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Transition in the Arab World: Guidelines for Comparison

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ABSTRACT

While most of the literature on regime change in the Arab world during the 1990s focussed on political liberalization and democratization, more recent contributions detect developments in the opposite direction. These latter ones often conclude that “transition” may not be the adequate category to address regime change in the Arab countries; rather, they see a “modernization” of authoritarianism, without systemic transition. To give possible paths of regime change a clearer structure, a classification of different types of regime change is proposed here. The paper then focuses on one such type of change, namely non-democratic transitions.

With regard to the MENA region, this possibility has been neglected because literature has almost exclusively focussed on the normatively biased and teleologically oriented option of democratization, which cannot be found today in the Arab Middle East.

Therefore, political change in this region can occur either in the form of an evolutionary adjustment of authoritarian polities to changed domestic and international environments or as non-democratic transitions from one form of non-democracies to other, also non-democratic political systems.

Both processes can be observed today. Which one of both occurs depends on - among other possible variables - the availability of external resources accruing directly to the respective regimes and to the countries’ history of state formation.

The approach pursued here provides a framework for assessing regime change in the MENA region comparatively and, thereby, to make these processes better comparable to processes of regime change that occur elsewhere. The analytical frame proposed here may in fact have universal applicability.

INTRODUCTION¹

While most of the literature on regime change in the Southern Mediterranean during the 1990s focussed on political liberalization and prospects for democratization, more recent studies detect developments in quite the opposite direction: Political “de-liberalization”,² along with a feeling of renewed or “modernized” forms of authoritarianism, are among the findings in current country studies by scholars of Middle Eastern and North African affairs. Confusion prevails in many respects: Inhowfar have some of the Mediterranean systems become democratic or are democratizing? Does the dichotomy of authoritarian vs. democratic regimes make sense at all, given the varying degrees of civil and political liberties that are granted by the region’s regimes? And: is the notion of “transition” correct at all - bearing in mind that, unlike in Latin America or Eastern Europe, no drastic regime overthrows have occurred as of yet in the Southern Mediterranean? Might not the idea of authoritarian, yet modernized forms of authoritarian regimes be more adequate to grasp the realities of the MENA region than the notion of *systemic* political change? And, to start with: Inhowfar was political rule in the Arab world authoritarian before processes of regime change set in in the late 1980s?

No doubt, these are fundamental questions the answers to which determine to a great extent our views and interpretations of events and developments in the Arab countries, as well as the direction of future research. It might be useful to address them in a similarly categorical way, rather than through empirical case studies, in order to overcome some of the current confusion. Of course, empirical findings, which form the background of this paper, have to go hand in hand with conceptual analysis. However, this paper aims at remaining on the analytical level in order to find preliminary theoretical answers to at least some of the questions that have arisen in the context of regime change in the Arab world. It is essentially based on an earlier article of mine, in which I argued in detail that (and why) the academic community should refrain from labelling the current processes of regime change in the Arab

¹ A first version of this paper was presented at the *Second Mediterranean Social and Political Research Meeting* of the Robert Schuman Centre, European University Institute, in Florence, Italy, 21-25 March 2001. I would like to thank Holger Albrecht, André Bank and Rolf Schwarz in Tübingen for discussing draft versions with me, as well as Peter Burnell, Steven Heydemann, Eberhard Kienle, Mustapha K. Sayyid and Philippe Schmitter for their insightful comments on an earlier version. Saïda Aïch, Ali Kassay, Robert Holzschuh and Iman Mandour selflessly helped in field research, part of which was financed by the ‘*German Academic Exchange Service*’ (DAAD). I am also grateful to Debbie Rice and Sarwat Noor for proof reading and helpful inputs. Responsibility for all remaining errors is exclusively with the author.

² This notion has first been introduced by Kienle (1998).

countries as “democratization” (Schlumberger 2000)³. While this previous paper concentrated on de-constructing the “democratization-industry” in Middle Eastern affairs and, as such, made a rather “negative” point, the current study aims at providing an alternative framework for the analysis of regime change in the Arab world, thus providing a more “positive” input to the ongoing debate. It shall provide an instrument for understanding current political changes beyond the peculiarities of one country or another. Rather, a rough “guide” to the examination of regime change that is applicable to most of the Arab world shall be presented. By doing so, I hope to contribute to enhancing possibilities for comparison with processes of regime change that have been observed in South-East Asia, Latin America, Sub-Saharan-Africa and Central and Eastern Europe as well as in Central Asia.

In order to do so, I shall start chronologically: What were the main characteristics of the authoritarian regimes in the Arab world up to the late 1980s / early 1990s? They are classified according to two criteria: Their political system and the economic resources they control. A second section of the paper reveals that each of the sets of states of this classification has followed, during the 1990s, a distinct path of political liberalization. However, political liberalization has occurred in each of the cases. The problem therefore is: In what cases can we speak of systemic transitions (from one type of political system to a different polity), and in which ones does political change remain on a level “below” transition, thus indicating the non-systemic adjustment of a polity to altered domestic or external environments with the *type* of political system remaining in place? Examining political liberalization does not necessarily tell us anything about this question since it is a phenomenon that occurs in all cases. Hence, a third section analyzes the nature of regime change (systemic vs. non-systemic), again providing a framework for such analysis. Both systemic transitions as well as the non-systemic “modernization” of authoritarian rule, as is concluded, can be observed in the Arab world. Strikingly, those countries commonly considered candidates for democracy are among the least likely candidates for any kind of systemic transition, whereas such transitions do occur in countries like Egypt, but have been overlooked because they are not democratic.

³ It is not within the scope of this paper to repeat in detail why democratization is, analytically and epistemologically, an inadequate category to address Middle Eastern processes of regime change. The interested reader must therefore be referred to this article.

TRADITIONAL AND BUREAUCRATIC ARAB AUTHORITARIANISM

It seems necessary to start with a simple question: Why classify? It lies in the very nature of classifications that they tend to become self-referential and evoke ‘questions of “fit”’: is country ‘x’ really a case of class ‘y’ or ‘z’? Which subset is it in, and why? Do not classifications, by triggering this kind of questions, draw our attention away from more interesting ones? – No. The answer is as often forgotten as it is simple: Classifications are *the* pre-requisite for comparing; they “establish what is same and what is not”, and knowing that is a precondition for comparative research (Sartori 1991, 246). Even if single cases are problematic, classifications - explicit or implicit - are necessary for any sort of comparison. Since regime change in the Arab world has been dealt with almost exclusively in single case studies, any attempt at applying a comparative view must invariably engage in this kind of taxonomy as a first step.⁴ The sought benefit is, as I have indicated above, to generate at least some knowledge of how intra-regional differences can be assessed, and, by doing so, to make the phenomenon of regime change in the Arab world better comparable to (seemingly) similar processes elsewhere. The fact that nobody has done that so far is precisely the reason for the erroneous path of considering Arab political liberalization as democratizations, a dead-end street the research community has been travelling on for roughly one decade. Recent history of research on Middle Eastern politics thus provides most compelling evidence for the necessity of classifications, and for the fact that failure to do so leads us astray. To be even more concrete: The purpose of the classifications presented here is to (1) group states into sets of cases, (2) demonstrate that each set has been following its own specific path of regime change, and (3) to show that the question of transition vs. adjustment depends on which subset of classes a state is in. Thus, the approach pursued here enables us to identify at least some of the variables that account for the presence or absence of systemic political change in the Arab world. Also, it will help us in understanding why it is *not* the degree of political liberalization that is decisive in assessing transitions in the Middle East.

Arab regimes since the 1960s have often been categorized along a bi-partite model: literature on Middle Eastern politics usually distinguishes between essentially traditional (or, sometimes: “tribal”, “monarchical”, etc.) polities (the incumbent regimes of the Gulf peninsula such as those in Saudi-Arabia, the Emirates, Bahrain, Qatar or Oman, plus the monarchies closer to the Mediterranean such as Jordan or Morocco), as opposed to those states which, at least at some point in their history, have experienced social ruptures that have

⁴ I am not going to deal with the even more fundamental epistemological questions of ‘why compare?’ or ‘compare how?’ - the answers are well-known. See, for instance, Macridis (1953), Lijphart (1971), Sartori (1970 and 1991).

led to revolutions, coup d'états or other forms of abrupt and *systemic* regime change (Syria, Irak, Egypt, Algeria, Tunisia or Libya are examples for this category). These latter systems shall be termed here "bureaucratic authoritarian".⁵

Traditional authoritarianism⁶ in the Arab world defines a polity in which

- decision-making is primarily determined by primordial patterns of influence (tribe, clan),
- which either lacks modern bureaucratic institutions or has undergone an only incomplete bureaucratization (e.g., formal institutions and procedures, political parties, systems of political participation or representation, organized interest groups for different societal segments, a formal and secular judiciary providing formal mechanisms for dispute resolution; electoral systems, etc.), and in which
- society is organized neither along a system of individual interests forming voluntary groups and thus building pressure groups for collective action, nor based upon class relations, but where personal interests are determined by one's birth into a certain social segment or group of common regional, religious or ethnic origin.
- These polities are monarchies (or sultanates, emirates, sheikhdoms), which obviously implies a dynastic system of succession to power, and they
- have traditionally been oriented towards the Western hemisphere in their international relations.
- Legitimacy of the regimes / of the rulers is mostly and ultimately based on religious arguments rather than on any form of secular political ideology.

