not only in the Arab world. See, for example, David J. Samuels, *Comparative Politics* (Minneapolis: Pearson, 2012), pp. 123-25.
- 5 Al-Rumaihi explains how the political structure of the Arab kingdoms allows their rulers to identify opposition movements at an early stage and restrain them effectively while also listening to the public's sentiments. See Mohamed al-Rumaihi, "The Gulf and the Arab Spring," *The Majalla*, April 2, 2012.
- 6 Samuels stresses the importance of the geopolitical conditions in relation to the decision taken on outside intervention with the goal of regime change. Samuels, *Comparative Politics*, pp. 137-39.
- 7 Thomas Apolte rejects the common approach that states that in order to examine the possibility of a revolution occurring, the focus should be on the economic situation and the division of resources in the society. According to Apolte, in many cases the economic situation does not play a major role. He points instead to the need of examining social systems. Thomas Apolte, "Why Is There No Revolution in North Korea? The Political Economy of Revolution Revisited," *Public Choice* 150 (2012): 561-78. Another argument is that the chance of a popular outburst may increase precisely when the economic situation improves because the economic improvement does not always keep pace with increased expectations. See Ted Robert Gurr, *Why Men Rebel* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1970). On the commonly held view, see, for example, Daron Acemoglu and James A. Robinson, *Economic Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).
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  - 13 For example, the public statement by Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan that Mubarak must listen to his people. Benjamin Harvey, "Erdogan Tells Egypt's Mubarak He Should Listen to His People," *Bloomberg*, February 1, 2011. Another example is the harsh declaration by Iran's Supreme Leader Khamenei in support of the protests, in which he called Mubarak a "traitor dictator." Scott Peterson, "Iran's Khamenei Praises Egyptian Protesters, Declares 'Islamic Awakening,'" *Christian Science Monitor*, February 4, 2011.
  - 14 "The Long-Term Economic Challenges Egypt Must Overcome," *Marketplace*, February 1, 2011, <http://web.archive.org/web/20110429092953/http://marketplace.publicradio.org/display/web/2011/02/01/pm-the-long-term-challenges-egypt-must-overcome/>.
  - 15 Central Intelligence Agency, *World Factbook*, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/eg.html>, retrieved on October 30, 2012.
  - 16 Ibid.
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