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By Marvin Zonis

Mideast rulers of a certain age

The truth about ruling for too long

A staggering truth about the Middle East is the advancing age of its rulers and the number of years they have ruled.

In their important 1995 book, "When Illness Strikes the Leader," Jerrold Post and Robert Robins give numerous examples of aging leaders who continued ruling despite their physical and mental decline, often steering their states to disaster.

President-for-Life Habib Bourguiba of Tunisia suffered dementia but ruled for 31 years and was not deposed until 1987, probably 10 years after he should have left office.

Winston Churchill suffered a stroke during his 1950s premiership. The illness was kept secret by his physicians (as was the fatal cancer of Georges Pompidou while he served as president of France from 1962-1968 and Franklin D. Roosevelt's cognitive decline that should have precluded his running for a fourth term).

The litany of aged and debilitated leaders is a long one.

Aging invariably brings physical and cognitive decline. The age at which that occurs varies. Ron Reagan suggests in his new book about his father that President Ronald Reagan began showing signs of Alzheimer's during his 1984 re-election campaign, when he was 73, and probably would have stepped down by 1987 had his Alzheimer's been properly diagnosed.

But it is not only illness that makes aging leaders less effective. Aging and innovation do not usually go hand in hand. Openness to new ideas and experiences diminish. So does the capacity and willingness to understand and respond to new forms of social and political life.

All too often, as Post and Robins point out, the "courtiers" surrounding the ruler become his own worst enemies. Eager to protect their own elevated positions and their vast accompanying social and material perks, the advisers, physicians, relatives, spouses and assorted hangers-on shield the ruler from reality — just as they shield the true condition of the ruler.

I witnessed this during the Iranian revolution. Throughout much of 1978, the shah was informed only that there were a relatively small number of "troublemakers" on the streets, who did not represent the shah's true standing among his people. The shah, whose judgment was already impaired by his knowledge that he suffered from cancer, and whose toughest advisers, his sister Princess Ashraf Pahlavi and his longtime friend Assadollah Alam, were no longer at his side, waffled. The shah did not exercise the vigorous leadership that may well have preserved the Pahlavi throne.

We know very little about the present physical and mental condition of the aging rulers of the Middle East. We do know that 86-year-old Saudi King Abdullah left the kingdom for back surgery in New York in November and did not return until February. When King Abdullah left the kingdom, the 83-year-old Crown Prince Sultan returned from Morocco, where he had been convalescing from cancer surgery, to take hold of the affairs of state. The extent to which their advanced ages and illnesses have impaired their capacity to rule is unknown. Fortunately for the Saudis, other senior princes are undoubtedly weighing in.

We know very little about the effects that aging has had on the other rulers of the Middle East. But we can be sure of the very high likelihood that their judgment is not what it used to be; that the information they are receiving is not as complete and honest as any leader should get; and that because of those reasons, they are unable to respond as effectively as the threats to their thrones demand.

You doubt it? Remember, Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak and Tunisian dictator Zine El Abidine Ben Ali are already gone.

Other rulers will depart — reluctantly — soon.

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