⁵ This group of states, too, has been described with a variety of attributes throughout the decades. To give but one example, Richards and Waterbury (²1996, ch. 11), call them 'socialist republics', as opposed to 'liberal monarchies'. Another, comparatively convincing label is 'revolutionary-progressive states' (Khoury 1970). For processes of state formation and post-colonial political systems see Owen (²2000, chs. 2-4); Rustow (1971) distinguishes various dichotomous concepts, important among them 'Monarchies vs. Republics' and 'Tradition vs. Change'. The point here is not a question of terminology; the above dichotomy could just as well be established as one between 'revolutionary-progressive states' and 'conservative states', or between 'monarchies' and 'republics' (although this second suggestion would risk to allude to the UK and France, which should be avoided since we speak of authoritarian polities only). More important here are the defining characteristics of both groups.

⁶ This term emerged in the academic literature more than thirty years ago; see Khaddouri (1970, 39 ff.). He opposes it to 'Arab Socialism' (1970, Ch.7).

Bureaucratic authoritarian polities⁷, by contrast,

- have experienced major social ruptures, including revolutions; they
- have thus gone through systemic transitions during the 1950s or 1960s, resulting in
- presidential republics with “state classes”, or, as they have also been termed, “state bourgeoisies” as incumbent elites⁸, (and characterized by multitudes of layers of institutions with often overlapping responsibilities and unclear competences, although this may, in part, also apply to traditional authoritarian polities).
- These polities were based on legitimacy provided by an explicit political ideology (mostly some variation of “Arab socialism”), and, hence, in their external relations they were
- often characterized by alliances with the Soviet Union in times of a bi-polar world order.

Obviously, not all Arab polities can easily be subsumed under these two types of authoritarian regimes; as always, the problem with a dichotomy based on more than one factor is that it is hardly all-inclusive or all-exclusive: countries like

⁷ Both ‘traditional’ and ‘bureaucratic authoritarianism’ have been used as types of non-democratic regimes by Guillermo O’Donnell (1979); however, the way they are used here is different from the definition O’Donnell derived from the Argentinean and Brazilian cases in the 1960s; my usage of the terms might therefore seem slightly idiosyncratic. While O’Donnell finds Paraguay as his only case of ‘traditional authoritarianism’, the Arab monarchies as they prevail in the Gulf are at the heart of the class as I adopt it for the Arab world. Even though it is not synonymous, ‘bureaucratic authoritarianism’ as used by O’Donnell has strong parallels to what is understood by the term here. Most importantly, I choose to use the term because for O’Donnell, the presence or absence of military government is typologically irrelevant; rather, it is the existence of a coup-coalition that matters (O’Donnell, 1979, 108/-9). For our purpose, this is the crucial point since it hints to my most important definitional element of bureaucratic authoritarianism, namely the existence of social ruptures (coups, revolutions, etc.) that, during the 1950s and 1960s, led to the establishment of the Arab bureaucratic authoritarian regimes through abrupt transition. I am certainly guilty of idiosyncrasy insofar as my main focus is not the link between regimes and modernization in a broad sense. Yet, the advantage of using the term is that it stresses the existence of the said social ruptures as a feature that distinguishes the Arab republics from the monarchies.

⁸ By occupying the positions of political decision-making, state classes, even though they mostly had middle class backgrounds, were able to benefit from public resources and, later, enriched themselves to considerable grandesse, often exceeding the one found in traditional authoritarian (or: ‘conservative’, as they have also been labelled) states. Elsenhans (1996) develops his concept of the ‘state class’ as an incumbent elite which does not possess resources itself (unlike a Schumpeterian Bourgeoisie), but survives by monopolizing the state apparatus. His definition is largely congruent with the better known term of ‘state bourgeoisie’. For this latter term, see, i.a., Waterbury (1991).

Morocco or Jordan, for instance, are characterized by essentially traditional societies and a likewise traditional and dynastic pattern of political rule, while at the same time they possess large bureaucracies, political parties, active trade unions and other interest groups – all signs of a modern political system. They are thus somewhere “in between” on the continuum between the idealtypes of bureaucratic and traditional authoritarianism even though at first glance, they have more in common with the traditional systems than with the bureaucratic authoritarian regime type. Most notably, they share with the “traditional” group of cases the characteristic that no systemic transition (triggered by social ruptures and leading to ideologically legitimized political rule) has occurred prior to the current period of regime change. Secondly, all political systems on earth have, over time, become more and more “modern” in the sense that institutionalization has become stronger over the decades. Examples within the region under examination include Saudi-Arabia as a case where probably everybody would agree that it is to be categorized as a traditional system. However, the differences between polities such as Jordan or Morocco on the one hand, and Oman or Kuwait on the other, are diminishing over time. What remains common and unaltered in both kinds of systems is that they are ruled by a monarch, and the fact that, in their patterns of state formation, they have not experienced revolutions or social ruptures grave enough to lead to systemic transitions. Therefore, and for reasons of simplicity, Jordan and Morocco are included into the class of traditional authoritarian regimes.

However, real life is more complex than this, forcing us to distinguish on at least one additional level: Most of the Arab countries bordering the Mediterranean are relatively resource-poor, compared with their sister-countries on the gulf peninsula where the ideal “petro-states” with abundant mineral resources are found. Thus, an essentially economic criterion is introduced here in a matrix that serves as a basis for explaining political regime change. Why?

Apparently, the question whether a country was endowed with significant oil- or gas reserves had no decisive influence on its pattern of state formation during the 1950s to 1970s: As figure 1 below shows, there are resource-rich “bureaucratic authoritarianisms” as well as resource-poor ones, and although the majority of “traditional authoritarianisms” are resource-rich, there are also cases of traditional authoritarian polities which do not fit easily into the pure “rentier-state” model. It may seem, therefore, as if it was close to nonsense to insert this economic criterion as an independent variable in a matrix of regime types.

Yet, political and economic liberalization all over the region coincided during the past decade. This simultaneity may indicate a correlation, if not causation, of economic and political developments. And indeed, the degree to which a country was endowed with natural resources as foreign exchange

earners for the state (and, thus, for its rulers and their clienteles) *did* influence the course of political change during the 1990s, as will be explained in the following section.

Obviously, similar problems of categorization occur when classifying countries as “resource-poor” or “resource-rich” as have occurred above when subsuming them under the types of bureaucratic or traditional authoritarian polities, since ideal types hardly exist. However, the purpose here is to provide a rough scheme in order to assess the most important intra-regional differences for the examination of processes of regime change. Given the fact that the number of cases is large, the matrix suggested in figure (1) is certainly problematic for some countries (consider, e.g., Lebanon or Yemen) more than for others; however, the figure below *does* provide an analytical tool for examination for *most* of the cases to be considered here by grouping them into four subsets of cases:

Figure 1 Ideal types of Arab regimes prior to the late 1980s

Regime type →	Traditional-Authoritarian	Bureaucratic-Authoritarian
Economic position ↓		
Resource-Rich	(A) Saudi-Arabia; Bahrain; Oman; Qatar; U.A.Emirates	(B) Iraq; Libya; Algeria
Resource-Poor	(C) Jordan; Morocco	(D) Egypt; Tunisia; Syria

It is important to note that at the starting point of this analysis - the late 1980s / early 1990s - when the current phase of political reform and regime change in the Arab world set in, *all Arab regimes were authoritarian in nature.*⁹ None of them, according to any existing definition, could reasonably be termed democratic.

⁹ I argue here on the basis of Linz’ definition of ‘authoritarian regimes’ as regimes which
 - allow for limited political pluralism,
 - lack extensive or intensive political mobilization and which are
 - characterized by a leader or a small group who effectively rules.

For the detailed definition, see Linz (1975, 174 – 411; esp. 264 for his definition of authoritarian regimes).

Today, after more than a decade of political change, some authors have been seduced to take the selective political liberalization, which occurred in a number of cases, for the outset of democratization. As I have shown (Schlumberger 2000), this is a misperception and misinterpretation of events. Sobered by developments during the second half of the 1990s, most scholars have become much more careful today when reflecting about possible processes of democratization in the Middle East, and even though the term still haunts academic writings on the region from time to time, it has become far less common than it was a few years ago. As I have pointed out before, neither are there any democratic regimes, nor is there any such thing as democratization in the Arab Middle East today.¹⁰

THE 1990s: REGIME CHANGE BETWEEN POLITICAL LIBERALIZATION AND DE-LIBERALIZATION

Much has been written about political liberalization (and, alas, “democratization”) in the Arab world during the 1990s. Variations within the region, as concerns civic and political liberties, are considerable. And even though none of the polities is currently democratic, these variations cannot be neglected. Jordan, for instance, is a case where political liberties have been reaffirmed in more than one relatively “free” election; the press, especially the English daily “Jordan Times”, enjoys a relatively high degree of freedom, almost comparable to the media in liberal democracies, and civil society activities are abundant and flourishing. Jordan has been ranked by “Freedom House” as “partly free”, with a score of (4) for both political and civic rights.¹¹ Together with Morocco, Jordan can be considered a country on the near end on a continuum between states with a comparatively high degree of political and civic liberties, and others where such liberties hardly exist at all. On the far end, there are countries like Saudi-Arabia; essential and basic freedoms are not guaranteed there. Iraq is another case in point where political liberties cannot be

¹⁰ Whether one detects Arab democracies or not essentially depends on what is understood by the term ‘democracy’. I continue here to use a definition provided by Diamond, Linz and Lipset (1988, Vol. 2, xvi) the advantages of which I have discussed in greater detail before (Schlumberger 2000, 107f.). Diamond et al. define political systems as democratic when three essential conditions are met:

- 1) meaningful and extensive competition [...] for all effective positions of government power, at regular intervals and excluding the use of force;
- 2) a highly inclusive level of political participation in the selection of leaders and policies, at least through regular and fair elections, such that no major [...] social group is excluded, and
- 3) a level of civil and political liberties [...] sufficient to ensure the integrity of political competition and participation.

