Joshua Stacher spoke about his new book, “Adaptable Autocrats: Regime Power in Egypt and Syria” on Monday, October 22, at the Woodrow Wilson Center. Stacher, who has performed extensive research in both countries, is a Fellow at the Wilson Center and a Professor of Political Science at Kent State University. In his book, Stacher argues that power structures explain the resilience of autocracies in Egypt and Syria, as well as the greater Middle East and potentially the rest of the world as well.

Stacher began by laying out his argument for autocratic adaptability: a regime has the ability to adapt and survive if the executive has effective authority over the state’s institutions, but if there is a decentralized political order, the regime will view a threat to the leader as an existential crisis and unify against the opposition. Stacher argued that the essential schism in the Middle East is not monarchy/republic or oil producers/non-oil producers, but rather executive leadership and control.

Stacher used Egypt and Syria as examples to elucidate and support his theory. Power was organized in a pyramid in Egypt, with elites around the executive office controlling a centralized arena. Essentially, this allowed the military elites and other important powerbrokers to quickly remove the president and Interior Minister after only 18 days of protests without having to worry that the entire system would collapse. In short, the regime could quickly “adapt” to the threat by sacrificing a few individuals because the regime structure was so strong, Stacher said. President Anwar Sadat effectively gutted alternative power structures and bequeathed to Mubarak a system that could withstand even the toppling of the president. In Syria on the other hand, the system more closely resembled the Parthenon. Elites are fragmented and various power structures fight each other for control. In this context, the ruling regime viewed the opposition as an “existential threat” because if Assad were toppled, he would probably bring the entire system down with him. Stacher disagreed that Hafez al-Assad was omnipotent and ruled by personal gravitas; instead, Hafez built independent institutions to help prop up the regime, Stacher said. This created various fiefdoms with institutional leaders protected by their respective institutions and not subservient to the presidency. Removing Assad would crumble the fragile house of cards that underlies the Syrian government, whereas ejecting Mubarak was possible because the regime could and does survive without him.

In the Q&A period, Stacher dismissed both personality cults and sectarianism as less important variables in the resilience of autocracies. For example, Stacher said that Syria was not an Alawite state under Assad, as evidenced by the many Sunnis and Christians who are members of the inner circles and have a stake in keeping the regime alive. Stacher said that his theory holds up across the Arab Spring: there was a quick transition in the highly-centralized
Tunisia, a murky transition in the moderately centralized Yemen, and in the decentralized Gulf countries where various segments of royal families battle for control, the regimes have been forced to unite and avoid transitions at any cost.