¹¹ In the 1999 / 2000 survey. See: www.freedomhouse.org/pdf_docs/research/ratings.pdf

said to exist to any significant degree; it has reached the lowest possible score (7/7) attributed to polities by “Freedom House”. All other polities fall somewhere in between these two poles, but differ in their tendencies towards the left or right pole. Thus, the span of differences within the Arab world is extremely high – a fact that often escapes scholars’ views when dealing with single countries and cases, and a fact that requires explanation.

Contrary to this finding, some authors consider the Arab world as a whole to evolve “along the same broad trends and processes that have been at work elsewhere in newly democratizing societies” (Ibrahim 1994, 27).¹² With the experience of the 1990s in mind, such views cannot be considered anything else than extremely odd today.

In the article this paper builds on, I have argued that proponents of the “democratization hypothesis” invoke mainly two arguments to support their claim: First, the argument that civil societies in the Southern Mediterranean were on the rise, gaining in strength and in number; eventually, it is concluded, they might become so strong and numerous, thereby elevating the costs of repression to such an extent, that in the end, they might be able to challenge the hegemony of authoritarian elites to political power. Ultimately, this is the argument for a democratic transition “from below”. A second argument is the so-called “free-market argument”, predicting that – were market economies firmly established – democracy would somehow follow suite. These arguments are either epistemologically and/or logically inconsistent (the “free-market argument”) or incompatible with empirical evidence (the civil-society argument). The conclusion, then, necessarily is that democratization as a possible development in the Arab world’s longer term future cannot be ruled out, but that the arguments brought forth by those advocating the interpretation of current processes of regime change as democratization must be dismissed. Hence, apart from the fact that *Arab democracies do not exist* today, *nothing indicates democratization as a likely development* for the short to mid-term future.

However, even those scholars who correctly disagreed with the premature hypothesis of a democratizing Middle East generally failed to grasp the structural patterns of Arab regime change which so obviously differed from the global trend towards democratization throughout the 1990s. Political liberalization and de-liberalization followed each other in ways and phases that

¹² Sadly enough, the author himself was sentenced to seven years of prison, after his research centre at the American University in Cairo had been closed down by an increasingly repressive Egyptian regime the year before. It seems, thus, as if he had become the living falsification of his own - previous - hypothesis.

seemed entirely arbitrary; they have not been explained except on the level of single cases and their individual contexts. Yet, they have occurred in the majority of the Arab countries – a fact that demands cross-country examination in order to find out whether there is some common variable at work that accounts for this seemingly random oscillation between liberalization and de-liberalization. Literature, until this day, has not succeeded in reaching a systemic and comparative level of analysis. In most contributions, the question whether systemic transitions had occurred at all was not even posed since the view was almost exclusively focussed on political liberalization. Furthermore, liberalization has been evaluated and recorded in cross-time rather than in cross-country studies, leaving us without much of an idea on how to assess and compare liberalization beyond the borders of a given case.

Usually, such ups and downs in political liberalization are seen as some sort of evidence that, while authoritarianism prevailed, the regimes still had to take into account public opinion – more at some times, less in others.¹³ Yet, this fact lies in the very essence of what is called “authoritarianism”, and therefore results in a tautology rather than in greater understanding of actual processes. Also, *ad-hoc* explanations were invoked, by linking, for instance, the lagging “progress”, or better: uni-linearity of developments towards Western-style democracies either to the peculiarities of a prevailing political culture in the region, to some specific historical developments, or else to the predominance of Islam, which was considered to be “democracy-resistant”; this is a line of argumentation that was first promoted by proponents of culturalist approaches of regime change like Samuel Huntington. However, such hypotheses have already proven rather short-lived in other circumstances and different cases,¹⁴ and – to the best of my knowledge – no convincing arguments have been brought forth which could support, let alone explain, this view on a theoretical basis.

For all that, it may make sense to examine the degree to which Arab regimes have liberalized politically during the 1990s. Taking the above matrix given in figure (1) as a basis, it is possible to outline four distinct patterns of political liberalization during that period:

Subset (A) is the group of *resource-rich, traditional authoritarian polities* in the Gulf. It is the easiest group to assess because here, political liberalization

¹³ This sort of argumentation has been especially popular among scholars from within the region who have to pay respect in their works to the political situation in their home countries.

¹⁴ In the mid-1980s, for instance, Samuel Huntington (1984) had considered prospects for democratization in Latin American countries rather dim because of the prevalence of Catholicism – a view he was quick to revise after the transitions in that region.

has been marginal and hardly significant as concerns public participation in the decision-making process. Likewise, basic freedoms (of the media, of association, of expression, etc.) remain rudimentary, if present at all. No social scientist would, at present, advocate the idea of them being great “liberalizers”, let alone “democratizers”.

Subset (B), the resource-rich bureaucratic authoritarian regimes like Algeria, Iraq or Libya, differ in their political systems insofar as they are ruled by state classes which, at one point in history, have acceded to political power through revolutions or military coups. The states of this group have hardly experienced political liberalization, with Algeria being the odd man out due to its limited liberalization during the 1980s.¹⁵ Developments throughout the 1990s, however, show clearly for all states that the respective regimes have reaffirmed their claim to and grip on the exclusive political power. In this group of states, political liberalization has either not occurred at all or proven extremely limited, not moving the regimes to any point at which democratization as a possibility could be considered a realistic scenario.

Subset (C) are traditional authoritarian countries without any significant amount of resources to generate external finance (Jordan, Morocco). Here, the picture looks decisively different: Jordan and Morocco have both not only been hailed as success stories because of their economic reform programmes, but have also been the countries where political liberalization has gone furthest within the Arab world. Therefore, they have often been considered to be democracies, or at least to be on the road to democracy, i.e. undergoing democratization. While it has been said before that, as a matter of fact, they can neither be considered democracies nor democratizing, there is no denying the fact that political liberalization has been pursued as a policy objective more than in any of the other Arab countries.

Finally, *subset (D) consists of relatively resource-poor bureaucratic authoritarian regimes* (Egypt, Syria, Tunisia). Like the cases in group (B), they were ruled by state classes¹⁶ which had assumed political power through revolutions or coups, transforming the states and polities along the lines of some form of Arab “socialism”. However, due to economic crises in the late 1980s, they were forced to give up the economic policies as prescribed by the (nominally socialist) ideological bases of the regimes. New actors had to be included, formally or informally, into the process of policy-making, since the old state-classes themselves had neither the know-how nor the resources to

¹⁵ I shall get back to the Algerian case below.

¹⁶ On the state classes or –bourgeoisies and the process of accumulation, see also Richards and Waterbury (²1996, ch. 7, esp. pp. 201 ff).

continue on the path of centrally organized and state-led development. This was the starting point of the selective and limited political liberalization these states have undergone throughout the first half of the 1990s. However, in Egypt and Tunisia, the paradigms in external relations (retreat from the Soviet ally and approachment to the West in international relations) as well as the abandoning of state-dominated ideological economic recipes took place earlier than in Syria. Accordingly, Egypt and Tunisia both experienced political liberalization earlier than Syria. Yet, parallels in political development are striking: All have opened up their parliaments for “independent” members, most notably for representatives of the private sector business community. Likewise, when the political opening led to popular expectations of continuing liberalization, all countries witnessed a reversal of this trend (in the case of Syria: stalled liberalization): symptoms of political “de-liberalization” or “stagnancy” have become apparent in this group of cases since the second half of the 1990s.

The following overview gives a picture of four paths of political liberalization in the Arab world that correlates with the grouping made in figure (1): Each of the four groups has pursued a pattern of political liberalization quite distinct from any of the other subsets of cases. Figure (2) combines the four subsets of cases established in figure (1) with their respective experience with political liberalization.¹⁷

¹⁷ The degree of political liberalization is, of course, judged ‘low’, ‘medium’ or ‘high’ in relation to the other cases of the region and not in absolute terms.

Figure 2

Political Liberalization and De-Liberalization in the Arab world, 1990s:

Regime Type	rr / trad.-aut. <i>[subset (A)]</i>	rr / bur.-aut. <i>[subset (B)]</i>	rp / trad.-aut. <i>[subset (C)]</i>	rp / bur.-aut. <i>[subset (D)]</i>
Cases	Saudi-Ar., Bahrain, Oman, Qatar, UAE	Algeria, Iraq, Libya	Jordan, Morocco	Egypt, Syria, Tunisia
Degree of Political Liberalization	<i>low</i> of marginal practical importance	<i>low</i> tendency stagnant or towards de-liberalization	<i>high</i> tendency stable	<i>medium</i> selective; mostly de-liberalization since mid-1990s

rr = resource-rich; rp = resource-poor; trad.-aut. = traditional authoritarian; bur.-aut. = bureaucratic authoritarian

Algeria is an interesting case since it does not seem to fit smoothly into the categories of this figure: It is the only Arab country where a ruling elite, throughout the past decades, has ever lost control to a degree that the regime itself was (almost) elected out of office. This certainly needs closer examination, and I shall recur to the Algerian case in the following section.

Apart from this, however, the degree of political liberalization that has occurred in a given country correlates to an amazingly high degree with its subgroup's average – in other words: intra-class variations are relatively low. This finding supports the hypothesis that at least one of the two variables (rr vs. rp // bur.-aut. vs. trad.-aut.) must be of relevance when looking at the degree to which the countries undergo political liberalization. Three main findings can be derived from figure (2):

The *first* finding may seem trivial, but should not be neglected: the phenomenon of political liberalization, irrespective of its degree, has occurred everywhere in the Arab world. Even in systems as closed as Saudi-Arabia, a *majlis ash-shura* (Consultative Council) has been introduced in the 1990s, after such a step had been the subject of heated debates for decades. Similar institutions are in place in the other Gulf monarchies today. Also, and maybe even more remarkably, the Kingdom has introduced a written constitution (*an-*

nizam al-asasi), guaranteeing a number of fundamental individual civic rights for the first time ever.¹⁸

A *second* result emanating from figure (2) is a rather strong correlation: Resource-rich regimes are less prone to political liberalization than resource-poor ones. The higher external capital inflows are (as in the case of oil or gas exports as foreign exchange earners), the less the regimes liberalize politically. The underlying reason for this phenomenon is not all that new: It confirms the rather old theoretical claim of the “rentier state” model that the survival of authoritarian regimes in oil-exporting (or, for that matter: natural gas-exporting) states is secured by the regimes’ allocative power (see Beblawi and Luciani 1987; Pawelka and Schmid 1988).

A regime’s allocative power can be determined as the amount of (external) financial resources at the hand of a regime which are free for distribution according to political rather than economic rationalities, in relation to the size of the population within that country; thus, a regime’s allocative power is inversely related to the size of its population; it augments with the level of external financial inflows that need not to be re-invested. In rentier states, legitimacy largely depends on the regimes’ ability to “buy” support through distributive policies, rather than by taxing its citizens and facing demands for accountability. Therefore, the tendency that those countries with less exportable natural resources are more likely to resort to political liberalization in the wake of economic crises than the oil-rich Gulf states is not surprising. The political liberalization of the 1990s, in resource-poor states, can be seen as the indirect consequence of the economic collapse they experienced at the turn of the 1980s to the 1990s.

Finally, a *third* finding is that, although both subsets (C) and (D) have been characterized as resource-poor, the degree to which they have liberalized politically differs significantly. This poses a problem: If the statements made about the relation between the availability of resources and the degree of political liberalization hold true, then why should there be a difference in the degree of political liberalization between the two groups (C) and (D)?

One reason (not necessarily the sole one) might be related to the legitimacy-creating mechanisms on which the respective regimes rely: While the legitimacy of Muhammad’s Morocco and Abdullah’s Jordan is based on tradition and, ultimately, on a religious argument (descendant of the prophet; *Amir al-Mu’minin*) that links the ruler as a person directly to God’s will, the

¹⁸ This is, by the way, another symptom of the increasing institutionalization that takes place in even the most traditional polities, as has been argued above in section (1).

legitimacy of political rule in the resource-poor Arab republics had been based on ideology since the revolutions of the 1950s and 1960s. However, facing the dangers of economic breakdown and/or military defeat, the very pillars of the ideological orientation were debased from much of their content in all cases of subset (D). Egypt, Syria and Tunisia, at one point during their history, all had to give up the policies associated with their regimes' ideological background, either formally or *de facto* (or both). Finally, the ideologies pursued since the 1950s / 1960s themselves had become void of substance with the end of the Cold War. However, ideology had been the main and initial source of legitimacy for these regimes. Hence, lacking this source, there is an obvious loss of legitimacy. This lack of legitimacy in the bureaucratic authoritarian states coincided with decreasing allocative power of the regimes caused by the financial crises of the late 1980s. Thus, the two main legitimacy-creating mechanisms as tools for regime survival in the hands of the rulers have virtually disappeared in the course of the 1990s.¹⁹

By contrast, legitimacy did not suffer *a priori* when the monarchs of states like Jordan or Morocco were forced to adopt new policies (most notably: foreign policies, economic policies). Here, major changes in the policies advocated were not related to the loss of a state ideology. Whatever policies may be pursued, the Kings' political claim to rule is independent of them being successful or not; neither does the legitimacy of their political power depend on a certain type of policies or their economic and social success. Therefore, the resource-poor traditional authoritarian countries had a more stable basis of legitimacy in the wake of economic crises; political rule of the royal houses was not questioned because of socio-economic hardship. Thus, the foundations of political rule were considerably more stable than in their resource-poor bureaucratic authoritarian counterparts.²⁰ Political liberalization, which always is a dangerous experiment

¹⁹ Empirically, one can state an increasing convergence between subsets (C) and (D) insofar as succession in the bureaucratic authoritarian polities tends to become more and more 'traditional', i.e. dynastic. Syria is a first case where this has happened, and in Egypt and Yemen, rumours about the presidents' sons being prepared for taking over political leadership one day are becoming stronger (the same holds true, by the way, for the Iraqi and Libyan republics). Thus, while it was possible to distinguish these two groups clearly in figure (1) for the historical period from the 1960s to the 1980s, this is somewhat blurred today. Apparently, however, this historical difference still played a role as concerns the path of political liberalization during the 1990s.

²⁰ The fact that the monarchies also faced social discontent like the 'April-riots' in Ma'an (Jordan) does not contradict this argument: Certain policy outcomes may have been considered as unjust, or maybe even poorly implemented by a corrupt government, as had been criticized, but this could not touch upon the ultimate basis of the legitimacy of the ruler himself. Where, as in Syria or Tunisia, patrimonial leaders have emerged from state-classes, their coming to power is not founded on God's will. Whether one leader or another has assumed power legitimately can be contested at any point. This is the qualitative difference

for authoritarian rulers, was more easily manageable in the traditional authoritarian systems than in those cases where primordial loyalties to rulers had been abandoned and exchanged for ideology. The bureaucratic authoritarian regimes had to cope with severe losses of legitimacy not only due to their precarious economic situation, but also because the ideologies on which the regimes had built their political power in the 1960s had turned into bloodless ghosts that now haunt those who once promoted them. This might be considered one, if not the main reason behind the difference in degrees of political liberalization among the resource-poor Arab states.²¹

A first important conclusion regarding political liberalization in the Arab world can be drawn: The amount of external finance at the disposal of a given regime is a major determinant of the degree of political liberalization that takes place: The more such resources a regime possesses, the lesser is its tendency to liberalize politically. However, this is not the only variable influencing the extent to which the phenomenon of political liberalization takes place in the Arab countries: political legitimacy, too, enters as a variable of some influence, albeit with secondary importance: The more a given regime suffers from structural losses of legitimacy, the less likely it is to liberalize.²²

However, everything said until here is an inquiry into what has happened during the 1990s rather than a structural analysis of the *nature of processes*. It is, essentially, the examination of political liberalization as a *dependent variable* (“what does liberalization depend on?”). Liberalization, however, turns from a

between the traditional monarchs of Morocco or Jordan on the one hand, where legitimacy is ‘essentially rooted in kinship, religion, and custom’ (Hudson 1977, 165), and the presidents of countries like Algeria, Egypt, or Syria on the other.

²¹ This argument is related to Brynen et al’s findings (1998), in their conclusions (Vol. II, 275f.), where the editors, reviewing the overall processes of regime change, find a peculiarity in what they call ‘monarchical liberalization’. However, they do not recognize that the peculiarity consists precisely in the stable basis of legitimation, which in turn widens the scope for liberalization in these resource-poor monarchies (in comparison with the resource-poor bureaucratic authoritarian states) –without any significant threat to their political rule. An interesting parallel can be found in Huntington (1968, 167 – 169), when he writes on political reform and modernization in traditional polities. He argues that ‘the problem is at root one of legitimacy. The legitimacy of reforms depends on the authority of the monarch’ (167), an argument quite similar – though not identical (!) – to the one made here.

²² This does not contradict Adam Przeworski’s findings: In examining the possible reasons for the beginning of a transition to democracy, he rejects the hypothesis that a loss of legitimacy may lead to transition, on grounds that legitimacy was not necessary for regime survival (see Przeworski 1986, 50f.). However, we are here not dealing with explanations for democratic transitions, but with explanations for a limited political opening, which is an entirely different matter, as will be shown below.

dependent into an independent variable as soon as we ask for the *nature* of regime change in the Southern Mediterranean. Up to now, this paper has been more of an analysis of existing regimes and their differences in terms of political liberties, than answering the more important question: Are those regimes changing – and if so: whither? Is change systemic or just a gradual adjustment, without systemic implications? What, actually, is the importance of the variable “political liberalization” when asking for the nature of political change in the Arab world? Is that factor really the one and only relevant criterion to look at, as has been the general assumption in recent literature? Or might there be other, maybe even more relevant ones that should be considered when analyzing the nature of regime change in the Arab world?

SYSTEMIC TRANSITION OR A “MODERNIZATION” OF AUTHORITARIAN RULE?

It has been stated that regime change in the Arab countries has not resulted in democracies; secondly, democratization is not in the making. However, the fact that “something” *has* been moving (regardless of the direction) in the Arab countries in the course of the past decade is undisputed. This leaves us with only two logically possible alternatives:

Either, as some would argue, regime change did take place, but not to an extent where one could speak of (systemic) transitions from one polity to a different type of regime. In this case, the notion of “transition” would be inadequate to describe the processes observed, and the phenomenon under examination should rather be addressed as the (evolutionary) modernization of authoritarian rule. For demonstrative purposes, one could take as an example of such processes the re-orientation of policy priorities towards security issues in the Western European and American countries after the terrorist attacks on the Pentagon and World Trade Center in September 2001: They certainly indicate a shift in policies that may even include some structural changes as concerns, for instance, budget allocation, but not changes to the political systems as such. In other words, whatever process of political change in whatever case is analyzed, the first step must be to determine whether it is a case of systemic transition or non-systemic adjustment.

With regard to the Middle East, the second possibility is that transitions have taken or are taking place, but we fail to grasp them because they are not *democratic* transitions. What is meant by this? Consider some of the former Southern and Western Soviet republics which today are sovereign states: countries like Turkmenistan under Niyazov or Belarus under Lukashenko certainly are no longer the same type of polity as they had been during Soviet times. Both were, at a certain point, regarded as democratizing countries.

However, today the evidence is overwhelming and still growing to support a different interpretation: These states have, in fact, not democratized nor are they likely to do so. Rather, new authoritarian regimes are about to consolidate.²³ While there is no denying the fact that systemic transitions took place, these were *non-democratic transitions*.²⁴ Some authors would consider such cases as “democratic failures” (Burnell 1998). However, for many of such non-democratic transitions, there is good reason to question if they have ever been on a road towards democracy. To label them as “democratic failures” risks implying a direction of political development which actually never existed (Azerbaijan might be another such example);²⁵ secondly, the term “failure” seems risky to me because it explicitly refers to a normative viewpoint that sees “success” as synonymous with “democratization”, and where “failure” means that something, namely democracy, has not been achieved. Adopting normative viewpoints, however, bears the risk that aspects which might not fit into the desired categories of research are easily overlooked. This, I would argue, is precisely the case with the lion’s share of the recent literature on regime change in the Arab world.

An even clearer example to illustrate what is meant by non-democratic transitions has entirely escaped the attention of “transitologists”, maybe because it took place before the latest wave of transitions in Eastern Europe and Latin America: Pre- and post-revolutionary Iran obviously is a case in which a polity has undergone a systemic transition. The entire political system has been restructured, elites have changed, as have elite recruitment, institutions, the ideological (resp. religious) bases of the polity, foreign policy orientations, and the patterns of access to political power and its distribution; despite this, absolutely nobody would argue today that the Islamic Revolution of 1979 signalled the beginning of a process of democratization.

²³ To be understood more easily, imagining an equivalent process in a democratic context might be helpful here: The transformation of, say, a parliamentary democracy into a presidential system, or of a two-party democracy into a multi-party system could be considered a systemic transition from one type of democracy to different one.

²⁴ It is important to note that non-democratic transitions have a broader meaning than democratic breakdowns; while democratic breakdowns convey the notion of transitions away from democracies, non-democratic transitions can also occur from one authoritarian polity to another, but different non-democratic political system.

²⁵ A distinction might make sense between ‘democratic failures’ (meaning: failed democracies) and ‘democratization failures’ (the failure of systems in transition to democracy to consolidate during the post-transition stages of democratization, excluding all cases that never were on a road towards democracy). This idea seems compelling and possibly helpful; I owe it to Peter Burnell. Yet, I fear that the term ‘failure’ remains problematic.

As visualized in figure (3), there are several possible avenues of regime change: To start with, regime change can be either systemic (“transition”, “transformation”) or evolutionary (“adjustment”, without systemic implications as far-reaching as the transformation of a polity). Unfortunately, there is, as of yet and to the best of my knowledge, no universally applicable classification of different types of non-systemic change.²⁶ Likewise, the category of non-democratic transitions is new, and it is not possible to develop a comprehensive set of subtypes of such transitions here; however, some studies have been written that deal with cases which clearly fall under this pattern of transition (like, for instance, Linz’ and Stepan’s *The Breakdown of Democratic Regimes*) – even though non-democratic transitions cover a wider range of processes than just democratic “breakdowns” or “failures”.

What should become clear at this point is that “transitology” literature until this day has almost exclusively dealt with the specific and – looking at all the other possibilities of regime change – rather exceptional case of *democratic* transitions, marked here in dark grey. Figure (3) shows that what has been examined to date is but a small part of possibilities of regime change. The larger parts of that figure (white background) have hardly been the subject of theoretical or comparative in-depth studies since “Third Wave” analyses began to be published.

²⁶ It may well be that such an endeavour does not make much sense since the subgroups to be found throughout the international system and, consequently, the number of variables to be taken into account, might just be too many.

Figure 3 Types of Regime Change

Systemic Transition or Transformation		Evolutionary Adjustment (without systemic implications)
<i>Democratic Transition</i>	<i>Non-Democratic Transition</i>	Differentiation according to, e.g. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Underlying causes for change • Variables that have changed • Degree of their change
<u>Political Liberalization</u> (= the most important variable that <i>necessarily</i> changes)		<u>Political Liberalization and / or De-Liberalization</u> (= one among many possible variables that may change or not)
↓ Democratization (as the 2 nd phase of democratic transitions)	→ Democ. Consolidation (as the 3 rd phase of democratic transitions)	Subtypes (of non-democratic transitions and regimes) (e.g. the breakdown of democratic regimes; transition from one authoritarian system to a different type of authoritarian polity,...)
		Subtypes (of adjustment processes in different types of polities) (e.g.: “modernization of authoritarian rule” as in some Arab countries, incl. pol. liberalization; or: “erosion of democracy” in industrialized liberal systems ²⁷ ,.....etc.)

As this figure demonstrates, political liberalization is a phenomenon that can occur during democratic transitions as well as during non-democratic ones, and even when there is no transition at all. It can mark the beginning of a process of democratic transition, but does not necessarily do so. It may or may not appear during evolutionary adjustment (without systemic implications), and in the course of non-democratic transitions. The only case where it *necessarily*

²⁷ Arranging an intellectual marriage between Alexandre de Tocqueville and James Coleman, Putnam (2000), on the background of his earlier work on associational life in Italy (1993) finds a decline of ‘social capital’ in the United States. If such claims hold true, then the scenario of eroding democracies certainly is one important sub-type in this category. A more complex view on the question of democratic erosion – as seen by many as a consequence of globalization – is given in the edited volume by Norris (1999), but here, too, an almost universal decrease of citizens’ confidence in democratic institutions is confirmed.

occurs are democratic transitions.²⁸ However, the important point here is that it *can* be observed during both non-democratic transitions and gradual regime change below the level of systemic transition. What does that imply for our research?

For anyone asking what *type* of regime change (systemic or non-systemic) takes place in a certain country, a variable that can occur in *all* possible cases, i.e. in *any* type of regime change, is hardly a helpful tool for finding out which one of the given possibilities one actually deals with. Approaching the problem that way would be like trying to find a strawberry in a picnic basket by the criterion of the colour only: raspberries, red currants, and even a bar of chocolate wrapped in red paper would then be taken for strawberries. Hence: Neither the presence of political liberalization nor the degree to which it is implemented tells us anything about the type of regime change. In fact, *examining political liberalization is no instrument for finding out whether regime change is systemic or non-systemic, let alone an instrument for tracing democratization.*

Yet, it is understandable that this methodological mistake was made – not only in studies on Middle Eastern countries, by the way: Too great was the temptation to look at the factor which elsewhere in the world had signalled the advent of democracy.

Today, however, “disappointment” has spread among those who expected the “end of history” to be near: democratic regimes have not become the sole and uncontested form of government, and many – if not most – of those countries that had undergone “democratic transitions” during the “third wave” are today being looked at with surprise because of their obvious and grave “deficiencies”: What had been thought to become liberal democracies more often than not turned out to become polities which, in one way or another, look like democracies, but mostly do not fulfil the minimum definitory requirements of being termed one. Consequently, a long list of adjectives (“defective”, “delegative”, “illiberal”, “semi-”, “enclave”, etc.) was invented to be added to “democracy” in order to take into account the differences between these newly transformed polities on the one hand and the consolidated liberal democracies as known from Western Europe or North America.²⁹

²⁸ In this case, after democratization has been gone through, different sub-types of democratic regimes (e.g. presidential vs. parliamentarian democracies, etc.) will usually be distinguished. Quite similarly, we have to look for different sub-types of non-democratic regimes in the case of non-democratic transitions.

²⁹ For a critique on this practice, see Sartori (1991, 248/-9), where he explicitly refers to the problem of defining democracy, and concludes: “Along this route, then, we obtain the Cheshire cat-dog – it appears, grins at us, and vanishes before we catch it”. It is important

Then some scholars realized that today's consolidated liberal democracies had not always been so: Maybe the "deficiencies" that had become apparent in the newly transformed polities were a transitory phenomenon which would ultimately be resolved during the consolidation of those systems? More than before, research now focussed on possibilities and problems of democratic *consolidation*, rather than on examining whether the democratic "deficits" in newly transformed polities could be more than mere transitory "shortcomings": The possibility that transitions could have been regarded as democratic although they might not have been so in reality was neglected. It only began to be considered after a number of cases had turned out to be not only "imperfect" democracies, whatever adjective might have been attributed to describe them, but outright authoritarian systems. Slowly but surely, it was acknowledged that some transitions might in fact *not* have been transitions *to democracy* in the first place. Some of the newly independent republics in Central Asia, such as Kazakhstan or Turkmenistan, as well as some cases in Eastern Europe (like Belarus; see, i.a. Marples 1999) were the most obvious to fall into this category, where systemic change had occurred, and where non-democratic polities were subsequently consolidating.

The state of the art seems even worse with regard to the Arab world, however: Here, the specific problem is that democratic transitions have not taken place at all, nor is there any sign of possibilities for such transitions in the foreseeable future.

What, then, has actually been going on in the Arab countries: Are there any transitions? - If so, they would necessarily be non-democratic. Or else: Have systemic transitions not occurred at all, and is regime change in the region confined to the narrower limits of gradual, selective and restricted change within a given polity? Are regimes just re-asserting themselves within a changed international environment, with domestic power structures remaining unaltered? Along this line, some scholars begin today to promote the hypothesis of a "modernization of authoritarian rule" (Pawelka 2000). The expression, however, seems sub-optimal: it neither says what exactly is "modernized" in these polities, nor does it give any hint on what triggers such "modernization". Thirdly and most importantly, "modernization" itself is a vague term: It is not clear, what kind of modernization is meant – all the more so since most of the thus "modernizing" authoritarian states are usually considered to have "modernized"

here to note that there is no such thing as 'creeping democratization' or various 'degrees' of democracy. See also Collier and Levitzky (1997). Sartori, by the way, pointed to the problem of 'Concept Misformation in Comparative Politics' as early as 1970 when he argued against 'conceptual stretching'. The interesting alternative to 'defective democracy', namely: why not speak of 'defective authoritarianism' is suggested by Markow (2000).

well *before* the current processes of regime change set in.³⁰ Hence, those who speak of the “modernization of authoritarian rule” are under increasing pressure to explain what they actually mean. While the idea behind the term is new and certainly worth reflection, the term itself has to be reformulated. What seems to be meant by “modernization” in this context obviously has nothing to do with any of the connotations of modernization theory. Rather, what advocates of this term want to hint at seems to be the problem of authoritarian systems reforming in a way that they seem to be “more democratic”, even to the extent that they are perceived by some as democracies, while in reality they are not. A more subtle type of authoritarianism, with less overt repression and militancy, with refined mechanisms of ensuring regime survival, seems to be behind the catchword of “modernized authoritarianism”. Thus, while rejecting the term, I agree with the idea in principle.³¹

The core problem is, I would argue, to assess and categorize the processes that did take place, and not only to say what they have *not* been (democratizations) – even though many observers have yet to take that first step.

This paper suggests that both types of regime change, a “modernization” of authoritarian rule, in the sense of evolutionary adjustment, *and* systemic, yet non-democratic transitions can be found in the Arab world in the early twenty-first century. Why, in what way, and where? It shall now be examined what *type of regime change* the four subsets of cases (as outlined in figure [1]) are undergoing and determined they are located in the general frame of different types of regime change as classified in figure (3) above. The result is given in figure (4) below where the four subsets of states are shown as pursuing distinct paths of regime change.

A first eye cast on political change in the Arab countries since the late 1980s shows that group (A) (the resource-rich traditional authoritarian states), again, is the easiest to assess since regime change is marginal. The idea of systemic change in the oil-rich gulf monarchies is too far-fetched to be considered seriously. Thus, regime change clearly remains on a lower-than-

³⁰ This has been maintained as early as the 1950s and 1960s, when many of the Arab states were taken by ‘modern’ or ‘new’ middle classes, and subsequently experienced a ‘modernization’ of their political systems, administrations, bureaucracies, and so forth. See, for instance, Halpern (1962, 277ff). Also, the notion that *authoritarian* systems ‘modernize’ is not really inventive: In 1971, Ronald Schneider wrote a book entitled *The Political System of Brazil: Emergence of a Modernizing Authoritarian System*. The - obviously ridiculous - question would necessarily be: What, then, is the difference between Brazil in 1970 and, say, Jordan in 2002?

³¹ However, finding a more adequate expression is one of the problems that must remain unsolved in this paper.

systemic level. Also, the traditional structures of the state as they have existed before the mid-1980s have not been altered to any significant degree. I guess nobody disagrees that these countries should today be considered cases of evolutionary, non-systemic change.

This is entirely different with the one group of states in which, as is argued here, significant signs for political transitions can be found: Egypt, Tunisia and Syria are the states which have experienced, over the past decades, fundamental change on two decisive levels: First, their general political orientation has altered dramatically: Once, under the leaders Bourgiba, Hafiz al-Assad and Nasser, these states were the strongholds of Arab Socialism. Private enterprises had been nationalized, the financial system been brought under the control of revolutionary elites, land had been redistributed. In their foreign policies, they had relied on alliances and treaties of friendship with the former Soviet Union. All of them, differences in their actual formulation notwithstanding, had recurred to state ideologies based on some sort of collectivism, mostly called “Arab socialism”. Egypt under Nasser was *the* centre of Arab socialism, but Tunisia and Syria, too, implemented their policies along the prescriptions of that ideology.

Looking at these countries today, there is no state ideology left at all – even though nominally and on paper, the Syrian regime in its propaganda partly still clings to a terminology inherited from the 1960s. Actual political life, decision-making, and the new social elites, however, give a strong proof of this terminology having lost its content: The scene is dominated by the *nouveaux-riche*s pampered by the regimes; these latter ones have come to depend on the narrow upper stratum more than on any other social segment. Increasingly, an “amalgamation” between parts of the private business community and segments of the former “state class” can be observed. In fact, what once was the “state class” no longer exists in its former constellation in any of these countries. Not long ago, rumours spread in Egypt that the leading National Democratic Party (NDP) might be dissolved and replaced by a new “Future Party”, maybe headed by President Mubarak’s son Gamal, who himself is among the most powerful figures in private business. In Syria, the sons of the leading figures of what had been the generation of revolutionaries (Tlass, Khaddam, and many more) today do not even think about enrolling in anything like military academies, but have all “gone private”, i.e. established their own companies, hotels, restaurants, factories, and foreign trade establishments. In Tunisia, too, the state secures privileges for the small stratum of the well-connected who, with the protection of a still strong state, are able to accumulate considerable wealth.

The result is that “personal wealth and political power have become married as closely as they last had been in the 1940s”, as a long-time chief

advisor to one Arab ruler put it in a conversation with this author. Whether or not one agrees with this statement, the growing alliance between private business and the state, with simultaneously increasing social inequalities and widespread popular frustration, is a clear symptom of the state having lost its ideology (and, thereby also its legitimacy, as I have explained above). The elites have changed enormously, and so have the mechanisms of their recruitment.

In a process that began with the *infatih* of the 1970s, Egypt, Syria and Tunisia all slipped into serious crises during the second half of the 1980s. This group of countries (subset [D] in figures 1 and 2 above) ultimately had to swallow the bitter pills of orthodox economic adjustment under the auspices of the Bretton Woods institutions. Syria had implemented its own economic reform programme that differed in timing, but not in content from those adopted by Egypt and Tunisia. These economic developments can be considered to have eliminated any remaining credibility of revolutionary, let alone socialist ideologies.³²

Hence, subset (D) is a group of countries where the fundamentals of elite recruitment and –formation (thus class structures), of state ideology and, consequently, of the basic orientation of the polities in their external as well as in their domestic economic and social policies, have been thoroughly transformed over a time span of roughly two decades. In the light of the question of political transition, I argue therefore that subset (D) is the one group in which systemic change has occurred or is still going on. However, there is no evidence whatsoever that these transitions could be considered democratic. They have all had ups and downs in the level of political liberties that were, at times, granted by the regimes and curtailed at others. However, this is not what matters here. Other indicators have been found to support the argument that, in fact, non-democratic transitions are occurring in the Arab world. Namely, the following seem relevant when looking at regime change in the Arab world:

- changed patterns of elite formation and recruitment, and thus
- at least partially changed composition of elites
- loss of state ideology
- a U-turn in the basic orientation of the polities, externally as well as domestically³³

³² Apart from Egypt in Nasserite times, Syria probably is the proto-type of the resource-poor bureaucratic authoritarian state since here, the state ideology has been kept for the longest period. The best comprehensive analysis of this system is Perthes (1995). For Egypt under Nasser see, among many others, Baker (1978), and Waterbury (1983).

³³ These are but some first suggestions. Obviously, if democratization as a type of transition is not privileged vis-à-vis other possible trajectories (and I maintain that there is no reason why

They are therefore placed under the category of non-democratic transitions in figure (4) below.

The Palestinian entity is another proto-state which is often mentioned in area studies when the subject comes to transition, though sometimes with a question mark. However, Palestine is the most peculiar case of all in the Arab world because here, a new political system is consolidating for the first time. This does not contradict the fact that the PLO as the leading force within the former Palestinian National Council had determined much of the directives of Palestinian policies even before the Oslo accords were concluded with Israel: Today, and for the first time ever, the system that (maybe) is consolidating consists of elites from within and without the Westbank and the Gaza-Strip. Also, the government bodies, ministries, and other institutions associated with political rule have newly been established in the course of the Oslo process. Hence, there is no ground today to speculate about any possible “transition” of a Palestinian political system still in the making, or, at best: about to consolidate. A system in *formation*, quite simply and logically, can – by definition – not be *transforming*.

Much more interesting to look at is the group of resource-rich, bureaucratic authoritarian systems (subset [B] in figures 1 and 2 above): In contrast to the resource-poor bureaucratic authoritarian states, these countries have not been forced to call in the IMF or the World Bank for help in times of crises. This does not mean that the respective regimes enjoy a higher degree of legitimacy than Egypt, Syria or Tunisia. Yet, the regimes possess resources enough to entertain a huge oppressive apparatus. They manage to ensure regime survival through state terror or, as seems to become similarly efficient, just the threat of it. Precisely because they still control the national economies and since resources are abundant, politically they seem very stable indeed. Since there was no need to open up the economic sphere, the re-formation of the politico-economic elites so typical in the resource-poor bureaucratic authoritarian

we should do so), a whole Pandora’s box of alternative dimensions to choose from is opened. However, these seem to be of relevance with a view to the bureaucratic authoritarian Arab regimes examined here. Other indicators might well add up to form a longer list when casting an eye beyond the Arab world. In that case, change with respect to integration into world systems / erosion of sovereignty might be particularly important, as well as changes in the source of state power (legitimation) or the degree of state power (legitimacy). I am most grateful to Peter Burnell for his brilliant thoughts on this point which, to a large extent, I adopt here.

Certainly, it would then be necessary to assess their relative importance, weigh them accordingly – and justify this for specific cases. And most probably, the criteria would not be universal but have to take into account the type polity on order to be able to say when we speak of non-democratic transitions and when not.

politics has not taken place: For the cases of subset (B), there was no need to extend the access to decision-making power to new social groups by including (or, to start with: by creating!) new private entrepreneurial strata that were necessary to save resource-poor states from economic collapse. Therefore, the “old” state classes which once had held power in all bureaucratic authoritarian Arab regimes have split up and dissolved in the resource-poor states, but remain mostly unchanged and unchallenged as political elites in the resource-rich ones. As long as enough resources can be gained (from oil and/or natural gas exports) to maintain the tightly knit internal security systems and patrimonial mechanisms of regime survival, there seems hardly any threat to political dinosaurs like Mu’ammarr al-Qaddafi or Saddam Hussein.

Within this group, however, Algeria obviously is the odd one out: Contrary to the Iraqi and Libyan regimes, Algeria surprisingly is the only case in the entire Arab world where a regime had itself – almost – voted out of office. This is certainly not easy to explain, but nevertheless, the variables examined here do provide some hints at possible contributions to such an explanation. Firstly and most importantly, I would suggest, Algeria does not fit into the category of “resource-rich” countries as smoothly as do Iraq and Libya: While Algeria is endowed with considerable amounts of natural resources in absolute terms – and certainly so when compared to the resource-poor countries – its population of over 30 million citizens leaves the allocative power of the Algerian regime on a significantly lower level than, say, the one enjoyed by Libya’s regime. It could be that here, the critical margin of allocative power is reached, a margin below which state classes cannot manage to remain in power as a coherent and distinct elite.³⁴ An argument supporting this assumption is the Syrian case: While Algeria falls “down” within the resource-rich group of bureaucratic authoritarian states when comparing the allocative power of the respective regimes, Syria climbs “up” (in the direction of Algeria, so to speak) within the group of resource-poor bureaucratic authoritarianisms: it has, during the 1990s, enjoyed significantly higher foreign capital inflows than both Egypt and Tunisia³⁵. In fact, Syria’s allocative power (external finance at the disposal of the state in relation to the size of the population) is only slightly below the one of Algeria. Accordingly, as has been noted above, Syria did follow the Egyptian and Tunisian path of a transformation of the state classes and the loss of the state ideology, but with remarkable “delay”. Secondly, another theoretical

³⁴ At least indirectly, this is confirmed by Vandewalle (1992, 190). He writes that the FLN ‘had become valued by most Algerians by what it could deliver [a clear hint to the centrality of allocative power, O.S.], not for what it stood for politically or ideologically’.

³⁵ A recent calculation based on IMF staff reports and unpublished Syrian statistics reveals that throughout the 1990s, more than half of the Syrian budget stemmed from international rents and rent equivalents (Schlumberger 1998).

finding comes to mind: Przeworski has found that citizens will engage in opposition activities against an authoritarian regime only when an alternative to the incumbent regime is perceived as a realistic possibility³⁶. Obviously, the Islamist option was, during the early 1990s, indeed perceived as such an alternative, which might add to explaining the Algerian developments during the early 1990s.³⁷

In spite of the destabilization of the country in the early 1990s, the election of Bouteflika to the presidency in 1999 can be interpreted as the re-establishment of the old “state class”. While Islamist groups may continue to pose a threat to individuals, the regime itself seems to have fastened its position, not willing to make the same mistakes twice: It was certainly not by accident that during his election campaign in 1999, president Bouteflika often referred to Boumedienne as a figure for political orientation, thereby keeping distance to his three predecessors who had initialized and (mis-) managed the Algerian version of liberalization that led to civil war.

Another aspect is interesting when examining the cases of subset (B), and even more so with the Algerian experience in mind: At first glance, these regimes seem to be invulnerable to any destabilization due to their allocative power which enables them to buy legitimacy on a large scale, to co-opt possible counter-elites, and to keep effective mechanisms of coercion. A closer look, however, reveals that this is a more unstable balance than it seems: Firstly, these regimes generally lack legitimacy. Like the resource-poor states of subset (D), collectivist state ideologies have lost much of their attraction in a world characterized by the unquestioned triumph of capitalism. Secondly, the main pillar on which regime survival is built, the continuous availability of external capital inflows that can be “privatized” to a large extent by the regime, is a much more precarious foundation for long-term political stability than, for instance, the religious-political legitimacy prevailing in many of the traditional authoritarian systems (Jordan, Morocco, Saudi-Arabia). Latently, the cases of subset (B) are therefore much more likely candidates for systemic transitions

³⁶ Przeworski (1986, 51 – 53) maintains that ‘a regime does not collapse unless and until some alternative is organized in such a way as to present a real choice for isolated individuals’ (52). He argues that “what matters for the stability of any regime is not the legitimacy of this particular system of domination, but the presence or absence of preferable alternatives’ (51, 52). By contrast, his following observation seems to be valid for cases such as Iraq or Libya: ‘If the belief in the legitimacy of the regime collapses and no alternatives are organized, individuals have no choice’.

³⁷ A number of other factors, too, might contribute to the Algerian specificity. The process of state formation through the long war of independence (*guerre de liberation*) certainly is one such point, for various reasons, but to deal with these factors in detail is beyond the scope of this paper.

than even those traditional systems which lack the advantage of vast amounts of natural resources. Therefore, there is an inherent possibility that the resource-rich bureaucratic authoritarian systems might, at one point in the future, “join” Egypt, Tunisia and Syria in their path of non-democratic transitions. Of course, it cannot be ruled out that, in case transitions took place in Iraq, Libya and Algeria, they might be democratic. However, the parallels between subset (B) and subset (D) are strong; bearing in mind that Egypt, Tunisia and Syria all do not provide any evidence for democratic transitions, and adding to this the Algerian experience where a non-democratic transition had almost taken place, the more likely assumption is this: In case systemic regime change would take place in Algeria, Iraq or Libya, it would not be towards democratic systems of governance. For subset (B), such transitions could be expected to occur when a sustained reduction of external resources takes place, most likely in combination with external economic pressures for structural adjustment. Such pressures will, of course, gain more weight as less finance can be secured from the export of oil or gas. Structural adjustment, in such a scenario, would be the trigger for non-democratic transitions, including a re-formation of political and economic elites, as has happened in the resource-poor Arab republics. In order to take this possibility into account in our visualization of types of regime change in the Arab world, the separating line between subsets (B) and (D) has been drawn dotted only in figure (4) below.

Figure 4

Patterns of Regime Change in the Arab World, 1970s to 2000s

(Systemic) Transition		Non-Systemic Adjustment
Democ. Trans.	Non-Democratic Transitions	<i>rr / trad.-aut. [Subset (A)]:</i> hardly perceivable, no practical importance for regime type
		<i>rp / trad.-aut. [Subset (C)]:</i> obvious and noticeable adjustment, but regime type stable, not affected by changes
no cases in the Arab world	<i>rp / bur.-aut. [Subset (D)]:</i> non-democratic transitions over time <u>Characteristics:</u> > transformation of state classes > new mechanisms of ... - elite recruitment and -formation - distribution of polit. and econ. power > end of state ideology	<i>rr / bur.-aut. [Subset (B)]</i> Seemingly stable, but in case of (a) reduced external capital inflows and/or (b) increased international pressures (most likely: economic): regime type latently instable; might, in case of reduced availability of resources or external influences, join group (D) in the course of non-democratic transitions

But what about those countries which have been the “best” candidates for democratization, those who have undoubtedly gone furthest on the way of political liberalization? I will immediately claim that Jordan and Morocco are among the least likely candidates for *any* kind of systemic transition (let alone democratization). Rather than being an indicator of possible democratization, the fact that they have reached the highest degree of political liberalization among all Arab countries during the 1990s indicates the *stability* of the regimes. The Jordanian case maybe serves best to illustrate the fact that political liberalization ends at the point when it risks becoming a threat to regime stability: True, there were “free and fair” elections in 1989 (and, to a lesser extent, in 1993 and 1997), but parliament, as in any Arab country, is not the place where sensitive political decisions are made. The Jordanian political system has a multitude of built-in mechanisms (too many to be listed in detail here) that prevent any serious threat to the Royal Court’s rule. King Abdullah has managed to establish himself as the ultimate arbiter and unquestioned source of political power as firmly as his father had done before. In terms of prospects for democracy, there is no sign whatsoever that the king might retain a representative function only, as many of the European monarchs do, or that he might cede ultimate say in political decisions. As long as this is the case, the

first condition a polity has to meet in order to be called a democracy, namely competition for “*all effective positions of government power*” (see note 10), will not be met. From this view, the Jordanian and the Moroccan system seem much more stable polities than even the resource-rich bureaucratic authoritarian systems (Iraq, Libya, Algeria; subset [B] in figures 1 and 2 above). The specific combination of religious and political legitimacy of the leaders provides for a much more reliable kind of stability than any ideologically based sources of legitimacy. As Hammoudi (1997, 13) aptly writes on the Moroccan case, attacking the king “would be both a crime and a sacrilege – inseparable notions in this logic – at once a violation of divine law and the desacralization of a figure of Islamic piety”.

Hence, for the short- and medium-term future at least, the fact that countries like Jordan or Morocco liberalize politically up to a certain point (but certainly not beyond) has no impact on the stability of their respective regimes, and thus on the question of systemic transition – even though, as has been explained in the previous section – this “certain point” will tend to allow for a higher degree of political and civic liberties in the subset (C) – group of Arab states (Jordan, Morocco) than in the bureaucratic authoritarian group (D) (Egypt, Syria, Tunisia).

The *first main finding* of this section is the following: Only the resource-poor bureaucratic authoritarian states (subset [D]) are currently undergoing / have undergone systemic transitions. All other groups fall under the category of non-systemic change. Among subsets (A) to (C), it is again the group of bureaucratic authoritarian states which seems most likely to provide cases that might eventually join group (D) into systemic, but non-democratic transitions. With the empirical background of the relative countries in mind, group (C) is less likely to democratize than is subset (B) to undergo non-democratic transitions – which is most amazing.

The second, more general finding that results from a look at figure (4) is: The most important variable for the question of systemic transition vs. non-systemic regime change seems to be related to the type of state formation, or rather, to the historical experience of the states: Generally speaking, those countries which have experienced revolutions and greater social distortions in the 1950s and 1960s seem more likely to become cases of transition than the traditional authoritarian systems. Unlike the findings in our examination of the degree of political liberalization, the question of income (resource-rich vs. resource-poor) does not seem to play a major role when asking for the *type* of regime change. It does enter as a variable, however: When focussing on the bureaucratic authoritarian systems, it becomes clear that the greater allocative power of the resource-rich states increases their “staying power”. Possible non-

democratic transitions can thus be either postponed or avoided altogether. By contrast, both groups of the traditional authoritarian regimes seem stable. They differ significantly with regard to the degree of political liberties, as has been pointed out in section (2), but not in the type of regime change that occurs (non-systemic change). Consequently, we can conclude that in the Arab world, the regime type (prior to change) seems to be of greater importance than the economic variable for answering the question if systemic transitions (democratic *or* non-democratic) take place or not.

These findings are quite unexpected, given the fact that virtually all literature on the subject reaches an opposite conclusion. However, on a theoretical level, the approach pursued here has one serious shortcoming: It has not been clarified where exactly the *border between non-democratic transitions and gradual, non-systemic regime change* is. Yet, this could be considered a strength rather than a weakness of this paper: Until now and to the best of my knowledge, nobody has ever even mentioned this fundamental problem. Only by changing the angle of our view – as done in this paper – are we able to recognize the absence of such a border-line as probably one of the most fundamental problems of “transitology”.

I aimed here at providing an alternative frame in order to widen our view and open our minds for more variables than just political liberalization in the analysis of regime change – be it in the Arab world or elsewhere. While it is hoped that this goal has been reached in general, the admitted deficiency of this paper certainly is that it was not possible within the limits of an essay to refine the suggested model to the degree that clear and universally acceptable criteria for the problem mentioned here could have been established. This would probably deserve a separate paper, or maybe even more than that.

THE TASKS AHEAD: THE ARAB WORLD - AND BEYOND

The goal of this paper is a methodological, if not theoretical one, because there is an urgent need to make processes of regime change in the Arab world better assessable. Secondly, they need to be made more easily comparable to similar processes in other parts of the globe.

The course of regime change in Arab states has been examined, grouping them in four specific subsets. The aim was to provide a more structured framework for the analysis of regime change in that region, and to do away with some of the terminological and analytical confusion prevailing, especially among area specialists. Admittedly – as in every taxonomic undertaking – not all Arab states are easily subsumable into the matrix proposed here (figure 1 above). Yet, this rough categorization proved useful for gaining insights into the

nature of processes of regime change in the Middle East. It was possible to identify four distinct paths of political change in the Middle East and North Africa, which should enable scholars to better classify the specific nature of regime change in a given country. This is hoped to become a useful analytical tool for further research in this field.

Two most striking results were reached by thus advancing: First, where indicators for systemic transitions from one political regime to a different type of polity exist in the Arab states, such possible transitions turn out to be *non-democratic*. Consequently, when asking for the existence of systemic transitions, the degree to which civic and political liberties exist (or are granted by the respective regimes) turns out to be an irrelevant criterion. The reason is that political liberalization is a measure only when looking for the specific – and, for that matter, exceptional – case of *democratic* transitions.³⁸ Given the fact, however, that systemic transitions are not necessarily democratic, this one criterion does not tell us anything about any other type of transition. Therefore, political liberalization was considered less relevant for that specific question, and hence relegated to the background in section (3).

Accepting the possibility of types of regime change other than democratization widened the horizon to include other variables into the search for systemic transitions. Patterns of elite recruitment and elite formation or the changing role of ideology certainly fall within the range of criteria that are worth further examination.³⁹ However, with regard to the processes of regime change occurring in the Arab countries, the ones mentioned seem especially important and have thus been placed at the heart of this paper.

From these disturbing findings, a second conclusion emanates: Paradoxically, those cases that were considered the “spearheads of democratization” (subset C) turn out not to be likely candidates for systemic transition at all, let alone for democratization. In fact, they bear less potential by far for transitions than subset (D), the group of states which have undergone or are currently undergoing *non-democratic, yet systemic* transitions. Thus, the regimes of would-be democratizers like Jordan or Morocco are, as a matter of fact, more stable and seem to possess more “staying power” to keep their polities as they were (ups and downs in political liberalization notwithstanding)

³⁸ In this case, political liberalization is a necessary, though not sufficient condition.

³⁹ We should bear in mind the possibility that there may be various other relevant variables to examine in this context. However, within the limited frame of this article, it is not possible to establish - and justify – a list of other such variables that might be relevant in the given context.

than the resource-poor, bureaucratic authoritarian polities. This is the second surprise unveiled by the findings of this paper.

A last word seems necessary when looking at “transitology” research on other regions of the international system like Sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America, or Eastern Europe: Might it not be that some of what has been taken all too naturally for democratic transitions may, upon closer inspection, turn out not to be democratic transitions at all? – I have a feeling that some of those cases might ultimately turn out to be (or: to have been) either political liberalizations of sorts, but no systemic transitions, or, what is probably an even more frequent phenomenon, cases that were initially ill-perceived as democratic transitions, but which later turned out to really have been non-democratic transitions.⁴⁰

Some of the cases in Eastern Europe and Central Asia clearly provide strong evidence for this hypothesis. In the Far East, Vietnam or Indonesia may be worth re-examination, as may a number of Latin American cases like, e.g., Peru, and certainly some of the countries in sub-Saharan Africa like, e.g., Zambia. However, this cannot be verified in a short paper. Still, it is this aspect in which the ideas presented here might be of significance to political scientists with little or no interest in the Middle East. The desiderata are as follows:

First, the establishment of clear *criteria for distinguishing systemic transitions* (defined as the transformation of one type of polity to a different one) *from non-systemic adjustment* (defined as a sub-systemic level of structural alterations within a given type of polity), and not only, as has been done until now, to distinguish democratic transitions from whatever else may occur in today’s world. In this context, it has been shown that changed patterns of elite formation, alterations in the legitimacy foundations of a polity such as major shifts in state ideologies, as well as various patterns of state formation are among the aspects to examine.

Secondly, the number of countries that have undergone regime change in the past decade is large; many (if not most) of them lie somewhere in between democratic and authoritarian regimes and cannot be grasped adequately. Furthermore, many of such “transitional regimes” have already proved rather

⁴⁰ My impression is that area specialists on regions other than the Middle East do acknowledge the possibility of non-democratic transitions; however, there seems a lack of conceptualization of different cases. In sub-Saharan Africa, for instance, many states have witnessed the end of military rule and one-party systems, but not the advent of democracy. Neopatrimonial rule and clientelism often continue as before, reducing the political competitiveness of opposition and eroding the rule of law.

long-lived,⁴¹ indicating that they should maybe no longer be regarded as “transitional”, but maybe as polities for which analytical categories have to be found. Transitology and the research on processes of regime change will remain deficient as long as this issue has not been tackled.

Thirdly, there is an epistemological (not political!) need to *define democracy* universally, as an analytical category without regard to normative contents the concept may have in the eyes of some. Normativity has never been a good guide when it comes to questions of understanding the world we live in; it tends to make observers blind on at least one eye.

Finally, we should *re-examine*, as has been done here for the Arab countries, cases which have previously been considered *democratic transitions in order to find out whether in fact they have been such* – or rather something else. This is the sort of “homework” that would be expected from area specialists on Latin America, Africa, and Asia in particular.

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⁴¹ Turkey, for instance, has been considered a ‘democratizer’ since roughly half a century; it seems about time to find a more adequate language for such cases.

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